

Power in Aid Relationships: A Personal View

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1 Introduction

This article is about the operation of power in relationships between people working in the complex web of organisations involved in the giving and receiving of international aid. Intuitive reactions to the racial inequity I observed as a young child in post-colonial Africa suggest my subconscious interest in power relationships began long ago. However, it is only recently, while reading and reflecting on my experience as a development practitioner during a return to study that I have come to frame my understanding of such inequity more formally in the language of 'power'.

A brief engagement with contemporary literature concerning the international aid system reveals that although power is a contested concept and understood by different authors in various ways (Eyben 2006: 7–8), it is of critical importance to understanding the workings of the system. Power has often been discussed within the context of relationships between bounded organisational entities – 'Northern' donors and 'Southern' recipients. Having been involved in the financial management aspects of such relationships while a practitioner, it was this framing of power relationships that initially captivated my interest (see Shutt 2006).

More recently, publications such as *Inclusive Aid: Changing Power and Relationships in International Aid* (Groves and Hinton 2004) have begun to unpack these relationships and show their complexity, which has encouraged greater focus on power relationships between individual actors. In one contribution to that volume, Chambers and Pettit (2004) challenge practitioners to critically reflect on their own power in order to critique dominant ways of thinking as a means to improve development practice. Scott Villiers' (2004) and Eyben's (this *IDS Bulletin*) responses in pieces about their own experiences

working in international aid have inspired the writing of this article: a personal reflection on the operation of power in my relationships while working as a development practitioner.

Why write about oneself? While it may appear an act of vanity, the experience is deeply discomforting. The advantage of self-reflection is that it avoids some of the ethical difficulties associated with analysing power relationships between other social actors. Furthermore, the use of reflexivity encourages acknowledgement of how one's own interpretations are influenced by power and thus partly prevents the author assuming a neutral, 'objective' and morally superior position to those she is writing about.

My narrative is framed as a journey through 'Aidland', a term coined by Raymond Apthorpe. I use Aidland as a metaphor to describe the institutionalisation of structured practices that are intended to create shared meanings and allow actors to collaborate in the delivery of international aid. This fits with a theoretical understanding of power posited by Haugaard (2003) in an article entitled 'Reflections on Seven Ways of Creating Power'. Haugaard is not only concerned with power as the capacity of one actor to make another actor do what she otherwise would not, but equally how and why such power or capacity is conferred on particular actors within social relationships and not others. When applied to aid relationships, it encourages consideration of why some actors, for example donors are attributed with more power than their 'partners'. This is not merely about the power given to those who control financial resources, it also considers how ways of knowing and communicating, for example through a language which I refer to as 'Aidlish' in this article, privilege some actors more than others. Such knowledge allows certain individuals to occupy well-paid positions in aid relationships with more

influence or decision-making power than those who earn less; a type of power I shall refer to as 'dispositional'. Haugaard's notion of power is not only conflictual. It allows conceptual space for consensual power that is created through collaboration to achieve mutual goals. This consensual view of power is particularly appropriate to a study of relationships in Aidland as they are essentially about cooperation to build capacity; to 'empower' those in countries that receive aid. It should be noted that the term Aidland is not intended to suggest that the aid system is homogeneous. Nor does it imply that development only occurs through the efforts of those working within the international aid system. Many people are 'developing' and changing their lives for the better quite independently of the Aidland mechanisms to which I am referring.¹

My story begins with an account of my arrival in Aidland in late 1993 as a Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) volunteer sent to help build the capacity of a farming cooperative in the Philippines and my efforts to cope with feelings of estrangement in my new environment. The next section considers changes in my interactions with others as I learned Aidlish, which gave me the knowledge and confidence I needed to be able to stay. Some of the internal conflicts I felt while resident are then explored before I describe the experience of internal migration, the result of a move to Cambodia. In conclusion, I argue that it is easy for those of us that enter Aidland hoping to empower others to end up using our knowledge of the aid system to our own advantage while reproducing its inherent inequities. I end by suggesting that we need to continually question our motives for staying.

Having not kept an accurate journal during my time in Aidland, the article is constructed around some critical events that provide useful illustrations for the analysis of power and thus is not intended to represent a 'balanced' account of my overall journey.

2 Moving to Aidland

My reasons for seeking employment within the international aid system were decidedly mixed. Growing up in Zambia, the child of parents that worked in the mining industry, and spending my formative educational years in a strict Catholic convent meant guilt featured strongly in the decision. Some noble intentions were at play but so were

selfish motives. England never provided me with a sense of belonging and after an exciting and privileged upbringing in Africa, life in London seemed rather dull.

Finding a post in Aidland was no easy task and several failed applications for jobs for which I was totally unqualified were an indication of my lack of understanding of the workings of the aid system. However, perseverance eventually paid off and after passing the prerequisite psychological tests, I was given a visa to Aidland under the auspices of VSO; I was to work with a farmers' credit cooperative in the Philippines as a banking adviser and help them to develop their organisational capacity.

The advantages of travelling to Aidland with VSO included a series of pre-departure training activities that encouraged volunteers to think about the possible culture shocks we might experience abroad. Group exercises and role plays helped us consider the power inequities that would exist in our relationships with local people, making clear that they were not simple to resolve. A strong emphasis on skill-sharing and the possibilities for mutual learning in our interactions with counterparts provided a sense of the importance of developing good relationships, something I felt more confident in my ability to do than appear as a professionally competent 'banking adviser'. While armed with the prerequisite academic qualifications and experience in non-profit financial management, I had no practical experience of working in credit. A frantic phone call to a VSO postings officer days before departure expressing doubts about my abilities to perform the task was met with the soothing response that the job would be simple: merely explaining the concepts of money. He was sadly mistaken. Months later, I was still trying to understand the exceedingly complex credit project which had been established by a donor grant to an international non-governmental organisation (NGO), Enabling People² (EP), that was to be turned over to the farmers' cooperative called Inheritance, according to the terms of a complicated matching agreement designed to encourage the farmers to save.

The terror I felt when a senior member of EP's staff kindly welcomed me as a 'credit specialist' dissipated upon arrival at the farmers' cooperative, where work seemed secondary to family responsibilities and progressed at a gentle pace. It was easy to take the VSO Field Director's advice and subdue a task-

oriented approach to work, particularly given my ignorance about credit programmes. The more relaxed attitude to time at Inheritance made an enjoyable change from life in London and challenged many of the 'professional' ethics I had unconsciously adopted over the years. Everyday office life was full of fun and laughter, an aspect of Aidland which gets inadequate attention in dour development texts. It will probably remain peripheral to this one, although I believe a strong sense of humour is a vital ingredient in the recipe of quality aid relationships.

Enacting aid relationships as an expatriate volunteer allowed me both time and opportunity to develop deep connections with farmer colleagues. Rudy, my counterpart, and I got on famously, primarily due to a mutual appreciation of numbers, computers, independent rock music and beer. He came from a poor farming background and was able to teach me a great deal about agricultural practices and the challenges facing Inheritance's borrowers, while I was able to reciprocate giving him access to tools that enabled him to further improve the computing and accounting skills that he had taught himself with little assistance. Despite my poor Tagalog and his reluctance to speak imperfect English, we were able to communicate sufficiently well to create shared meanings and collaborate creating consensual power that enabled us both to better perform our jobs and thus, at least in theory, empower Inheritance.

Although my relationship with Rudy provided enormous personal satisfaction, life at the cooperative was by no means easy. It was hard to judge the farmers' true expectations of a volunteer. They certainly did not have the experience to know whether they were getting good value as regards my credit expertise (or lack of it) but perhaps professional competence was never their primary concern. I was indignant to discover that the farmers had selected my CV on the basis of my single status and eligibility for marriage to Rudy. Constant teasing related to the possibilities of our union was intensely irritating and I sought solace by considering their behaviour 'unprofessional' and part of the reason for some of the repayment problems the cooperative was having at the time. I can now see that 'othering' cooperative members and suggesting their behaviour was unprofessional and inferior to my own was an effort to retain a sense of security. A reading of Baaz's (2005) research on the construction of identity by development workers and volunteers in Tanzania

suggests that it is not uncommon for expatriate aid workers to 'other' and assert superiority of the 'self' while reproducing the inequitable power relations that international aid is meant to challenge.

At the same time, economic inequity affected my friendship with Rudy. Despite the fact that he chose to reject a number of traditions often described as 'typically Filipino', such as joining in coffee break gossip and attending local festivals, he stuck to cultural norms when it came to paying for the expenses associated with the social activities we undertook together. While understanding his generosity and efforts to pay were intended to make me happy, it was rather unnerving. Regardless of being a volunteer, I was earning more than he was and had assets in the UK and a resettlement package from VSO to look forward to. Like many Filipinos, Rudy may have had a different perception, seeing my decision to leave friends and family in the UK to work in the Philippines as a sacrifice, and thus deserving of his generosity; a notion that seemed inconsistent with my reality, and so I chose to spend less time with him, growing increasingly uncomfortable about accepting these seemingly unreciprocated gifts. Now, with time to reflect and access to theory, I realise that like many volunteers who set off to Aidland in response to their abhorrence of the inequity surrounding the distribution of global resources, the rediscovery of such inequity within the terms of personal relationships made me feel guilty and estranged (Baaz 2005: 84–7). Ironically, a Filipino recently rightly pointed out that by refusing Rudy's generosity, I may have been denying him a sense of empowerment.

Initially, I tried to be sensitive to differences in the behaviour and attitudes of my colleagues, perceiving many of them as cultural in nature. Occasionally however, feelings of anger prevailed when a value I presumed to be universal felt threatened. Recollections of losing my temper while drinking beer with a gang of men, as they let the women staff – who were not really joining in – wait on us, are vivid. My behaviour was met with laughter, suggesting it was either amusing or horribly embarrassing for all present: I had committed a cultural *faux pas* and created a situation in which the men could lose face.

Such emotional outbursts were followed by anguish and internal conflict. Part of me felt a sense of guilt

and failure at not being able to perform my politically correct volunteer role to perfection. Another voice inside my head questioned my right to challenge existing norms and gender roles that women seemed quite happy to perform. Yet another aspect of my personality experienced anger, seeing cultural norms as oppressive and regarded staying silent as being complicit in the reproduction of inequitable power relations between men and women. One thing was for sure, a short stint as a volunteer in an Oxfam store in the UK, where one could hold onto universal values and remain emotionally detached from producers and other actors in the web of relationships that were required to get products to UK high streets, seemed inadequate preparation for the complexity of living these relationships in practice.

Recent theoretical reading suggests that much of my discomfort was due to the fact that I was operating in what Rosaldo (1993: 26–7) calls ‘cultural borderlands’ but that the differences experienced in these borderlands were not simply due to me being English and the farmers being Filipino. Rosaldo illustrates the idea of cultural borderlands by discussing the confusion his young son experienced due to the changes in routine when he moved between schools. This conceptualisation is similar to that used by Haugaard (1997) who points out that social actors are not unified selves. As we grow up, we are subjected to a number of discourses or systems of thought, some which have more to do with our ethnicity and countries of origin than others. Each discourse provides us with an interpretive horizon that helps us give meaning to different parts of our lives. I had been conditioned to try and separate the professional and emotional aspects of my life and experienced discomfort, even resentment, when my personal life was introduced into workplace conversations by the farmers in the Philippines. My confusion was further complicated by the powerful influence of new discourses I had been exposed to, regarding how to behave as a culturally sensitive volunteer. Although I experienced awkwardness, this challenge to the way I viewed the world was healthy, as it led me to critically reflect and question my values while entertaining alternative ways of thinking and being, which were sometimes quite liberating. It also encouraged me to consider the social conditioning that may have been in part responsible for my colleagues’ attitudes, and to think about the possibility that the reproduction of power

relations that I saw as inequitable could be a result of them following norms that they had tacitly accepted and was thus, to an extent, unintentional.

Unfortunately, these critical musings seldom provided obvious or easy solutions about how best to behave. However, with the benefit of hindsight and the luxury of time to read, it seems that the potential merit of such reflection is that it stimulates thinking processes, which make it less likely for an actor to revert to a simplistic explanation of culture as reason for the differences that cause feelings of insecurity. Expatriate aid workers often turn to the ‘discourse of cultural difference’, sometimes encouraged by development organisations, to provide meaning and security in relationships in unfamiliar environments, ignoring how other differences such as class, gender and economic inequity affect their social interactions (Baaz 2005: 101). Explaining difference in ‘others’ as merely cultural conceals the power of the ‘self’ performing the analysis (Rosaldo 1993: 202).

3 Learning ‘Aidlish’

Attending a training course on credit programmes with the manager of the cooperative among a group of Filipino NGO workers enabled me to enhance my ‘Taglish’, a hybrid of English and Tagalog. Taglish can be thought of as a local Aidlish dialect containing a number of acronyms understood by Aidland inhabitants wherever they are working around the world. The training also provided me with tools that I could use to contribute to the cooperative’s future, namely helping Inheritance with the maths. Unfortunately, the sums showed that repayment problems and low demand for credit threatened the cooperative’s sustainability. Inheritance had been established to serve farmers cooperatives, but many of the village level cooperatives seemed to have collapsed as farmers were forced to sell their land during the industrialisation of the province that was occurring under a structural adjustment programme. While subsidised credit (i.e. low interest rates) that originated from an NGO may have been responsible for creating a culture of non-repayment, the risks associated with agricultural loans in an environment where natural disasters were endemic probably made it extremely difficult for some people to repay. It was clear that quite radical change was required if the cooperative was to survive, and lending to individual entrepreneurs had to be considered in the new local economic climate.

A participatory review and strategic planning process was a solution that emerged during conversations with more experienced colleagues at EP. EP had the opportunity to access funds to finance such a process but proposing it to Inheritance required sensitivity. EP and I perceived Inheritance's problems as low demand for credit encouraged by existing lending policies, while Inheritance believed their difficulties would be solved if EP, whom they had started to distrust due to the complicated terms of the matching agreement, handed over ownership of more of the loan fund.

EP faced a challenge common to those trying to achieve the normative ideals of participatory practice: the two parties in the aid relationship, Inheritance and EP, assessed the situation with different ways of knowing and understanding. If Inheritance had the power to make a decision according to their perception of the problem, it is likely to have led to the collapse of the credit arm of the cooperative, which was needed to provide financial support to their social programme which included an HIV/AIDs education project. Suggesting a strategic planning process could have been seen as disempowering by Inheritance if viewed as symptomatic of failure and weakness on their part. The problem was further compounded by the fact that EP did not yet seem to be sharing responsibility for the problems that were inherent in the design of the credit programme, something easy to say with the benefit of hindsight. Encouraging the planning process could have been viewed as an attempt to create *power to* – to help the cooperative achieve its goals or alternatively as an attempt to have *power over*. It is also likely that Inheritance staff may have seen that the money that was going to the INGO for managing the project as yet further evidence of their exploitation by EP.

Interpretation of whether consensual or conflictual power was to be created through undertaking a strategic planning process together was highly subjective. If Inheritance viewed the planning process as an opportunity for EP to control them, their resistance could have jeopardised the possibility of change, something I recently witnessed when a young volunteer tried to facilitate and suggest change during a planning process for an NGO in Cambodia. In the end Ed, my supervisor from EP, a facilitator whom Inheritance trusted, was able to persuade them of the merit of the process and we

submitted a proposal to finance the planning. Inheritance's agreement may have been due to the quality of their relationship with Ed, but it is possible that the cooperative was complying as it felt it should due to the patron–client relationship that had historically existed between the two organisations. As Inheritance became more empowered, the staff privately questioned inequity in the power relationship, beginning to see it as a social construct rather than a natural way of being.

A gradual increase in my knowledge of Aidland's theories concerning the rules and procedures needed for 'successful' credit programmes had made me more confident. The ignorant volunteer who had been so willing to learn with the cooperative now felt she understood more about credit than her colleagues. This knowledge provided a sense of dispositional power and inspired efforts to instigate change in the way Inheritance was managing the programme, namely increasing interest rates. Lessons emerging from micro-credit programmes assessed to be successful by merit of their ability to provide credit and saving products to the poor on a sustained basis regardless of whether they were lifting people out of poverty, suggested that interest rates should have been set somewhere between those being used by local money lenders and banks. Such a change at Inheritance required a dramatic change in mindset by cooperative members, who had prioritised their social development agenda over income from the credit programme, something they could afford to do while receiving subsidies from the donor-funded project which was soon to end. They had invested in an identity that sought to undercut bank interest rates which they labelled as exploitative through a discourse which the staff actively maintained. It was difficult to know how to proceed.

I spent time explaining the need to increase interest rates to Rudy. At their current levels, they could not cover the cooperative's costs. As I was without decision-making power, I was hoping that Rudy, who understood the economic argument, could convince the rest of the cooperative members of the benefits of such a decision and in so doing change the dominant way of thinking within Inheritance about the appropriate costs of credit. Memories of the anxiety I felt when the day of the decision-making meeting arrived are still strong. The participatory discourse in my head was persuading me that I must accept whatever decision Inheritance took, provided I

felt that they understood the consequences. But I was not a disinterested party to the outcome. Having devoted enormous emotional energy in the change process, I was seeking personal satisfaction and was thrilled when the Board agreed to increase rates. I am unsure to this day whether this decision was based on a full understanding of the issues involved or just because they trusted Rudy's professional competence. For me, it was an important outcome. I felt that within the terms of my job description, my posting had an impact and hoped that the change would not be detrimental to the poorest borrowers; something that was difficult to predict given the doubt about whether credit was actually helping them at all. The influence of the professionalism discourse which I had managed to subdue for a couple of years was getting stronger and the task-oriented professional was making a return.

4 Seeking residency in Aidland

While Inheritance was going through its planning process, I had begun to get itchy feet. Tired of being an adviser, I wanted to take part in the action. An apprenticeship in Aidland meant that the acronyms commonly used by NGOs that had seemed enigmatic two years previously were now part of my normal vocabulary. I had been seduced by the fascinating world of international development and felt entitled to stay. EP's attractive philosophy, focus on participatory development and encouragement of learning provided opportunities for challenge and satisfaction that it seemed impossible to imagine in a job back home. It looked to be a place where I could help make a difference to global inequity. Besides, EP was an international training and learning centre that would allow me to meet and network with people from all over the world, making it a fascinating place to settle. While continuing to help Rudy with systems development at Inheritance, I began to seek more permanent employment opportunities at EP in an effort to 'clock up' five years' experience working in Aidland, a period of time that was commonly assumed to grant one the option of permanent residency.

I was in luck. The rapid uptake of the 'management for results' frameworks (MFR) by donors, with its emphasis on quantitative indicators to measure results suggested a potential niche. A background in the corporate sector meant I was already equipped with much of the jargon being introduced into Aidlish by the more powerful actors in the aid

system. Being a native English speaker gave me further advantage of being able to speak this more formal and rapidly changing Aidlish dialect, something that was more difficult for many colleagues. The ability to develop databases that could count and produce powerful quantitative statistics was an added bonus, as was the attendance of a couple of training courses about how to write a successful proposal which involved repeating a number of structured practices added to a set of skills that were in high demand.

At the time, I genuinely believed in the merits of the logical framework matrix (LFM) and MFR ethos. Modernist in my thinking, it seemed to offer opportunities to measure the quality and effectiveness of EP's work. I thus actively encouraged colleagues to include quantitative impact indicators in the projects they proposed, seeing it as a means of increasing organisational capacity and persuading others of EP's worth. It was professionally exciting, and I worked long hours trying to help EP develop monitoring systems. Nevertheless, my enthusiasm was clouded by frustration and internal conflict regarding my salary. When comparing myself with community organisers and programme staff at EP who had years of experience working with poor communities, I found pleasure in a sense of equity. However, when I looked at the salaries of senior international staff (both Filipinos and expatriates), I felt that my professional skills were not being taken seriously. These sentiments are eloquently explained in an article by Michael Watts (2002) based on research of motivation of volunteers in Cambodia, where their salaries were found to be simultaneously a source of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Eventually, I used personal relationships with higher decision-makers to negotiate a salary that although far below internationally recruited staff and my previous earnings in the UK, was significantly higher than the earnings of many of my Filipino colleagues. The desire for the increase was not really about financial need. Had I not been so proud and keen to be independent it would have been possible to rely on my family for support, a practice that would have not seemed at all strange in the Philippines. The desire to earn a higher salary was more about wanting greater recognition from the more powerful members of Aidland.

What had happened to the idealistic volunteer that had been sent out to help develop the capacity of

others and who had worried about economic inequity in my relationship with Rudy? Although I was not working for a big donor organisation, there are similarities in the changes in my behaviour and relationships with others comparable to those that Everjoice Win (2004) observed in a friend of hers that had arrived in Zimbabwe as a volunteer, and after joining a donor organisation began constructing herself as an Africa expert. A reading of Haugaard's (2003) power theory suggests that once I had learned Aidlish and become disciplined in reproducing its rules such as the MFR framework, I felt a competent citizen and sought more appreciation. This need for achievement combined with the desire to stay in Aidland meant I was beginning to use the dispositional power conferred on me through my knowledge of donor rules to leverage the symbolic capital of a better salary that was associated with higher status within Aidland's artificial and socially constructed confines.

5 Internal migration

My enthusiasm for the MFR framework was relatively short-lived. More experienced fieldworkers showed me that the rules and procedures that I had found both personally enabling and of potential use for enhancing EP's organisational capacity were rather less helpful for them. The LFM did not allow fieldworkers enough flexibility in their relationships with the communities in which they were working and things were made even more complicated by the highly restrictive budgets that accompanied the donor-funded projects and programmes with which they worked. These tools or structured practices that enabled some, became powerful instruments of control for others, and eventually I joined others in resistance through the creative interpretation of Aidland's rules and procedures (see Shutt 2006). I departed EP several years later, somewhat cynical about the institutionalised mechanisms of Aidland, not realising how difficult it would be to leave them behind.

A trip around Southeast Asia was intended to be the first leg of a journey back home but a sudden family death made return less urgent and the opportunity to migrate to Cambodia, a country that had intrigued me through contact with Aidland workers while at EP, proved impossible to resist. Although electing to move there independently as a small business owner, without an official Aidland identity, large vehicles with familiar aid agency logos and a community of

VSO volunteers with whom I was confident I could speak Aidlish, suggested I would feel 'at home'.

I was wrong and the decision proved decidedly unwise. I had not anticipated how different the experience would be without an Aidland identity legitimated through membership of a recognised aid organisation. Being introduced to expatriate Aidland residents as a small business owner led to feelings of exclusion, as it meant I tended to be left out of Aidlish conversations. In moments of discomfort, it proved easy to turn to the discourse of cultural difference, claiming Aidland Philippines as superior to Aidland Cambodia in efforts to deal with feelings of loneliness and alienation.

Frustrated, and increasingly depressed at the fact I was contributing so little to Cambodia's development, I sought volunteering opportunities and was willing to undertake anything that might restore my sense of identity as an Aidland resident. It was an incredible relief to be introduced to a small NGO which was struggling with funding after an international donor suddenly stopped supporting its work. Returning to the familiar discipline of filling in LFM boxes while trying to develop proposals for the local NGO provided great comfort. Given my cynicism about these powerful Aidland mechanisms, I was horrified to recently rediscover some of the emails I wrote to the Executive Director at the time. They lauded my knowledge of Aidlish and the rules of the donor game – rules that I insisted he must follow – somewhat insensitively, constructing '(my)self' as more expert than he, 'the other'. The emails suggested that well-intentioned efforts to empower the organisation through helping them access money were probably simultaneously disempowering for its Executive Director, as I was once again unconsciously reproducing structural power relations partly due to the need for a sense of security in my own new environment. I probably hoped that my actions would lead others to give me the symbolic capital necessary to be recognised as an Aidland citizen again and indeed they eventually did.

6 Conclusion

This article has traced a personal journey through Aidland. It suggests that it is easy for those who enter the international aid system with honest intentions of 'empowering' people in developing countries to unwittingly reproduce the inequitable social relations of power that they seek to challenge

due to insecurities experienced in unfamiliar environments and the desire for what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic capital', as discussed by Navarro in this *IDS Bulletin*.

Forming long-term relationships with people that have either been conditioned to, or have chosen values and beliefs and ways of thinking that vary from one's own, can cause confusion and anxiety. It is tempting to explain the discomfort away, using the notion of cultural difference. However, relying on simplistic, essentialist explanations of culture can prevent critical reflection on other factors that may affect relationships between individuals in Aidland, such as race, gender and class, etc. Most importantly, turning to the discourse of culture as reason for difference can obscure the operation of power.

Critically reflecting on difference using the lens of power can help to illuminate how assorted individuals' attitudes and behaviour are influenced by various traditions and ways of thinking. Tracing the origins of these systems of thought and considering who is responsible for sustaining them gives clues as to why some actors are conferred with more symbolic capital that functions as social relations of power than others. As someone with a background in economics, I was enabled by LFM, which were introduced by the more powerful in Aidland, as they relied on simple cause-and-effect relationships with which I was familiar. For fieldworkers that dealt with the complexity and unpredictability surrounding their work with communities, these same 'tools' can be disempowering barriers. My experiences suggest that whether one's actions are judged as helpful and creating 'power to' or trying to gain 'control over' will depend on subjective interpretations of those living in recipient countries; interpretations which are

not only shaped by the social relations of power in Aidland, but also by local systems of meaning.

I write this article from my country of origin. It is no accident that I have decided to settle near the academic institute where I study, as it is inhabited by people from all over the world and Aidlish is commonly spoken. It provides a sense of belonging and an identity, as well as security which I would miss terribly were I to be situated in the middle of rural England. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to come back and accept relative anonymity in the town where I live after being afforded so much symbolic power as an expatriate aid worker overseas through knowledge of the rules required to navigate the social construct of Aidland.

Personal conversations with other expatriates and research by Stanley (2001: 198) suggest that I am not alone. Expatriates that work overseas often find it economically or socially difficult to fit in 'back home'. While many expatriates undoubtedly do good work, this article shows how easy it is to get caught up in a system which, with the requisite knowledge, can be personally very enabling, while simultaneously reproducing inequitable power relations that have negative effects on the citizens of recipient countries. It is quite possible that I will at some time in the future return to Aidland and find comfort in boxing 'others' in LFM squares. If international aid is about true partnership, that is, about letting local actors take the lead as Crewe and Harrison (1998) point out in their aptly titled book *Whose Development?...*, people like me need to constantly question whether our participation in the system is actually achieving this end. Although not always easy to answer, it is a question that needs to be continually asked.

Notes

- * I would like to acknowledge all the colleagues and friends that I have worked with during my time in Aidland, as they have made the writing of this article possible.
- 1 I am grateful to John Gaventa for encouraging me to make this distinction in an early conversation about this article.

- 2 All organisations and individuals mentioned in the article have been given pseudonyms to help maintain their anonymity.

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