REMARKS ON THE INTERFACE BETWEEN DISCOURSE AND AGENCY

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Introduction

This article addresses the relation between discourse and agency within the development sector, and questions how development discourse shapes development projects and involved agents' agency. Aid-chains imply a knowledge encounter between donor and recipient. From the late 1980s scholars writing from a post-structural perspective, known as post-development theory, started to see development as a hegemonic discourse that prevails over other types of knowledge and human agency, being an approach to explain why so many development projects seemed to fail. It was from this perspective I initiated my study of a development project in Ethiopia. However, during my study I realized that the project did not fall short, as local development agents were acutely aware of the limitations they faced in relation to the formal order of the project, and that these agents were able to be strategic and manipulative to the donor's formal order of the project. In the encounter with the donor's formal order, development agents on the local level generate informal strategies as coping mechanisms towards the donor-imposed development discourse. Hence, I saw the necessity of including an actor-orientated approach to supplement the discursive understanding of development and to grasp the encounter between local informal knowledge and development discourse, as articulated through development agents (Lie 2004). Denzin's conceptions of methodological and theoretical triangulation enable the researcher to have two perspectives and approaches to these knowledge encounters (1989). By addressing post-development theory's shortcomings, it also becomes more nuanced and thus its relevance for studying development encounters increases.

Starting with an empirical example on how a consultant relates to the donor's formal order and development discourse when he produces a new project application, I give a theoretical outline of the processes involved and knowledge encounters identified in the nexus of discourse and agency. The project takes place in Aba'ala of the Ethiopian Afar region, and is funded by NORAD[1] via a Norwegian non-governmental organisation (NGO). It is implemented by two Ethiopian institutions. The consultant is hired by the donor NGO to assist the local implementing institutions in producing a good application. The involvement of the consultant is because he knows the current development trends, NORAD's policy and the format the application is to be submitted in.

'He knows the NORAD format': The case with the consultant

The development project at task has, formally, an explicit agenda of using participatory approach and bottom-up planning. This means that the recipients and beneficiaries are those to take control over their own development by being empowered and emancipated to design, control and manage their own project (cf. Chambers 1995). Project documents—which manifest the project's formal order and the aid-chain—are characterised as being produced according to a template, or produced to feed into a larger whole of a development discourse (cf. Stirrat 2000). The way project documents are designed is reductionistic towards the multiple realities and local variations of the field the project addresses. This is due to the methods used when planning (Scott 1998, Stirrat 2000). The effect of planning means reducing a field's complexity; formalisation and codification of knowledge implies a reduction of complexity, making projects and their documents legible. Legibility is the means for donors to pursue policy coherence and coordination, which are conceived to make development more effective. Bottom-up planning implies that the recipients and beneficiaries design the project, and thus its documents and formal order would be complex, as well as it means difficulties for donor's intended policy to prevail. The case presented below, about the inclusion of an external consultant to a development project in the process of making a new project application, addresses the nexus between conditionality and participatory approaches, and how an actor is reflexive towards donor's system of knowledge.

The development project is in the final stage of its first five-year phase, consequently donor and recipient organisations have started the application process for the second phase. The local project manager prepares a 'feasibility and identification study' to gain information to be used in the application for the second phase. He takes the idea of participatory approach seriously, and makes a lot of thorough and extensive arrangements. He took over the job as program manager right after the first phase was initiated and has never produced such an extensive application before. He applies the formal stipulated guidelines for planning, and "because this project is community based, I need to know what the beneficiaries regard as important to make the application as valid as possible".

On the day of departure for the fieldtrip, which is planned to last for five days, the project manager arrives late to the meeting point wearing his ordinary suit, being rather inappropriate for a field trip. He informs that the trip is cancelled and that "we have to wait for a consultant that the donor sends from Norway. They don't want us to do it ourselves, or, they say we need help". The reason given by the donor for sending a consultant is that "he knows the NORAD format".[2]

The project manager is upset about being run over in the decision-making process, and argues that there will not be enough time for the fieldtrip and survey if he has to wait for a consultant from Norway.

> "If we postpone the fieldtrip until the consultant has arrived, we won't have time for it. We are soon expected to submit our application to the [donor], and the involvement of another person is very time consuming".

The project manager asks what there really is to know about the NORAD format. He argues that the application form is well arranged with several open-ended questions only to be filled in with the information gained from the beneficiaries. He recalls the words of the donor representative a few months earlier who informed about the application process: "In order to make it easier, it is only to copy from the application we made for the first phase. Much of the socio-cultural elements are the same".

After heavy delays, the process around the new application starts as the consultant arrives from Norway. The donor has employed him as a consultant and external expert on several earlier occasions. The project manager questions the consultant whether they will manage to meet the application deadline or not. The consultant assures they will make it. He states he has experience and skill with such formats, and that "everything we shall do and produce is stipulated in the Terms of Reference I've brought from the donor. We'll manage this". The project manager expresses his concerns: "The [project] is a bottom-up project. We need to talk to the community!" The consultant replies that the most important thing is that NORAD is convinced to give further funding. "We only need to write that we have talked to the community, so that [NORAD] believes we have done it. Talking to the whole target group is too exhausting, and I guess that the community opinion about what to do has not changed much since the previous study". This statement surprises the project manager who underlines the importance to assess the needs of future beneficiaries, "especially the people in the new areas we're targeting".

The divergence between the project manager and the consultant is settled through choosing a middle course. They decide to go to Aba'ala, the project area, and talk to community *representatives,* i.e. the elder council and employees at the governmental offices and other community leaders. The project manager objects, stating that these groups are not the primary beneficiaries, rather people that already have employment and live under relatively good conditions compared to the average of Aba'ala. The consultant argues that it is impossible to apply participatory approach and bottom-up planning literally, due to the extensive workload it implies. He refers to his experience in designing projects and applications as a safety valve.

In a meeting between the consultant and the project manager, responsibility is distributed about who should write what in the project application. One of the last points in the application form for new projects (as defined by NORAD)[3] is "how is the project to be financed after Norwegian support has ended?" (point 3.5). The project manager claims that "it is improbable for the project to be financed by others, and even more impossible that it would be self-sustainable. The project's budget is nearly 1 million *birr,* while the [second institution's] annual budget is only 40 000. There's nobody to finance the project except NORAD". The consultant replies:

> "Well, of course, we cannot say that we are dependent on the funds from an external donor. The application for the first phase did so, but we can't do it once more. Again, we just have to convince them that the project is sustainable, and that the local institutions will take over the responsibility for the introduced infrastructure. We write that through lifting the capacity of the local institutions and creating awareness, the people in Afar will manage the project themselves. I don't think the second-phase application will be accepted if we say that we are dependent on further external funding after the implementation. And we have to write that it is cost-efficient".

The consultant informs that it is easier to fill out the application if "you know what they want". He says that he promotes the inputs given him by the donor, who knows the trends and policy of NORAD and the Norwegian Government, to which the project must accord.

This case exemplifies a contradictious aspect of the formal order of development, that is, between the donor's wishes, intentions and conditions which infringe the notion of participatory bottom-up planning. The case shows how development agents relate to the formal order and discourse of development, and that actors are able to be reflexive towards both imposed knowledge

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[2]This is the second time the field trip is delayed, but for different reasons. The first time, the reason given was that nobody was around to accept and sign the necessary papers for a small withdrawal from the project's bank account to cover the expenses of the field study, set to approximately 2000 *birr* (2000 NOK). At that time, the project manager expressed frustration over not being allowed or able to manage and control funds on the project he supervises, instead "I have to wait for a week for a signature".

[3]The form is called "NORAD—Department for Non-Governmental Organizations. Application for Support to New Project, Year: 2003". From autumn 2002 a new application format substitutes the old ones, as the one used in this case.

and prevailing discourses. Additionally the case shows that the project exists on two different levels, or 'realities', namely one in project documents and the other at the practical implementation level. These two levels are interconnected, but do not necessarily reflect each other directly. However, the local informal practises can contribute to maintain the formal codified order (in documents). As the actors have knowledge about the formal order to which they relate, they can be reflexive to it and produce knowledge that feeds into the larger whole of development order, despite the practices applied to do so diverge from the same order. As these practices are not reflected in the formal order, and simultaneously maintain the same order, the preconditions for similar actions are reproduced. The case tells us how actors relate and might respond to prevailing ideas and imposed expert knowledge. The case is privileged because it not only illustrates post-development theory's main shortcoming, but also it says a great deal about general discourses' formative power.

Discourses as systems of knowledge

The concept of discourse, as applied within the social sciences, denotes the interrelation between knowledge, meaning and power, i.e. a system of knowledge or meaning that is shared by various people (Svarstad 2001:3). Neumann defines discourse as a

> system for the formation of statements and practises, that by inscribing itself into institutions and appearing as more or less normal, constitutes reality for its bearers and has a certain degree of regularity in an array of relationships (Neumann 2001:18, my translation).

Those seeing development as a discourse are generally concerned with the array of relationships aligned to contemporary and historical development issues, that is, the development discourse's formation. The demarcation of a discourse implies identifying the regular and systematic collection of statements and practices (Hammer 2001:8). A discourse refers not only to oral and written statements, but also to aggregates of social practices (Kårhus 1992, Kårhus 2001).

Foucault proposes a discourse that is perceived as insignificant by its bearers, and emphasises the structuralising power a particular discourse has over its bearers through the discourse's conditions of existence, rules of formation and procedures of exclusion. "The discourse can appear as insignificant, but the prohibitions it is affected by reveal quite early and quite fast its connections with the desire and the power" (Foucault 1999 [1970]:9, my translation). The rules of formation lead to regularity in statements and practices aligned with the discourse. Actors' expressions and practices that do not reflect or relate to the existing discursive

order are sanctioned by exclusion. Foucault's argument is that the actors' self-disciplinarian and self-regulating normalisation of statements and practices lead to a strengthening and reproduction of the established discursive order. Foucault is not directly interested in the discourse's originator, since a discourse "comprises a sort of anonymous system that is available to those who want or can operate it without its meaning or validity necessarily being connected to the discourse's originator" (ibid:19, my translation).

For those embedded in a discourse the discourse *is* the reality. Following Foucault, a particular discourse might even become the reality for actors who regularly relate to it due to the discourse's formative power. For the discourse analyst this reality is revealed and perceived through its representations (Neumann 2001b), or metonyms (Kårhus 1992). A representation, or metonym, is a piece that stands for a larger whole in which the piece itself is a part of (ibid:113) and appears between the physically given world and our perception of it (Neumann 2001:33). Identifying the representations a discourse relies upon say something about the particular discursive realm and how the discourse functions. A discourse is socially and intersubjectively constructed. As discourse is a construction, it has no institutional fixity. Consequently, it can be changed. A particular discourse is not exclusively reserved for selected groups, but a system of knowledge that can be shared, learned through living and thus applied by others. This is illustrated by the case with the consultant, who has knowledge about development discourse, and thus he uses his knowledge selectively to generate an application that feeds into the 'larger whole' of development. Bearing this in mind, post-development theory is fruitful to grasp the formal order, or larger whole, of development.

Poststructuralists' development discourse

Many contemporary academics engaged with development issues are heavily influenced by Foucault's notion of discourse. Since the late 1980s, authors writing from a poststructuralist perspective, known as post-development theoreticians, have begun to analyse development as a powerful discourse. Different from previous theoretical approaches to development is that this perspective tries to address why so many development projects seem to fail by analysing the intentions, and the development apparatus used and imposed by donors. "Focus has been shifted to the way in which discourses of development help shape the reality they pertain to address, and how alternative conceptions of the problem have been marked off as irrelevant" (Nustad 2004:13). Whereas development represents itself in terms of beneficial intentions, post-developers, who position themselves outside development's institutional structure, have a less flattering opinion about develop-

ment. Post-developers see institutional development as

> a bureaucratic force with *global reach* and an explicitly pro-capitalist agenda, operating as a tool of regimes that seek to perpetuate relations of inequality and dependence between the West and the rest and, through their representation, to perpetuate the construction of others as post-colonial subjects (Green 2003:124, emphasis added).

Post-development scholars' development critique takes advantage of seeing development as a discourse—"as a system of knowledge, technologies, practices and power relationships that serve to order and regulate the objects of development" (Lewis et al. 2003:545). Such a view, proposing development as a hegemonic and monolithic discourse is associated with, amongst others, Sachs (1992), Ferguson (1994) and Escobar (1995).

The early post-development theoreticians conceive development as a western neocolonial discourse embedded in unequal power relations between the north and the south of the world. They understand the realm of development as relying on an apolitical understanding of the world where nations are developed intentionally according to recognised and consecutive stages with the US and Europe as "the beacon on the hill" guiding the less developed nations (cf. Rostow's version (1961) of the modernisation theory). Consequently, the world and relations between states are understood and defined from the point of view of the developed (cf. Cowen and Shenton 1996). "Considering the development enterprise as a discourse implies that the 'underdeveloped' world is constructed through representations and that reality is constantly 'inscribed' by discursive practises of developers, economists, demographers, nutritionists, etc" (Orlandini 2003:20). Consequently, the development discourse is continuously reproduced and thus strengthening its hegemonic position, formative power and power of normalisation over individuals relating to it—at least according to post-development scholars—leaving rather small chances for alternative or deviating knowledge or practises to be projected.

As an inevitable result of this rigid comprehension of discursive power, human agency is neglected as a factor that might deviate from the prevailing discursive order. This is among the main shortcomings of Foucault's notion of discourse and post-development scholars' application of it. As the case with the consultant illustrated, actors are able to be reflexive towards a discourse and not merely reproduce it uncritically. Including actor orientation, which implies the inclusion of empirical studies, contributes to nuance this rigid comprehension of discourses, while also strengthening the relevance of post-development theory. Seeing development discourse as *one* discourse, or system of knowledge, amongst others to which actors relate is more beneficial. It then becomes easier to understand the processes involved as illustrated with the consul-

tant, and it budges on the formative power certain scholars ascribe to development discourse.

Some critical remarks on a discursive approach

My general concern of discourse analysis, which echoes my critique of post-development, is the validity and the area of application ascribed to it and its ability to grasp the entirety and complexity of what is analysed. It's hardly a novel anthropological insight, but it echoes my argument that no single theoretical approach manages to grasp the full complexity of what it sets out to describe. Discourse analysts in general, and post-development scholars in particular, largely avoid other theoretical approaches. I am critical of their conception of discourse as a monolithic, hegemonic and homogenising system of knowledge that neglects and undermines humans as reflective individuals and rather sees them as subordinate and merely bearers of a discourse. Discourses, regarded as obvious conditions for communication, can be questioned under particular circumstances; they can be revealed to be constructions and therefore changeable. Not only conflicts between discourses, but also challenges to the very discourses themselves can occur as the implicit may be transformed and thus appear as explicit and intentional opinions. Discourse, as a system of knowledge, is maintained and spread by its bearers, but the reception and rendering of a discourse has no a priori defined outcome. To assume a too strict causality between discourse and practice would be a great fallacy. No system of knowledge is hegemonic; it gets local expressions. What happens in the encounter between a discourse and other systems of knowledge is an empirical question. Too rigid a conception of discourse necessarily precludes certain ways of thinking and viewing the world, while privileging others (cf. Lewis et al. 2003). The development discourse represents a system of knowledge development agents in various ways relate to in constituting their reality. The consultant-case illustrates this; that he relates to, but is not shaped or formed by development discourse. What he does is non-discursive practises that relate to development discourse.

I acknowledge post-development scholars' identification of a development discourse, but I disagree with the exclusive formative power ascribed to the discourse. The discursive approach to development is favourable and a good way to grasp the formal order of development as seen from donors and policymakers. To assume that discursive practise is the only thing taking place locally attaches too much faith in formative structures and knowledge. A way forward is to study the reception and the local application of the development discourse, which calls for an actor-orientated approach. What becomes prevalent is the disjuncture and slippage between the formal discursive order and local practices that might be non-discursive. Local ac-

tors generate informal strategies as the inevitable result of their knowledge encounter with formal structures (cf. development discourse). However, the formal order of development is not irrelevant to what is going on, only that it is not *what* is going on (cf. Barth 1993).

Actor orientation and informal practices

To grasp what happens in the knowledge encounter—as illustrated by the case with the consultant—there is a need to supplement the discursive approach with an actor-orientated approach. Post-development scholars' identification of the development discourse is merely *one* among several systems of knowledge development agents relate to. Some coexist, some overlap, some oppose each other. An actor-orientated approach enables to see how various systems of knowledge are affected when challenged and encountered by others—being situations of interface articulated by actors. The focus on actors is not to reveal their intentions. It is rather a matter of where focus is put to gain data in order to study local renderings of development discourse.

The actor-orientated approach not only helps to open up black boxes of formal, institutional and discursive development, but also opens up and nuances post-development theoreticians' depiction of the development discourse. An actor-orientated approach enables to grasp how aspects of development are "produced, contested and reworked in practice—and thus to illuminate the multiple significances that the term holds for actors involved in the development process" (Lewis et al. 2003). To study this process, it is important to understand the broader picture of development, as offered by post-development scholars, and how the various organisations involved function formally and practically. The understanding of development as a discourse relies mostly on formal sources. What is regularly prominent in this field, is the discontinuity between formal organisation and the many informal practices that oppose but at the same time relate to the formal structure of development. An actor-orientated approach enables us to provide ethnographic studies on how particular texts are consumed by development organisations and agents, how they relate to or feed into a development discourse and how these influence and interact with project practices as communicated by local development agents. Norman Long's concept of interface is, in this respect, very appropriate as it takes as its primary concern the encounter between various life-horizons, and takes the knowledge-encounter as the privileged analytical point. In my case, this is the consultant: he represents and articulates the knowledge-encounter he faces, and relates to various forms of knowledge and demands. On the one hand, donor's knowledge and demand, the need locally for more money and their wishes, while on the other his defined objective to produce and finalize the application.

Interfacing development discourse

Norman Long defines "a social interface as a critical point of intersection or linkage between different social systems, fields or levels of social order where structural discontinuities, based upon differences of normative value and social interests, are most likely to be found" (1989:1–2). Identifying situations of interface is an approach for studying linkages between structures and processes, and illustrates encounters between different systems of knowledge. Interface-studies help to bridge the gap between structural and actor-orientated research. Interface is an analytical tool for understanding what happens in the encounter between different knowledge systems. Long calls for a "thoroughgoing actor-orientated approach which builds upon theoretical work aimed at reconciling structure and actor perspectives" (Long 1992a:4). This is to counter the resurgence of simplistic system thinking, stressing the importance to acknowledge and take ethnographic particularism into account (ibid). The fruitfulness of using interface as a methodological and analytical tool is that its "concepts are grounded in the everyday life experiences and understandings of men and women, be they poor peasants, entrepreneurs, government bureaucrats or researchers" (ibid:5). Actor-orientated research takes the multiple realities and diverse social practices of various actors into account and makes it possible to grasp these different and often incommensurable of different actors (ibid).

The development encounter denotes a process of transformation as the formal order of development "is transformed through acquiring social meanings that were not set out in the original policy statements" (Long 1989:3). Situations of interface articulate factors which cannot be directly linked to the development programme itself, but evolve as a result of the intersection of different fields of knowledge. In dealing with multiple realities, acknowledging potentially conflicting social interests, we must look closely at the issue of whose interpretations or models prevail over those of other actors, and under what conditions. "Knowledge processes are embedded in social processes that imply aspects of power, authority and legitimation" (Long 1992b:27). This discussion brings out certain parallels between power and knowledge processes. Like power, knowledge is not simply something that is possessed and accumulated. Nor can it be precisely measured in terms of some notion of quantity or quality. "It emerges out of processes of social interaction and is essentially a joint product of the encounter and fusion of horizons" (ibid). Power and knowledge must therefore be understood relationally and not treated as if it could be codified, depleted or used up. That someone has power or knowledge does not necessarily imply that others are without, nor is this the case in the development sector concerning the relations between donor and recipient. Recipients are not incapable and powerless in their en-

counter with externally imposed structures, rather they apply a wide range of strategies to cope with the formal order of discursive development. What happens in the development encounter is thus solely an empirical question.

Counter-tendencies and reflexive responses

Interfaces challenge development's formal institutional arrangement (Arce & Long 2000:11), which illustrate that one needs to identify the formal and informal settings that can generate various effects of the representations of development. Studies of knowledge encounters show the struggles, strategies and interactions that take place. Such studies show how "actors' goals, perceptions, values, interests and relationship are reinforced or reshaped" in situations of interface (Arce & Long 1992:214). Interface gives focus on the diverse types of interplay and interaction between different knowledge realms. Parkin (in Arce & Long 2000) presents the notion about 'counterwork'. Counterwork denotes the process that unfolds when different systems of knowledge intersect. Parkin conceptualises counterwork as the rebounding effect of knowledge in its diversity. Partnership relationships and the interactions between donor and recipient involve the interplay of 'hegemonic' and 'non-hegemonic' discourses and values. Thus, Arce and Long also give an account of Wertheim's notion about 'counterpoint', characterised as composed of 'deviant' values that, in some way or another, are institutionally contained. Wertheim's central point is that the "dynamic processes of change can never be understood if the opposing value systems within society are not taken into full account" (Wertheim cited in Arce & Long 2000:11). In studies of interface, one must take the different realms that actors relate to and that shape their perception of everyday life. The analytical amplification of counterpoint values challenges the existing institutional arrangements. Arce and Long call for a combination of counterwork and counterpoint, viz. counter-tendencies, which evolve in situations of interface. To identify counter-tendencies is a useful methodological approach to grasp different and entangled systems of knowledge in situations of interface and the outcome of these. "Life-worlds exist as specific time, space and experiential configurations..., where some coexist, some clash, some mix, and others separate or retreat into themselves" (Arce & Long 2000:13).

Counter-tendencies might not only take the form of implicit responses to whatever imposed. In fact, actors can be acutely aware of the external system of knowledge they encounter, and they might also have thorough and even intimate knowledge about it. Hence, the counter-tendencies might be explicit reactions and not merely implicit responses to various situations of interface, as we saw in the case with the consultant presented above. As the consultant 'knows the NORAD format' he is able to produce whatever of interest and make it fit into the format in which the executive officers at NORAD evaluate and estimate the project. Working regularly as a consultant for the development sector he alternates between various discourses, which enables him to be reflexive not only to what he is doing or producing, but also to the very discourses themselves which, in turn, are contested. Through distant knowledge and low degree of embeddedness into the development discourse the consultant manages to produce an application that fit directly into the very discourse despite bypassing several of the formal guidelines and structures (such as participatory approaches) that he inevitably is supposed to relate and stick to. Thus, by bypassing the formal structures and thus producing a project application that feeds into the larger whole (that is, the development discourse) he is on the one side being strategic and manipulative. On the other side he then also contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of the formal order, the formal structures, or what post-development theoreticians denote development discourse. Nevertheless, the case shows that discourses can be contested by actors' deviating practices, and that a discourse is not as powerful, hegemonic and formative as strict discursive approaches tend to state.

Concluding remarks

No discourse is hegemonic and power cannot exist without the possibility of being resisted, contested, manipulated, translated, or even rejected. Actors can be perfectly aware of the important elements that make up their entangled life world. A discourse analyst perspective to development neglects this approach. I argue that by including agency into the analysis one meets the critique of resurgent system thinking that recognises the discursive approach, while also giving the analysis an empirical grounding. This is the major shortcoming for post-development scholars who fail to acknowledge the fact (and traditional anthropological insight) that no theoretical approach manages to grasp the full complexity of what it tends to describe. Two theories and two approaches are always better than one. What follows in respect of development is that post-development theory's main shortcomings are met, thus it becomes more nuanced, which inevitably contribute the theory to gain relevance as an approach to development. A combination of a discursive and actor-orientated approach allows us to identify various actors' relations to a system of knowledge, illustrating how actors might draw on, challenge or alternate between different discourses. Imposed discourses might be challenged by the actors' cultural stock and local practical knowledge. Discourses, as the implicit, obvious and unspoken conditions for communications can be challenged by actors' agency and their opinions, i.e. what is intentional, explicit and debatable.

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