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Development aid to water management in Mali: the actors, 'global' paradigms, and 'local' translations[1]

Jan Cherlet

Department of Conflict and Development Studies, Ghent University, Belgium

Introduction and research question

Anthropology rarely manages to approach the *practice of delivering development aid* as research subject *per se*, without succumbing to discussions on the desirability or effectiveness of this practice. Indeed, there is a wide abyss between, on the one hand, critical but lofty contemplations that deconstruct 'development' as hegemonic Western *ideal* (e.g. Escobar, 1995), and, on the other hand, applied but hidebound evaluations that merely focus on increasing the effectiveness of 'development aid' as *instrument* (e.g. Horowitz, 1996). In this abyss lies important anthropological knowledge that is not readily explored, to wit, knowledge about the social interactions *in themselves*, about the actors' strategies, how they handle the diversity, or how they translate an abstract policy into a concrete development project. A growing stream of 'ethnographies of aid' are now exploring the social organization of aid *as such* (Gould and Marcussen, 2004, Mosse, 2005). The PhD research of Jan Cherlet (2012), summarized here, situates itself in this current.

The research departed from the observation of an apparent contradiction. Development aid is delivered through a complex network of myriad actors, such as donors, multilateral agencies, consultants from the Global North and South, the private sector from the Global North and South, governmental administrations, village chiefs, grassroots NGOs, and farmers. These actors possess incredibly diverse world views, cultural backgrounds, interests, resources, and outreach. Despite this heterogeneity, when it comes to delivering aid and implementing projects, all actors speak the same 'development jargon' and seem to display congruence (Mosse, 2005); this congruence appears to extend from the donor over the aid professional to the village chief. And although the ideas about what counts as 'good' and 'bad' aid have constantly changed over time (Thorbecke, 2007) – with new paradigms and policies sprouting every few years (Cornwall, 2007) – the apparent congruence between actors remains more or less unchanged.

1 This is the report of PhD research carried out at Ghent University, under the supervision of Koen Vlassenroot.

This observation triggered the following research questions: How can the congruence between actors be explained against the background of heterogeneity and changing paradigms? When a new paradigm appears, where does it come from and how does it gain support? Is this support actually homogeneous amongst all actors or is it just an appearance?

Research methodology

In order to get an answer to these questions, qualitative data concerning the emergence of, and support for, hegemonic development paradigms was collected from three different sites in the development aid network, via a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995, Falzon, 2009). From the outset the research focused on one sector: development aid in the water sector (covering water management *and* access to drinking water).

The collection and analysis of the qualitative data followed the Grounded Theory Method (Charmaz, 2006). Faithful to this method, the research started without any particular theory, hypothesis, or field delineation in mind. During the first of three participant observations, three paradigms emerged as worthwhile to be concentrated on:

- 'Integrated Water Resources Management' (IWRM) as best practice;
- 'Capacity Building' as mode to deliver the aid;
- 'Adaptation to Climate Change' and its implications for the IWRM paradigm.

From the data collected at the first site followed the selection of two subsequent sites of inquiry. The three sites of inquiry were, in chronological order, the following:

- the international headquarters of WaNGO[2], a non-governmental development organization specialized in implementing water projects in Latin America and Africa, one of which in the Inner Niger Delta in Mali;
- six rural villages in the Inner Niger Delta in Mali;
- the international headquarters of the Global Water Partnership (GWP), an intergovernmental organization founded by the World Bank and UNDP that fosters the integrated management of water resources worldwide, including in Mali.

Eventually the complete corpus of data consisted of 13 months of participant observation at three sites, 48 interviews, 21 focus group discussions and over 50 official documents.

Outline of the dissertation

The doctoral dissertation (Cherlet, 2012), which reports the above-described research, is conceived as a collection of six original articles. Four empirical articles answer the research questions and two theoretical articles reflect on the research methodology. Each of these six articles stands on its own and can be read independently of the rest. They are summarized in the following paragraphs.

The four empirical articles present the data that was collected concerning 'Capacity Building' and 'Integrated Water Resources Management' (IWRM). During the data collec-

2 This is a pseudonym.

tion and analysis, 'Adaptation to Climate Change' was abandoned as separate paradigm, and was only considered in relation to IWRM. Each of the empirical articles reports and analyzes data concerning one of the paradigms in order to give an answer to one of the research questions. However, each article uses a slightly different theory to present the data, mirroring different stages in the data collection and grounded theorizing.

The first empirical article of the dissertation (Cherlet, 2012 & 2013a) probes the origins of paradigm shifts, by unearthing the *genealogy* of Capacity Building, a current hegemonic paradigm in development cooperation. If this paradigm is interpreted as an opposition to the technological determinism ingrained in traditional Technical Cooperation – as argued by the proponents of Capacity Building themselves – Capacity Building can be considered as the latest offspring of an age-long genealogy of discussions on the role of knowledge and technology in development. In fact, it is shown that the genealogy of these discussions dates back to the Enlightenment. Moreover, at any moment in history, more deterministic and less deterministic interpretations have existed along each other, with the sequence of development paradigms swinging back and forth between both extremes. Capacity Building is, hence, no more than the latest non-deterministic paradigm concerning the role of knowledge and technology in development.

As is the case with Capacity Building, new development paradigms are usually presented as the thaumaturgic successor of a previous failing paradigm – with failure usually being attributed either to the misconception of the previous paradigm, or to a gap between the original paradigm and its practical implementation. In the case of Capacity Building, the failing predecessor was Technical Assistance. This dichotomized image of the paradigm and its implementation as two monolithic and separate entities is untenable. In fact, the ethnographic data adduced in the second empirical article of the dissertation (Cherlet, 2012 & 2013b) shows how the Capacity Building paradigm is interpreted differently at various points in the development network – from the donor to the rural municipalities in Mali's Inner Niger Delta. The link between the donor and the Malian municipalities exists only by virtue of numerous mediators and intermediaries that, perforce, interpret the paradigm differently. Therefore it is hard to claim the existence of a 'gap'. Moreover, all actors actively *translate* the new paradigm according to their own interests, in order to reaffirm the own position in the network and in order to reproduce the network. Hence, the paradigm stands or falls with the integrity of the network.

The third article (Cherlet, 2012,&Cherlet and Venot, 2013) is the first of two articles to take a closer look at the IWRM paradigm. Definitely moving away from the idea that paradigms have an overpowering and disembodied discursive power, this article highlights the *role of individual agency* in the deployment of a paradigm. Taking the introduction of the IWRM paradigm in Burkina Faso (in 1996) and Mali (in 2004) as entry point, the article describes the interplay between national policy entrepreneurs, international organizations, and structural constraints in the shaping of the IWRM-inspired water policy reforms in the two countries. Despite the apparent uniformity of the IWRM paradigm, the qualitative comparison of the policy change process in the two countries shows that the reforms, as well as the national 'ownership' of these reforms, are significantly dis-

tinct. The idiosyncrasies of the reform dynamics and ownership largely depend on the agency displayed by individual policy entrepreneurs.

The last empirical article (Cherlet, 2012 & 2013c) traces the network of actors that sustained the emergence of the IWRM paradigm in the multilateral sphere two decades ago and the implementation of IWRM in Mali through governmental and non-governmental development aid. The article displays the most advanced level of theorizing in the dissertation, as it found inspiration in *Actor-Network Theory* to describe how actors enroll each other in an alliance that makes the paradigm work. Non-human actors – e.g. the typical aid financing mechanism, the Dublin Principles, the organization GWP, or the Niger river – have proven to be important anchorage points for the alliance. Yet, the alliance that once was so strong, seems to be disintegrating now, and actors are compelled to renegotiate IWRM by drawing in 'climate change'. In resonance with the article on Capacity Building, Actor-Network Theory proves helpful in showing that the 'success' or 'failure' of the paradigm depends on the strength of the alliance, not the strength of the paradigm.

The two theoretical articles reflect on the use of, respectively, the Grounded Theory Method and multi-sited ethnography. Although the classic Grounded Theory Method requires the data collection to be dissociated from existing theories, it is argued in the first reflective article (Cherlet, 2012) that there are at least four forms of unavoidable, theoretical conditioning in the data collection: (1) the framing of the research problem, (2) the implicit ontological assumptions about the world and the problem under scrutiny, (3) the delineation of the site of data collection, and (4) the theory-ladenness of observations. Drawing on the experience of the multi-sited ethnography, the article exemplifies this data conditioning and its impact on the grounded theorizing. It is asserted, however, that this conditioning does not invalidate the Grounded Theory Method as such, but that it should be made explicit throughout the process of theorizing. Therefore, a case is made for post-modern advances in the Grounded Theory Method, by allowing novel ontological categories from Discourse Theory and Actor-Network Theory to enter the theorizing. In the most advanced phase of theorizing in the present research, the latter theory provided powerful categories for the description of the data.

In an *ex* post reflection on the data collection and the data description, the second reflective article (Cherlet, 2012) points out that multi-sited ethnography as data collection method and Actor-Network Theory as descriptive tool constitute, in effect, a powerful method/tool package to describe the social interactions in development aid. The article shows that the method and the tool are particularly geared to each other. Subsequently, it is shown that the package allows the analyst to move beyond the persistent global/local and policy/practice dichotomies that characterize many development policy analyses. Further in the article, George Marcus' six operational strategies for multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) are translated to the context of development aid. To conclude the article, Cherlet draws again on the experience of the conducted multi-sited ethnography to reflect on the peculiarities of gaining access to, and forging an identity in, the different sites.

Conclusions

The four empirical articles experiment with different theoretical concepts to present the data. Starting with a *genealogical* description of the Capacity Building paradigm in the first empirical article, the theorizing subsequently demonstrates that this paradigm gets *translated* in numerous ways. The third empirical article shows the importance of *individual agency* in the implementation of the IWRM paradigm, and the last relies on full-blown *Actor-Network Theory* to describe the network – widespread in time and space – that supports the IWRM paradigm. Although each theoretical perspective emphasizes different aspects of the data, Actor-Network Theory turns out to be the most apt tool to describe the eclectic set of data that was obtained from multi-sited ethnography, interviews, focus group discussions and documents.

Regarding the research questions, the data shows that neither the Capacity Building nor the IWRM paradigm shift happened overnight; they have a long line of descent. More importantly, they needed the unrelenting work of a small number of dedicated individuals to become hegemonic and they continue to require a strong network of actors to remain so.

Moreover, these paradigms are no monolithic entities; neither is their implementation. No 'gap' between paradigm and implementation is observed, but only a vast network of actors who collectively adhere to the paradigm and who, depending on their position in the network, interpret the paradigm differently. All actors implant their own interests in their interpretation of the paradigm (the actors 'translate' their interests), regardless of whether they constitute the donor, a mediator, or the aid recipient. These translations are necessary to cement and reproduce the network: actors enroll each other in the network by translating interests. The strength of a novel development paradigm depends on the strength of the network and the translations.

The limitations of the reported research are obvious: it is based on a small selection of paradigms from only one aid sector. The results might not be generalizable. Moreover, the research focused on paradigms that were said to be *working*; no data was collected on the demise or failure of development paradigms. The latter could be the topic of future research.

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