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From complexity to simplicity – how chasing success stories affects gendered NGO practices

Maren Olene Kloster

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the “production” of success has become crucial for NGOs to manage their individual brand and secure funding within the contemporary global health and development landscape. Based on an empirical study of a Save the Children project in Malawi aimed at reducing teenage pregnancies by retaining girls in school, it illustrates how gender has become de-politicised within global health. Furthermore, it also shows how their changing role and growing pressure on NGOs to achieve impact and success stories affect NGOs’ ability to represent and understand the lives of women and girls.

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Introduction

The external evaluation of the test-and-invest project “More Educated Girls – Reducing Teenage Pregnancies in Malawi” (hereafter RTP) was presented at a meeting between the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and Save the Children Norway (Save Norway) in June 2016. This project, funded by Norad, was Save Norway’s first cross-sectoral project integrating health and education to support efforts to retain girls in school and thereby reduce teenage pregnancies. Initiated by Save Norway to take stock of the project, this critical evaluation emphasised the learning potential, the complexity of the topic – and the mismatch between activities and indicators. Importantly, it also highlighted project achievements. In her presentation, the external evaluator described how the project aimed to attain social change, and by doing so went “*against the cultural grain in many of these societies ... where your child is successful if it gets married and have a lot of children*”. She stressed the difficulty of making such a project sustainable: “*until you get people to realise that changing behaviour is a good idea*”.

The evaluator sparked discussion by stating that: “in Malawi, the dropout rates for boys and girls are quite similar ... and there are myriads of reasons why they drop out”, pregnancy being only one. As one Norad advisor said, “*I had the impression in Malawi that people wanted to stop teenage pregnancies, and now you say the opposite. What is correct? ... What is success here?*” The evaluator replied “*there is not necessarily a correlation between dropout and pregnancies or vice versa*”, noting factors like poverty, early marriage, and other socio-economic aspects. She further pointed out that numerical indicators cannot adequately reflect the complexity and comprehensiveness of the programme approach, and stressed that what they want to achieve with the project is difficult and will take a long time.

The evaluation was repeatedly denounced as irrelevant because it could not help to create a “*success story*”. This criticism reappeared towards the end of the meeting, when a Norad advisor stated: “*There is no visible story of success. That is critical. The Theory of Change is wrong, and you don’t have a new one. That is critical. This is a test-and-invest project ... we need the evidence*”. The

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critique of the Theory of Change (ToC) and lack of evidence of success was further repeated in the donor agency's written feedback to the NGO some months after the meeting.

This example indicates the confluence of pressures facing NGOs. In a changing aid landscape increasingly dominated by managerial values of efficiency, effectiveness and the need to show value for money, NGOs encounter sharper competition for funding (Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012). To justify their aid budgets, donors need success stories to prove value for money; and international NGOs have to show they are the best at producing such successes. Professional NGOs, like Save the Children International (SCI), do in many ways resemble enterprises that, like commercial entities, are concerned with managing their "brand" to remain competitive vis-à-vis donors. To strengthen their position as particularly effective at "doing good", and to survive in the increasingly competitive landscape with scarce resources, managing their individual brands is becoming important to NGOs. These pressures have changed NGO development practice (Kamat 2004), shifting the focus of NGOs from social transformation and power relations, to success stories and strategies that can help improve their brands. Save the Children is a good case to demonstrate this development. From an alliance of 29 national NGOs, the organisation went global in 2009 to ensure and better demonstrate effectiveness and increase impact. SCI is today one of the world's largest INGOs and has entered into "strategic" partnerships with business actors like GlaxoSmithKline to secure funding (PHM et al. 2014, D2).

Additionally, this article shows how this observation is informative as to what has become of gender in global health and development, where the focus on women and girls has waxed and waned over the past five decades. When NGOs, often feminist organisations, first took up gender issues in the 1970s, these were as political cases, often radical, concerning rights, resources and equality. Today, however, gender has become a technical enterprise, rather than a project designed to change power relations and achieve gender equality and social transformation. A key NGO response has been to "*instrumentaliz[e] women as key providers of development for their families, communities, and countries*" (Wallace, Porter, and Ralph-Bowman 2013, 18).

By showing how gender is reduced to "the girl" detached from context, I unpack how lack of contextual understanding renders it possible for NGOs to produce success stories vital for their brand management. The management of the given NGO brand, combined with donor demand, critically shapes what NGOs communicate upwards in the aid chain. I demonstrate these mechanisms empirically by analysing the abovementioned Save the Children project. By exploring how such narrowing down of gender plays out in the RTP project, this article offers an empirical account illustrating how the changing role of NGOs and growing pressure for achieving impact and success affect their ability to represent and understand the lives of women and girls. Before elaborating on the RTP project and processes of demonstrating success, the article first provides background on how gender in global health has shifted from being political to becoming a de-politicised and rather technical mechanism, and how reproductive health and rights have been narrowed down to girls' education (see Austveg 2011; Switzer, Bent, and Endsley 2016).

Women, gender and NGOs – from complexity to simplicity

Today's plethora of NGOs addressing women's welfare and gender issues through girls' education contrasts with its politico-ideological starting point in the 1970s (Bernal and Grewal 2014, 1). Gradually, gender equality and empowerment as *relational* concepts entered the agenda. Women's NGOs, often grassroots organisations different from today's professionalised development NGOs, were central in driving this development, and their effectiveness and influence grew during the 1990s (Petchesky 2003). The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 stands as a watershed in this regard. Within the growing field of global health, gender was initially framed within the Cairo consensus. Radical NGOs with a specific political agenda were the drivers of this consensus, with its focuses on women's rights – their reproductive rights in particular. This was deeply challenging of the economic and demographic objectives of then dominant vertical

family planning programmes. The consensus promoted “*family planning within the context of more comprehensive reproductive health care*” (Cohen and Richards 1994, 272). Perhaps most significant was the emphasis on improving the status of women at all stages of lives (Cohen and Richards 1994), acknowledging gender equality and empowerment as cornerstones in development. NGOs “*became corner posts stretching the terms of the debate*” making it easier for governments to come on board and “*find a position behind them*” (Joachim 2003, 267).

Although the ICPD was a transformative event for women’s reproductive rights, and its ideas lingered on in the development discourse, they proved less visible in actual practices (Austveg 2011). Throughout the 1990s, levels of official development assistance declined. Then, in what is often deemed a policy victory, the 2000 UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) managed to turn the growing donor fatigue into global consensus and commitment to global poverty reduction. Although NGOs had been key actors in establishing the Cairo consensus, they were kept out of the MDG process, replaced by a group of elite technocrats, to ensure consensus (Crossette 2005). The goals’ simplicity and measurability were key to their publicity and power, and hence influence on the development discourse (Roalkvam and McNeill 2016). The MDGs led to increased funding for women’s health and gender – but something got lost on the way. The use of indicators to measure highly complex and relational issues, like reproductive rights and gender equality, led to the de-politicisation of such issues (Austveg 2011). With MDG5, the broader ICPD focus on reproductive rights became narrowed down to a focus on maternal health, and institutional deliveries in particular (Austveg 2011; Yamin and Boulanger 2013). Attention was diverted from communities and the social changes emphasised in the ICPD agenda, to the idea of achieving a specific, measurable, outcome (Yamin and Boulanger 2013).

Feminist scholars have argued that the emerging donor focus on women’s health after the ICPD centred on women’s access to family planning: on improving the *conditions* of women rather than transforming the *position* of women (e.g. Hunt 2004). NGOs (often politically moderate ones) that provided health care tended to receive greater funding than NGOs that worked on challenging political and structural issues. Moderate NGOs grew in size and influence, developing into professionalised organisations more amenable to donor conditions and agendas (Silliman 1999). That is not to say that all professionalised INGOs have become “*co-opted and incapable of effecting social change*” (Silliman 1999, 31), but there has been increasing pressure on NGOs to meet donor directives and achieve pre-determined results. Knowing that their effectiveness in doing so will be evaluated and future funding depend on their success rate has led NGOs to downplay their political character and focus on enhancing their managerial and technical capabilities (Gideon and Porter 2016; Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012).

With the 2000s, a growing focus on gender equality and the empowerment of women as “*smart economics*” emerged (Chant and Sweetman 2012; Koffman and Gill 2013). The bottom line here is that gender inequality hampers economic growth. Within global health, slogans like “*invest in women – it pays*” emerged in forums such as Women Deliver. Bolstered by a rising corporate involvement in gender interventions, one of the earliest and most influential initiatives in this regard has been the Nike Foundation’s Girl Effect, launched in 2008. Here, the adolescent girl is the main development agent, seen as “*the world’s greatest untapped solution*” to development (Girl Effect 2011). Empowered through education, the Girl Effect campaign asserts, girls will rise above the obstacles that hold them down – whether poverty, early marriage, pregnancies or HIV/AIDS – and move from being victims to victors. The focus is on the girl’s power to change her own situation, and not on the context in which she lives, or on social norms and power relationships that govern her life (Hickel 2014; Koffman and Gill 2013). Hickel (2014) argues that, within this dominant development narrative, gender and reproductive rights are woven into an apolitical form and linear development process acceptable to all. The blame of underdevelopment shifts from structural and institutional drivers, as seen in the Cairo consensus, to local forms of personhood and kinship. Girls and women are made responsible for bootstrapping themselves and their community out of poverty, and thus become both the cause and the solution to

poverty (Hickel 2014). NGOs have been effective promoters of this discourse, but it was business actors and not NGOs that set the agenda.

Methodology

This article focuses on development practices, and how the changing role and organisational character of NGOs, notably their need to produce success stories, influence how gender is approached. It draws on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Malawi and Norway between April 2014 and December 2017. Through a four-year research collaboration with Save the Children Norway and their Malawian counterpart, as part of a research project, I was granted access to RTP project meetings, documents and staff. Additionally, the NGO and the research project developed an MoU clarifying intended roles and expectations, for example, that the researchers were to communicate their analysis to the NGO. Moreover, it also emphasised the researchers' independence.

To understand how gender is understood and communicated in this health project, I conducted participatory observation with staff at district and national level, attended field trips and training of trainers workshops with Save the Children in Malawi. Additionally, I attended meetings between project staff and Malawian government officials and the project's implementing partners, and meetings between Save Norway and Norad. In development projects, reports have gained prominence in the name of managerialism and aid effectiveness. Project staff now have to report regularly on activities and achievements, spending more time on this than before. Reports can serve as an important source of information, telling what is communicated between local, national and international sites, and how success stories are then produced and travel between these sites. To explore how the project team reported on success, achievements and indeed failures, I scrutinised the project application, annual reports and various project documents. In addition, the evaluation report, commissioned by Save Norway to take stock of the project and to document unplanned achievements, became a valuable source for understanding not only how "success" is understood within this project, but also how important success stories have become for INGOs. Further, I examined correspondence between Save Norway and Norad in electronic public records, such as minutes from meetings, feedback on applications and reports. Through these conversations, observations, reports and in-depth interviews, I could follow what was communicated upwards and downwards in the aid chain, and how the project framed and communicated gender, success and complexity.

This Save the Children-led project promoted a focus on gender in line with the global narrative on girls, and promoted global health norms concerning adolescent pregnancies. Paired with the managerial approach of making complex issues like gender and teenage pregnancies "fit" bureaucratic systems (Wallace, Porter, and Ralph-Bowman 2013), education became the quick fix of this multifaceted issue. The RTP project focus on girls' education as the means to curb teenage pregnancies – a rather linear understanding of development – may seem logical within the "girl effect" paradigm. On the other hand, viewed in historical context, starting with the ICPD's clearly political approach, gives rise to a central question: what has been lost? In my view, what has been lost is the understanding of gender as relational – that women and girls do not live in isolation, but as members of communities.

"More educated girls – reducing teenage pregnancies"

The RTP project aimed to combine health and education in a cross-sectoral approach to reduce teenage pregnancies within a three-year timeframe. It was funded by Norad with NOK 30 million through Save Norway, which saw it as a major strategic focus. It was developed in collaboration with staff at Save the Children International-Malawi and technical advisors from Save Norway and Save US. The project was implemented in six administrative districts in Malawi in partnership with two national NGOs: Banja La Mtsogolo (BLM), a national affiliate of the reproductive health and rights INGO Mari Stopes International; and Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi

(FAWAMA). Because of ongoing professionalisation, INGOs now tend to operate as intermediary organisations within the aid chain (Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012). Working through national and local NGOs have become the new norm for INGOs. In becoming global actors, they seem to have lost their grassroots connection (Kamat 2004; Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012), in turn making national and local organisations, like BLM and FAWEMA, a necessary basis for INGOs in the aid chain.

The RTP project was designed to fill a gap identified through a *“situation analysis of programs, partners and donors working to address Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health in Malawi”* (Save the Children Norway 2013, 1). Analysing similar NGO projects, the project staff explained, had enabled them to design a unique and holistic project. Due to RTP’s multi-sectoral approach and focus on behaviour change, it was better than other efforts aimed at reducing teenage pregnancies. Such analysis, it can also be argued, helped to legitimise the need for this specific project in a situation of many other projects addressing teenage pregnancies (Pot 2019b). In particular, it was necessary to address environmental (family, friends and institutions) and individual (risk perception, vulnerability and opportunity) barriers for the use of youth-friendly health services, with an emphasis on sociocultural factors (Save the Children Norway 2013, 5). In response, Save the Children designed a tailor-made project consisting of pre-planned activities, with the overall goal to reduce teenage pregnancies by 10% and the school dropout rate by 5% in six Malawian districts – lofty goals to reach in only three years. As scholars have argued, behavioural change concerning reproductive health issues involves complex processes of “domestication” of information, within a context of core cultural values and meanings – and therefore takes time (Cleland and Watkins 2006).

The situation analysis also sought to explore the link between teenage pregnancy and education, describing the former as both a cause and a consequence of school dropouts (Save the Children Norway 2013). Although in line with the global narrative on girls’ education, the proposal also emphasised the need for a multisector approach which could view the adolescent girl holistically (Save the Children Norway 2013, 6). However, the project rationale was built on a *linear* view of development. Within the managerial discourse that sees development as linear and technical, the project’s ToC is indeed logical. Based on an *if-then* logic, it assumes that lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services and information, lack of quality learning environment and self-efficacy, and lack of community and social support for girl’s education lead to adolescent pregnancies: therefore, improving these will result in achieving the project aims (Save the Children Norway 2013, 5–6). This established the idea of causal connections, but failed to understand teenage pregnancies as a result of a complex set of factors that include both community and individual expectations. Such an instrumentalist approach ignores the realities of young girls’ lives. What the ToC does is to offer technical solutions to a complex issue, by stripping away context. The ToC thus replaces the complexity that society and community do represent, detaching the girl from structures and social norms.

In the proposal, self-efficacy – *“believing in better future opportunities and one’s ability to successfully prevent pregnancy”* – is described as a key determinant in dealing with adolescent pregnancies and girls drop-out, in addition to creating a *“climate for behavioural change”* (Save the Children Norway 2013, 9). Project activities were aimed at strengthening girls’ self-efficacy to empower them to make smart reproductive choices in line with global health norms. As Hickel (2014) argues, there is in this discourse an underlying assumption that girls, once empowered, will follow a liberal logic, freed from traditional norms and kinship, and will become modern, global subjects. Moreover, within this narrative the sociocultural environment is seen as something that hampers the girl’s self-efficacy. The RTP project aimed to activate girls’ agency, enabling them to fulfil their potential through education, thereby *“saving”* the girl from the family and community, which see adolescent pregnancy and motherhood as the norm.

How does it play out in practice?

The way aid is disbursed – the procedures and conditions of aid – affects how NGOs implement programmes on the ground, shaping the way they work, their practices. In what follows, I explore how

this plays out in the RTP project. By showing how gender is reduced to “the girl” detached from context, I unpack how lack of contextual understanding renders it possible for the NGO to produce success stories vital for their brand management.

RTP – a game changer?

The RTP project was launched with great expectations. Norwegian global health officials within the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Norad referred to it as a game changer because of its holistic framing and cross-sectoral approach linking education and health in one intervention. Moreover, and maybe equally important, the project responded to a political demand in the donor country, Norway.

Since the early 2000s, key global health actors, in collaboration with Norway’s former Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, had branded Norway (and the Prime Minister himself) as maternal health champions, through increased funding and political attention towards MDG5. According to a Save Norway employee, the RTP project came about as a result of a change of government in Norway in 2013, where the new Prime Minister, Erna Solberg – representing the conservative party – emphasised girls’ education as key to reducing adolescent pregnancies and boosting economic growth. However, there is more to this shift than a politician’s need to distinguish herself from her predecessor. With education added to the equation, the approach became more in line with the dominant global development discourse. For Norad and key health bureaucrats, it was also a way of preserving the long-established focus on maternal health while also joining the new global emphasis on girls’ education.

Despite Save the Children’s attempt to address such highly complex issues in a holistic manner, the evaluation report stressed the mismatch between indicators and overarching goal. Furthermore, that the focus on numerical indicators overshadows the broader focus on social change (Millard, Msowoya, and Sigvadsen 2016, 17). This is, according to the evaluation, one reason why the project failed at producing evidence. RTP was innovative in merging health and education, and employed a broader approach than more technical interventions. However, the RTP project was *not* a game changer. Indeed, it could not succeed, because of its design. Designed as a test-and-invest project, it sought to achieve behavioural change through an innovative approach – in only three years. While addressing the importance of communities in changing perception about girls’ education – social change – what was implemented followed a linear logic focusing on individual girls. Hence, the project can be seen as staged to fail in that it was designed to deliver on donor expectations of numerical indicators and evidence rather than to create long-term social change. In the following I explore how practices and strategies aimed at producing success set the project up to fail.

Demonstrating success on the ground

When I first met the project manager in Lilongwe, he asked me “*Can you help me create evidence? Can you help me create a success?*” During my fieldwork, it became evident how important it was for the team to create a success, where “success” meant the number of girls they managed to get back to school. While acknowledging the risk factors, like the short timeframe and gaps identified, the team, hired on a project-based contract, worked persistently to achieve the project goal.

Aware of the importance of securing evidence of success in quantified, numerical form, the project staff developed routines for identifying girls who dropped out due to pregnancy. They reactivated local community groups to help ensure that these girls would be readmitted after delivery. Through a database developed specifically to measure dropouts and readmission, a reporting routine with monthly check-ups was established. Information about girls whom the project had helped back to school travelled in the form of statistics from village level, through district offices and to the country office in Lilongwe, for final inclusion in reports to the Norwegian partners and donor.

The girls, and their stories about how, having become pregnant, they were able to return to school with the help from the project, not only travelled as statistics in the aid chain, they also became popular additions to various project reports. Further, these girls often made appearances during donor visits as testimonies of success, telling their story about how the project had helped them back to school. Although success was attributed to this specific NGO project, Pot (2019b) has shown how such testimonies and the attribution given are not always clear in a context where multiple NGOs have been implementing similar projects. Common to these testimonies was a linear cause–effect chain in line with the global discourse: the girls had dropped out due to pregnancies and were not aware of the readmission policy until project partners informed them and helped them back to school. Although staff members recognised poverty as a major reason why rural girls dropped out of school in Malawi, neither the proposal nor the testimonies address this factor. That is not to argue that such testimonies were false, rather that complex reasons for dropping out lying outside of the project’s scope were not included. That staff members stressed that poverty was one of the gaps in the project, and that divergent understandings existed about how to report on girls dropping out due to other causes than pregnancies further affirms the practice of (over-)simplification. Hence, the NGO *“rel[ie]d on a singular and problematic storyline to base their claims”* which further corresponds with the global *“invest in girls”* rhetoric (Switzer, Bent, and Endsley 2016, 35).

To promote the project nationally and within the NGO community, and concurrently strengthen the Save the Children brand as the most effective and innovative NGO, the project team produced several short films and a documentary, featuring the girls and their success stories. According to Mosse (2005), such testimonies and publicity materials become a way of maintaining the *appearance* of success, and thereby more important to the day-to-day management of a project than its actual outcomes. The appearance of success can become the actual outcome (Mosse 2005), as well as being a performance for a special audience – the national NGO elite and international donors – crucial for brand management.

Saving girls – innovation and evidence

When the RTP project was selected for display at the member’s meeting of Save the Children International in Johannesburg in June 2015, that became in itself proof of the project’s innovative approach. Here, innovative projects competed for additional funding. On the basis of a 10-minute presentation and an exhibition showcasing the various projects and their achievements, delegates from SCI member countries voted on which project was the most innovative in saving children. During the weeks prior to the meeting, RTP project staff had intensively worked on producing a short documentary with young mothers telling about how the project had helped them back to school after delivery – the same testimonies of success that were used to brand the project and the NGO in Malawi.

Discussing the experience with one of the Save the Children Malawi employees that had presented the project, the NGO worker stressed the catch phrase used in the presentation: *“Every year thousands of girls in Malawi drop out of school. Come to our booth and learn about our innovative way of helping them to reclaim and secure their future”*. To the NGO worker, this was the core of the project: education is the best ways for girls in Malawi to *“reclaim their future”*. If girls drop out of school, the project can help them with the chance to return to school and reclaim their future. *“Otherwise they have no future”*, the NGO worker added. Although some delegates in Johannesburg were extremely impressed, and voted extensively (by throwing fake dollar bills in a container bearing the project name), the RTP project did not win.

Within this story rests the idea about the girl as powerless, and assumed to lack agency, needing of the project in order to have a bright future. Agency resides in the NGO, not in the girls it claims to empower. However, within the *“girl effect”* discourse, it is the organisation that has the agency to change the girl’s future – indeed to define what a *“good”* future is. The NGO worker’s reflections

from the members' meeting indicate how permeated the organisation and the aid enterprise are by success stories, and how simple messages come at the expense of acknowledging power structures that govern girls' lives.

The expectation of deliverables

After the evaluation meeting described in the introduction, several staff members of Save Norway expressed frustration at the donor's lack of contextual understanding, the dominant position of numerical indicators, and the difficulties communicating complexities within the prevailing short-termism.

That the Norad adviser described the ToC as "wrong" led to frustration, and staff members pointed out that although the project goal was not achieved in the predetermined three years, that does not disprove the ToC. It may not be flawless, but that does not mean that it is wrong. Neither does it mean that the project has failed. Whereas the evaluation stressed that success was measured on the basis of indicators that did not adequately reflect the complexity and the comprehensiveness of the project, in its written feedback to the NGO, the donor described the evaluation itself as insufficient; further, that for Norad to consider extending the funding, several conditions would have to be met. These included that Save Norway should "*demonstrate ownership and strategic direction*" and clearly state what "*end success looks like*" (Norad 2016). In addition, Norad requested:

a clear Theory of Change demonstrating that [the NGO] have good knowledge of the actual situation (e.g. whether girls drop out of school due to sudden/unplanned pregnancies, or whether girls are taken out of school for early marriages and then becomes pregnant; situations which require different kinds of programming to address the problem) (Norad 2016, 2; emphasis added).

The idea that girls might drop out due to complex set of reasons and that different girls drop out due to different causes, and indeed a combination of several causes, which was stressed both in the evaluation and in the meeting, seems to be far from the donor's development narrative. Statements like these bear witness to a linear understanding of development with predetermined outcomes. Furthermore, expectation about knowing what will work already before a project is implemented, or what end success will be, indicate a strong belief in a single approach that works everywhere. This is not to argue that the ToC was strong, as the project did approach teenage pregnancies from a narrow understanding of causal pathways (Pot 2019a). However, as noted, when the project evaluator mentioned that there might not be a strong correlation between adolescent pregnancies and dropout rates, but highlighted other causes, the Norad advisor reacted with disbelief. That response reflects the linear narrative that dominates the global discourse on adolescent pregnancies or girls. The same understanding of development as linear was repeated in the agency's written feedback to Save Norway. This emphasis on the narrative or discourse corresponds with Mosse's (2005) argument about the narrative of development often being as important as what is actually happening on the ground. Controlling the narrative means being able to define the problem, and thus the solutions.

Set up to fail – concluding discussion

In a changing aid landscape increasingly dominated by a managerial logic, brand management is becoming more and more important for INGOs. As donors come under growing pressure to show that their money is spent effectively to legitimise their aid budget, their need for control increases (Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012). A focus on results, efficiency and accountability is, as several NGO workers stressed, not in itself negative in a setting of scarce resources. However, as the field becomes more competitive with regard to funding, and INGOs must position themselves vis-à-vis an emerging group of private and business actors, NGOs, like Save the Children, have to prove that they can deliver on donor expectations. Moreover, private actors are becoming increasingly popular as they are good at delivering on such factors (Wallace, Porter, and Ralph-Bowman 2013). To prove effective in this competitive landscape, knowing that future funding depends largely on

your organisation's success rate, producing success stories can overshadow the importance of the actual outcomes of a project. Today's heightened focus on targets and indicators, measurability and effectiveness, that dominates the development landscape has affected NGO practices. Such managerial demands shift the focus of NGOs from social transformation and power relations to success stories and strategies that can bolster their brand. This has also led NGOs to approach gender in a de-politicised way, moving from the relational and political approach of the 1970s and 1980s towards a more technical and economics-centred approach.

Understanding gender as relational acknowledges that women's health or development cannot be separated from the larger social, political, cultural and economic forces that govern, shape and constrain their lives. In the understanding currently prevailing in global health, "gender" is not about reproductive rights and how social structures constrain women. It is about individual girls, and how education enables them to pull themselves and their community out of poverty (Hickel 2014). If men, families, communities and institutions appear at all in today's narrative, they often feature as a negative factor, which the girl must be saved from.

Alongside this de-politicisation of gender, my analysis indicates that NGOs have both enabled and themselves been influenced by these developments. Within the prevailing managerial landscape, the critical space traditionally occupied by NGOs has been shrinking. Moreover, the political and contextual understanding of gender is ignored in favour of simplified and ultimately technical fixes. During the ICPD process, many NGOs, mainly political ones, stressed the importance of situating women and girls within the broader cultural and socio-political context. Now, professionalised NGOs have, to a great extent, become promoters and implementers of the dominant development narrative that considers gender as an apolitical and technical "*tick-box exercise*" (Wallace, Porter, and Ralph-Bowman 2013, 17). The professionalisation and bureaucratisation of NGOs since the 1990s has led to NGOs becoming agents of success stories defined by global policies, rather than serving as organisations firmly based in local constituencies and working to bring forward the voices from these communities.

I hold that, in order to manoeuvre in a changing aid landscape – in practice, to deliver on donor expectations as to effectiveness and efficiency, and compete for future funding – NGOs shape their projects in specific ways. Accentuating the efficient and effective use of resources is in itself not negative. However, research has shown how NGOs that initially aimed to promote a politicised understanding of women's health are now required to work with more instrumentalised approaches, in order to meet the standards of today's development architecture (e.g. Gideon and Porter 2016). Shaped in line with the global narrative on "the girl", they are designed to deliver on donor expectations, not to challenge the power structures that govern women and girls' lives. NGOs should not simply implement projects effectively, but also be close to the communities with which they work. Moreover, effective and efficient use of funding should not entail neglecting the deeper needs and interests of the communities suffering from the injustice, inequality and poverty that NGOs aim to eradicate.

Although the RTP project claimed to view "the girl" holistically and aimed to achieve social change, its design and implementation followed a linear logic that focused on individual girls. The emerging need to manage the NGO's brand resulted in the practice of producing success, in turn enabling a singular and simplistic understanding of gender to be communicated upwards in the aid chain.

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Notes on contributor

Maren Olene Kloster is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Development and the Environment at the University of Oslo, Norway. Her current research focuses on the role of NGOs in transferring policy, knowledge and norms within reproductive health between local, national and global levels as part of the collaborative Norwegian Research Council funded NGOMA project.

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