SOCIAL NETWORKS, RESOURCES, AND INTERNATIONAL NGOS IN POSTWAR SIERRA LEONE

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ABSTRACT: The wages paid to local employees by international NGOs and the grants given to community organizations are an understudied aspect of the effect of aid on war-affected countries. In this article, I explore how wages and grants become part of social networks in Makeni, in northern Sierra Leone, and argue that cash infusions cause tension within networks and between payees and INGOs because organizations refuse to “inflate” wages and grants, and yet recipients suffer extreme poverty and support vast social networks. INGOs do not want to pay more than the earnings of low-level civil servants, though popular perception is that they can and should. Community-based organizations also begin their activities by repaying debts, giving them limited life spans and limited trust in communities. These tensions contribute to perceptions of hoarding, which adversely affects the willingness of residents to cooperate with INGO programs and may hasten program failure.

KEYWORDS: NGOs, Employment, Kinship, Obligation, Sierra Leone
I. INTRODUCTION

I begin this article with an episode involving an international nongovernmental organization (INGO) in Makeni, the capital of the northern province of Sierra Leone, which illustrates how the work of international aid in postwar rebuilding extends beyond their official programs in ways rarely analyzed. Sierra Leone experienced a decade-long civil war that ended in 2002, and it witnessed a concomitant rise in international aid during and after the conflict. This aid took many forms, from crisis interventions to long-term development programs, but all programs had two features in common: they employed or were partnered with local people in various capacities, and they became deeply enmeshed in intimate and large-scale social politics of interpersonal interdependence through employing local people and seeding their community organizations. It is how the circulation of money through employment and grants influenced local perceptions of INGOs’ intent and their promotion of development, rather than the programs themselves, that I focus on here. I maintain that inattention to the dynamics of direct injections of money into an impoverished community compromises our ability to understand how INGOs are perceived locally and why their programs may fail.

In 2005, an INGO was in its third year of a small operation training adult volunteers in the promotion of child health and wellbeing. Two expatriates ran the offices, supported by a local staff of a driver and six security guards. The expatriates were uncomfortable with the security of their living situation, which left them feeling vulnerable to unwanted interactions with their neighbors. Their house doubled as their office and had no fence, and people approached frequently to ask for money, food, or other resources, requests that the staff invariably had to deny. Their security guards, claiming other responsibilities, often failed to show for work or slept while on duty. The employees requested a security assessment from expatriate soldiers stationed in town, who recommended that the organization move and fire its security. The report was submitted to their managers, and the employees’ request to let go of the staff and to relocate was approved.

The country director traveled to Makeni to fire the security guards, and he offered them a large redundancy package to soften the blow of sudden termination. The staff members moved in with another expatriate who ran a different INGO and had hired her own security. The
driver was now the only local employee paid by the organization, and he drove them to their training workshops. A few days after they relocated, their former security guards sent letters warning of violence against the organization if they did not receive their benefits, even though those “benefits” were social security payments maturing at the age of retirement. A week later, the former guards assembled at the social security office, threatening to riot as they demanded their “security money,” which they knew the INGO had paid in compliance with new national social security laws. Government employees dispersed the crowd, threatening police action if the guards did not leave peacefully. This episode was followed by a debate on a local radio program in which the disc jockey, while interviewing a guard, asked listeners if this INGO should be asked to leave Makeni because “they are not doing anything good in the township.” The organization terminated its Makeni program less than a year later.

This episode illustrates the little understood linkages between employment of local staff and perceptions of that organization by communities, who have the choice of whether or not to cooperate with its activities. Grievances may have nothing to do with NGO programs themselves. If residents believed that expatriate INGO employees did not care about them—as evidenced in the example above by their persistent refusal to help their neighbors—or if an INGO was stingy with its local employees, it developed a bad reputation. If it funded community-based organizations (CBOs) that appeared to be predatory and untrustworthy, recalcitrant residents would refuse to work with that INGO, or, as I witnessed with two INGOs in 2005, sabotage its efforts. There was an inherent undercurrent of tension to many of the relations between Makeni residents and the town’s INGOs, in part because INGOs were perceived as being extremely wealthy (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 22), and yet they refused to conform to local expectations of how resources should circulate.

In this article, I explore the perceptions and practices surrounding monetary transactions in which INGOs engaged with the residents who comprised INGO employees and community-based grantees. I argue that much of the conflict between INGOs and community members stemmed from the belief among people that INGOs had abundant resources that they were hoarding; INGOs and donors exacerbated these tensions by forcing employees and grantees to conform to Western assumptions of financial flows, which are incongruous with
the varied claims that individuals in Sierra Leone have on each other (Cohen 1981; Jackson 2011), and the realities of local people’s limited access to financial resources. For example, INGOs distributed “seed money” to nascent CBOs, which spent their grants on repaying debts among their networks, on logistics, and on laying groundwork with community partners, often without the knowledge that further funding was not forthcoming without producing some results. INGOs also kept salaries in line with the earnings of low-level civil servants, forcing employees to cope with demands from families who believed that the organizations that funded the government could afford to pay more than the government. These mismatches in expectations seeded bitterness and mistrust among residents against INGOs, whom they accused of “eating” money earmarked for the community. Many residents spoke of the desires of INGOs and CBOs to “self-develop” instead of focusing on their beneficiaries (Peel 1978).

The heart of these mismatches lay in the disparate perceptions of money’s social role (Appadurai 1986: 6). Local employees often acquired their skills through training funded by family members, who in turn expected to benefit from that person’s success (Bolten 2012; Bledsoe 1990, 1992; Fermé 2001; Jackson 2011; Richards 1996). These claims were in addition to those of the employee’s family and spouse’s family, and employees stretched to support everyone on extremely low salaries. These salaries conformed to the fact that Sierra Leone had, at the time, the lowest standard of living in the world (UN 2004). However, they were based on the assumption that a poor country is “cheap” to live in, when in fact the opposite is true: the UN cited that almost all basic foodstuffs were overpriced in 2004. The pressure to increase personal resource flows was omnipresent, and employees in Makeni often threatened violence against their employers when their jobs were endangered by discovery of nefarious activities or program or organizational collapse. While programs operated, the siphoned funds were distributed through employees’ social networks, creating a “trickle down” effect of INGO money to unintended beneficiaries, and providing a small boost to social networks. In essence, by demanding more from INGOs, local employees and their social networks were using employment as leverage, treating it as a bargaining position by which to gain resources and make known their grievances about widespread poverty to their employers. However, the paltriness of these inputs and their negative effect on INGO programming exacerbated existing tensions, and the introduction of limited and strictly controlled resources into
this particular postwar context created a negative feedback loop where no amount of money could ever be enough.

Most INGOs operating in Makeni after the war were new to Sierra Leone. As humanitarian crisis organizations, they had limited knowledge of local practices or existing organizations. This meant they funded new organizations equally with extant organizations, which created uneven effects in communities. Most CBOs were new, organized opportunistically by individuals keen to become development professionals. These organizers often lacked the economic foundations to make measurable progress with their grants—as they were already in financial debt to their networks—and were refused further funding until they delivered some results. Their poverty fueled conflict with their community partners after their initial grants were spent on start-up costs, like signboards, without substantive progress. This gave all CBOs—and the “development” that they supposedly proffered—a bad name, and made Sierra Leone’s experience resonant with INGO resident conflicts elsewhere in Africa. For example, James Ferguson (1994) described the open hostility with which people in Lesotho treated NGOs, going so far as to sabotage programs that represented threats to their autonomy. In Sudan, Alex de Waal discovered that international donors initiated direct conflict with the national government over food aid’s destination, with politicians wanting food delivered to the most politically important areas, rather than to those with the greatest need (1997: 103). Violence resulted from residents—including government officials—wanting to gain as much as possible from aid organizations while they had access, while organizations were unsympathetic to these goals.

The material for this article was collected over a ten-year period in postwar Makeni. I conducted ethnographic research between 2003 and 2006, focusing on the relationships between NGOs and the community as part of the larger issue of postwar development, and again in 2010 and 2012, focusing on youth, employment, and the emergence of multinationals. I served as a sociocultural consultant in some form or another for each of the INGOs described here: I translated for the small INGO in the introduction, consulted for another, and trained the employees of the third in ethnographic methods. The rest of my data is based on interviews, participant observation, and focus groups that occurred between 2003 and 2012 and comprise the opinions and experiences of about seventy people.

I begin this article with an overview of Sierra Leonean social networks and relationships, and how individuals differentiate using re-
sources to nurture others or to “eat” alone. I then examine INGO employment structure in 2004 and 2005, and analyze how people who had acquired employable skills through the contributions of their social networks were pressured to use INGO resources to repay their debts to their social networks. Simultaneously, they became the target for family members to air their own grievances with poverty by making demands of global aid. I finish by analyzing “signboard development,” which consisted of CBOs who received seed grants from INGOs and failed soon after opening their project office erecting a signboard and making promises to their community partners. Many residents believed that starting a CBO would initiate their own careers as development professionals, and they had so indebted themselves to their social networks to start their CBO that they felt pressured to solicit money from their community partners. These CBOs often faltered, leaving individuals indebted and suffering community ill will.

I aim to begin a conversation about the role of INGOs as employers and donors in postwar communities. Wage and grant structures in communities with extremely low living standards and high costs of living must be considered an integral part of INGO programming. In addition, by examining the purposes of small grants for CBOs and how Western cultural expectations of grant spending are dissonant with the realities of CBOs’ debts within their communities, I aspire to initiate conversations about the role played by implementing partners and other so-called “nonbeneficiaries” in shaping local perceptions of development organizations. The lack of dialogue between INGOs and the people they employ and work with has, since the end of the war, caused consistent and predictable strife over the distribution and use of resources.

II. CONCEPTIONS OF INVESTMENT AND INDEBTEDNESS IN SIERRA LEONE

The social world in Makeni is molded by a rubric of interpersonal investment and indebtedness, a cultural emotional practice (Lutz 1988) emphasizing the material dimension of relationships; people do their relationships rather than merely having them. In order to be connected to someone, one invests resources in their wellbeing, nurturing them from one’s own resources, with the expectation of return (Bolten 2012). This set of practices creates a network of emotional and social owner-
ship, so that if someone has nurtured another in the past—whether by feeding them, paying their school fees, or through some other means—he has a claim on the latter person’s success (Bledsoe 1990, 1992). Parents nurture children within this rubric; the expectation of their later years is that their children will repay this debt by taking care of them.

People with extensive resources have the opportunity and expectation to become patrons for their family and for others who are less wealthy. Sierra Leonean conceptions of prosperity are rooted in a larger equatorial African sense of “wealth in people” (Guyer and Belinga 1995), where one gauges one’s life success not only in material possessions but in dependent family and clients. Individuals who strive to become big people must acquire the resources to cultivate many clients with whom they have consistent relationships of material and labor exchange, loyalty, and political support. Even if someone is not wealthy, if he is the only or eldest male, the expectation is that he will be the primary support for his family. As the ostensible family head, he is responsible for the wellbeing of all his relatives, including those for whom he has no childhood debt (Jackson 2011). People struggling to fulfill their obligations were common in postwar Makeni. Individuals who were failing in their obligations often moved away from their networks in order to escape this pressure (Bolten 2008), as the state could not provide the socioeconomic foundation of jobs by which an increasingly monetized economy functions. Others took on added responsibility, believing that if they spread their own obligations across many people, their risks in an unknown postwar future would be reduced.

Waged jobs in postwar Makeni were extremely scarce, highlighting disproportionately the impact of a single salary from, for example, a lowly INGO job as a cook or driver. Anyone who secured a reliable wage from an INGO became a point of leverage for their families, who would also demand jobs or other INGO resources as a way of airing their grievances about poverty. One employee I knew was under constant pressure from his family to “find ways to make more money” from his job. He had to defend the importance of merely possessing a job against the possibility of jeopardizing it through theft:

They say they know my boss has money that he is just wasting on other things, so why don’t they pay us more? Don’t they know we have big families? One of my brothers was urging me to just take a little petrol from all the vehicles for him to sell. He
said these rich guys would not miss it, and he has a new baby
to feed. I have to keep telling him that if I am fired, there will
be no money coming.1

Larissa Fast has argued that aid workers and NGO operations are in
the greatest danger of violence when they distribute material resources
during times of conflict (2007: 132). In this case, any INGO with
resources—even for its own use—is in danger when poverty and the
cultural context of relationships combine to produce pressure on em-
ployees to steal.

The converse side of nurturing is eating: selfish, sometimes con-
spicuous consumption of resources from which only a very few people
benefit. Sierra Leone’s dictator in the 1970s and 1980s, Siaka Stevens,
used his personal control of strategic resources including timber and di-
amonds to create loyal clients among individuals, such as military gen-
erals, who enhanced his ability to maintain power. Politically powerless
people, the majority of citizens, suffered instead from “negative exter-
nalities”: punishment through the withholding of resources. Stevens
was able to use his monopoly on resources to create a separate state
structure, based on himself as the sole arbiter of resource distribution,
in the shadow of the official state (Reno 1995). Much of that money
in the 1970s came from foreign aid as a result of structural readjust-
ment; therefore, it was not possible for the rural poor to resist Stevens’s
manipulation of state coffers. His cronies lived lavishly in the midst of
poverty, a self-presentation that was replicated by INGOs who moved
their elaborate operations into decimated postwar landscapes. As aid
money was not directly accountable to residents in the same way as re-
sources originating from within the community, it was a primary target
for theft, as its disappearance came with few local social consequences
and the potential for great benefit.2 Like Stevens’s shadow state, one had
to have close connections with an organization to tap into its wealth,
which everyone desired.

The idea of “eating” was described to me as a practice that culti-
vated a visibility paradox: people built high walls around their homes
and traveled in vehicles with tinted windows as a way of both displaying
and concealing wealth, as well as focusing people’s attention on them
without actually “seeing” them. INGOs were moved effortlessly into
this category of people and organizations that “ate” because of their self-
presentation in town. INGOs inhabited upmarket properties, which
were surrounded by high walls and spiked gates to protect their 4x4
vehicles from theft. Foreign employees drove for even short distances in town, were often away on international trips, and hosted visiting foreigners in addition to government ministers and other INGOs. According to one man I interviewed, “They build up a rich life for themselves behind their walls.”3 Merely by setting up their operations in Makeni, INGOs opened themselves to perceptions of their wealth and accusations of stinginess as they appeared to spend more money on themselves than on their programs. As a final insult, an INGO’s foreign employees made, according to one INGO manager, an average of twenty times the salary of a local employee of the same NGO. Though insulting to common understandings of the worth of their capabilities, people competed energetically to fill the rare vacancies advertised by INGOs.

III. CREATING EXPECTATIONS: BECOMING AN INGO EMPLOYEE

An INGO job was both blessing and burden for residents who managed to secure them. As INGOs were one of the few stable employers in Makeni after the war, their local employees were in a better position to support a larger number of people than the traders and other informally employed people whose incomes were not fixed. This raised their status and increased their stress as they cared for more people. The transience of INGO programs caused them tremendous difficulties, not just because people who were essential breadwinners in the local economy lost their livelihoods, but also because they felt that as former INGO employees, they had primary claim on any new INGO jobs. A job was an opportunity to cultivate relationships among the INGO community, leading to opportunities for other jobs if their own organizations closed. They became the primary class of white-collar workers in Makeni who, because their situations were both enviable and vulnerable, sometimes defended their employment violently. They feared and loathed INGO drawdown—though this was a benchmark of “development”—because of the inevitable job loss.

When the staff members from the small INGO mentioned at the start of the article moved into a house with another INGO director, her logistician hired new security guards for their house. Five of the six men he hired were his friends, and four had previously worked for other INGOs. All was well until rumor spread that the security guard positions were only for six months, as the INGO was planning to “nationalize” the director’s post with an existing Sierra Leonean staff member.
The guards were worried and upset, and many voiced hopes that the planned transition would fall through because the staff member was not “up to the task” of the job requirements, spurring the INGO to retain the expatriate manager and protecting their own jobs. One guard’s wife had just given birth, and he was concerned about the fallout from her kin if he could no longer support his growing family. Each expatriate had his or her own personal staff, therefore ensuring more jobs in the community. The “nationalizing” of a position jeopardized not just lower staff positions, but the welfare of their networks as well. Indeed, the more that positions were devolved to country level, the less money was distributed via wages. Though desired by employees, this also reinforced perceptions that expatriates consumed the bulk of an INGO’s budget and that more could go directly to communities.

Both INGO expatriates and their local employees were in precarious positions with respect to consistent employment. Indeed, for many heads of household, the jobs themselves were more important than any “community development” that, if successful, would induce a program to phase out, even though all the INGO directors I interviewed emphasized the goal of making their organization redundant. As much as residents said they did not want to depend on INGOs to take the place of government or business, every INGO closure meant mass layoffs. INGOs filled the need for white-collar employment that arose, since the war caused most international businesses, from banks to iron ore mines, to close their operations. However, they faced a large pool of potential employees and could only hire them on a much smaller scale than could prewar businesses, both temporal and numerically. Skilled workers, indebted to family members who had contributed to their educations, were under particular pressure to find and keep lucrative employment. The ongoing conversation about the problems of dependence and objectification created by aid (Escobar 2011; Ferguson 1994; Li 2007; Mosse 2004) rarely involve an investigation of how cultural context, in this case the material dimension of social relationships, affects ideas of dependency at the level of employees.

In July 2004, there were seven INGOs working in Makeni, with an average local staff size of fifteen. The largest operation employed upward of thirty people; the smallest had only five. This meant that only around one hundred Makeni residents were drawing INGO salaries, which ranged between the equivalent of $60 and $120 a month. According to two expatriate INGO managers, they did not want to “upset the levels of average income in Makeni,” and so they tried not to pay
their staff higher wages than average civil service positions. This reasoning was utterly incomprehensible to local people, who did not understand why a wealthy foreign organization could not pay more than the country’s own corrupt aid-dependent government. Many people did not believe their relatives earned so little, hence the increased pressure employees experienced from their social networks. According to one, “I know that C—— is an American organization and it works everywhere in the world. It is rich! My brother’s son tells me that he makes only Le200,000 a month (about $60) as a security guard there and it is not possible. His manager must be eating his salary instead of giving it to us. C—— has more.” However, this particular young man maintained his poorly paying job because the salary was regular and reliable.

There existed a marked difference between the ethos of INGO employment and that of other white-collar professions such as teaching and nursing, which were not seen as being as desirable. The consistent lateness of civil service salaries, the fact that most teachers and nurses endured a “probation” period of up to three years without pay, and the shoddiness of the work environment in dilapidated schools and hospitals made these professions unattractive and in no way comparable to INGO employment. The forty teachers I interviewed in 2010 and 2012 were evenly split between those who took up the profession because they could not find more attractive employment, and those who taught out of a genuine sense of social responsibility. The lack of government funding for social infrastructure meant that very few resources existed within schools and hospitals, buffering these professions from the same blanket accusations of resource theft as employment with INGOs. Civil service employees availed themselves of scant resources when they could with, for example, teachers forcing students to pay for exam knowledge by purchasing pamphlets and extra classes, though principals were at liberty to fire teachers who did so. These practices were officially banned in 2012, compelling teachers to survive on small, inconsistently delivered salaries with the help of other, more senior teachers. Most schools in Makeni had a “self-help” fund through which teachers requested cups of rice or clothes for children, for example, knowing that they too would be called upon to render assistance at a later date. Most teachers also held down several jobs, with ten of the forty interviewed engaging in commercial bike riding to supplement their income, making their unskilled secondary occupation central to their earnings. Where resources are scant, eating is impossible and the
focus is rather on surviving, but the workings of the social networks remained the same.

On the other hand, residents approached employment with the United Nations, and later with multinational corporations that came to Makeni a decade after the war, in the same way as they approached INGO employment. Employment was desirable because of the potential access to apparently limitless resources. In 2012, several employees of one mining company told me that they had lost millions of dollars in stolen fuel, even as it had become the largest employer in the district. This company paid skilled laborers $70 per month, which, factoring inflation from 2004, was less in real wages than the $60 earned by low-level INGO employees a decade earlier, fueling employee outrage and willingness to supplement their incomes. On many occasions I witnessed fuel being siphoned directly out of mining vehicles on the streets of Makeni. In one instance, my colleague called to the man holding the tube, asking him what he was doing, and the man shrugged and said, “They will get more.” And indeed, the following week, another shipment of fuel arrived at the company’s Makeni depot. A bioenergy company headquartered in Makeni experienced three strikes in less than twelve months between 2011 and 2012; each strike was characterized by workers’ demands for wages to nearly double. Notions of social responsibility aside, Makeni workers were grieved that wealthy companies insisted on keeping them poor. There persisted a general idea that resources should be shared out if they seemed abundant, which, as they continued to arrive from overseas, appeared to be the case.

Wages could be kept low because jobs were in such high demand and any disgruntled employee could be easily replaced at the same wage, a problem extant in much of the waged world today. Vacancies were predictably met with a flood of applicants, many of them overqualified. One organization was hiring for a filing clerk, and my interlocutor Saidu applied. Saidu had come first in the province in the national secondary school exams and needed money to apply to university. He was short-listed for the job with two others, but in the end lost the job to a man who, though his qualifications were not as good, had formerly worked for an INGO in Makeni and was friendly with several staff members. Qualified and intelligent applicants like Saidu lacked the high-profile social networks that would have paved his entry to INGO employment. However, when he saw that the man who was hired was suddenly inundated by demands from his wife’s family, who wanted to
move into his home, Saidu’s feelings were conflicted: “I feel relief that I do not have to suffer the same fate, but is it not better to suffer that fate than to have nothing at all?”

In spite of individuals’ expectations of demands from their social networks, they still attempted to use the money to their own purposes. Abu, the caretaker of an INGO-run house, asked me to keep his salary every month so that it would be hidden from his considerable extended family and could be put instead towards school fees. After several months, he had enough to pay one semester of college and was thrilled. I gave him his savings when I left Makeni, and a week later his uncle died. As the only wage earner in the extended family, it was his responsibility to pay for the funeral, and the uncle’s family sent a delegation to demand money from him. Whether or not they knew of his savings, they believed he had access to resources. INGO employees accept the probability of losing their earnings to the demands of others; a requisitioned income is better than none. By inserting a few wage earners into largely nonwaged economic environment, INGOs created and enhanced familial tension and pressured employees to maintain their jobs and augment their salaries when possible.

These tensions notwithstanding, social claims on an individual’s salary are a way “development” reached the community through the employment of local people by INGOs. Individuals could not hoard their incomes; the importance of nurturing others with one’s resources means that every private good was essentially transformed into a partial public good through the demands of one’s social networks. Another illustration of this process was ex-combatants using the transition allowances they received from the reintegration program to marry local women and start families (Bolten 2008; Coulter 2009). The movement of money from international organizations through individuals and their social networks was an unintended aspect of INGO involvement in postwar Sierra Leone that resonated with local understandings of how one is fully human within his or her social world (Bolten 2012). The tension was in large part due to the unwillingness of INGOs to raise the standard of wages in impoverished communities.

IV. SOCIALLY THICK AND FINANCIALLY THIN NETWORKS

The majority of Sierra Leoneans possess what I would call socially thick and financially thin networks. Through the shadow state, Siaka Stevens
ensured that the bulk of the country’s resources were held by a few people and, by extension, their social networks. Though resources were shared within these networks, the wealth never extended to the vast majority of citizens, who drew on much wider networks in order to make up for each connection’s financial thinness. I often spoke with a former Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel who believed that the war’s primary accomplishment was bringing the plight of millions of poor Sierra Leoneans to international attention, and thus encouraging foreign donors and NGOs to come to the nation. He believed poverty was the reason the war began and why it persisted for a decade, caused by the greed of wealthy people who hoarded rather than redistributed wealth. This emboldened a class of alienated youth who were willing converts to RUF philosophy (Abdullah 2005: 185), as well as civilians who, when the war started in Liberia, joked that Sierra Leone should also have a war to eliminate the “rotten system” (Richards 1996). The unwillingness of the elites to share the wealth of the nation with the poor was one of the causes of war. However, they could not entirely monopolize the wealth brought by INGOs that was meant for the poor, as they were neither beneficiaries nor could they entirely co-opt donor funding earmarked for CBOs.

The local administrators—the clerks, accountants, and extension officers—employed by INGOs fell in the middle of the scale, in that their networks had enough resources to provide them with formal schooling, leading to degrees and diplomas, by which they secured white-collar work. The cost of a university degree incurs a huge debt between the individual and his or her sponsors, who expect “appreciation”—in essence, some kind of repayment—from the start of the employee’s job. This pressure resulted in embezzlement and dishonesty among local INGO employees about resource distribution within programs, “losses” of program resources,8 and other systemic misappropriation that made expatriate INGO employees suspicious and mistrustful of local people. The end result was the cancellation of programs and sometimes the NGO closure, leading all employees to lose their jobs.

One of the large INGOs in Makeni was struck by a crisis early in 2005, when one expatriate manager noted consistent discrepancies between warehouse accounts and field logs maintained by extension officers of the resources distributed to beneficiaries. She discovered that fifteen officers had been stealing from their programs for nearly a year and confronted them about their theft. They reacted belligerently, so
she reported them to her expatriate boss in Freetown and was promptly fired for slandering the local employees. The expatriate who took over her program resolved to fire the employees, hire new ones, and begin the program again. Her new colleagues warned her that her predecessor was fired because the program’s manager in Freetown did not want to be held responsible for a program failing outright or for employing dishonest individuals, because the program would be shuttered and he would probably lose his own job.

Not only was the new administrator pressured by her expatriate colleagues to ignore the issue, she was directly threatened by those employees marked for redundancy. A few had menaced her directly on the streets of Makeni, and she received several anonymous letters threatening her safety and her life if certain people were fired. The employees were desperate to maintain their jobs; most were enjoying unparalleled access to resources and they risked losing security, social position, and lifestyle if they were fired. Anyone enjoying the benefits of the INGOs’ resources would not only bear grudges against their fired relative, but also take out their anger on the cause of this trouble: the INGO manager. Keeping them in the organization, even if the embezzlement continued, upheld calm even if the programs themselves faltered. It appeared to be to everyone’s benefit to maintain the damaged program, as the resources would keep coming from abroad and maintain the employment of all parties, foreign and domestic.

The pressure that some INGO employees experienced from their social networks was formidable and had dire consequences for program viability. One program officer for a small INGO was supporting his ex-girlfriend and their two children, his mother, four siblings, and their eight children. Though he was drawing a salary of Le300,000 a month (about $100 at the time), he was consistently short of money and always fighting to “make it up” until the next payday. He was also concerned about problems in the main Freetown office, as he suspected the financial controller of embezzlement. He and other managers wrote letters to the board of directors in Europe, and the board refused to fire the controller. Within months, the controller had emptied the organization’s accounts and absconded to Liberia with her boyfriend. A week later, the organization closed for good. The program officer was unemployed and finally left Makeni because “the palavers in the house were unbearable.” The family was fighting because there was no money, and the onus was on him to rectify the situation, which he could not. He
relocated to Freetown and was eventually granted a visa to the INGO’s home country.

Once the program was closed, the INGO’s beneficiaries, street children, were rendered homeless. The INGO sheltered them in a group home until their parents or suitable guardians could be found, taking others who were abandoned by their parents because their physical or mental disabilities meant they were not contributing to household welfare. Because of one key employee’s embezzlement, all of these children were suddenly without a support structure that had, over the previous three years, become necessary for their survival. A different INGO that worked on similar programs attempted to absorb some of these children, but the rest melted back into the fabric of Makeni’s streets, some stealing for their livings, others soliciting guardians on their own. Five years later, a different INGO arrived to assist street children, and a new crop of employees and beneficiaries emerged.

People who secured employment with INGOs dealt with both the benefits and drawbacks of having conspicuous employment with resource-rich organizations. A wage allowed one to address the needs of family and friends, giving employees the potential to rise in their social networks, while concomitantly rendering them vulnerable to using INGO resources to address the grievances of family about their own poverty. INGOs consistently fed perceptions that they were wealthy and could pay local employees more, which fueled discontent among the local population that they were never doing enough. Employees often used their position as leverage within an organization, demanding through their theft or arguments that INGOs provide living wages and improve the standard of living in Sierra Leone through their organizational practices, in addition to their programs.

V. “SIGNBOARD DEVELOPMENT,” NETWORK INDEBTEDNESS, AND PERCEPTIONS OF AID CONSUMPTION

Foday, who founded a CBO with several friends, was extremely critical of what he perceived as CBOs “eating” their grants from bilateral donors rather than using them for development. He believed that the bulk of funding went to socially connected people, who took the seed money they received from donors, erected hand-painted signboards announcing their existence and their donor, but conducted no activities. As he argued passionately:
After the war, a lot of development programs were earmarked. Money was sent for those programs, which were never implemented, you see? Most of the money just went into their [the CBOs] pockets. That is why I say there is not much real development; it is only signboard development. You see a lot of signboards. When Makeni first started after the war, Independence Square was jam-packed with signboards. But if you go to the headquarters and ask, ‘What is this signboard standing here for?’ they will not say anything!\(^{10}\)

Pertinent to that conversation, he took me on a tour of a few streets in his neighborhood and pointed out all the faded signs posted over doors and leaning against verandas. Most were for CBOs with grand plans such as training disabled women as tailors, organizing youth work clubs, and creating cooperative agriculture, all sponsored by prominent aid organizations. Though they advertised hope for development in the community, for him they signaled only the triumph of “self-development” over community development: the signs advertised instances where people “ate” the seed funding provided by international organizations, and promptly closed their doors. This perception obscured the fact that most organizations were in debt before they began; this was also the case for Foday himself, who had scoured his network for favors to get his CBO off the ground before it ever received funding.

Well-intentioned funding provided by INGOs for local NGOs and CBOs rewarded only those whose submissions made it to the review process, which required that a proposal and the organization meet specific Western criteria of legitimacy. For organizations that did not already have substantial operating budgets—and the requisite cash flow, bank account, and office logistics—it required a huge investment of time and resources on the part of friends and family to create. Foday and a few friends pooled their meager savings in 2003 and began an agricultural CBO with a nearby village. They had initiated contact with the village after the war as one founding member had an aunt who lived there, and the residents agreed that they would try cooperative agriculture in order to get tools and seed to restart their farms. The CBO founders used their own money to buy seeds for that year’s planting and “then found [themselves] seriously broke.” Foday spent months working on a project proposal to submit to a bilateral donor in Freetown; however, one caveat of the application was that all applicant organizations had to have a bank account into which the project funds, if
awarded, could be deposited directly. “Why would we need the money they offer if we had so many Leones lying around that we could open a bank account?” he asked rhetorically. He and his colleagues solicited enough money from friends and family to open the account—which had a minimum deposit requirement—so that they could fill in an account number on their project proposal.

The expenses did not stop at the establishment of financial accountability; the CBO also needed a headquarters and the logistics to submit the proposal. The friends brought in another acquaintance in order to use the front room of his mother’s house as their headquarters, and they promised to pay rent. Foday solicited further funds from another friend to rent a computer, someone to type the proposal, and paper and other supplies on which to submit it, and then money for transport to Freetown to submit several copies of the proposal directly to the agency. A month later the donor informed them that all the funds for that year’s cycle had already been exhausted and they would have to wait until the following year to apply again. In the meantime, the CBO’s initial bank deposit, containing the good-faith investment of family and friends, was whittled away in monthly maintenance fees and the bank closed the account. The CBO had submitted three failed proposals in all, and Foday and his two friends had indebted themselves to multiple members of their networks in order to launch an organization that, for all their efforts, received no funding.

The typical seed grant given to CBOs by bilateral donors in 2005 ranged from $500 to $1,800. Even if Foday’s CBO had received a $1,800 grant, over half of it would have been spent paying off debts to members’ extended network for their contributions, paying rent to his friend’s mother, and maintaining the minimum balance in the bank account that both the donor and bank required. What Foday perceived as other CBOs “eating” their grants and fulfilling none of their promises to their implementing partners could have been the straightforward consumption of aid, but was more likely to have been the same situation that Foday and his friends suffered: the requirement to maintain positive social connections within a social network before any other “development” could occur. Foday received money from his brother in order to erect his CBO’s signboard in the hope that the more official and legitimate his organization looked, the more likely it would be to receive a grant. A few months after our conversation, he took the signboard down.
VI. DESTROYING TRUST: HOW FAILED CBOS HAVE “RUINED” DEVELOPMENT

INGOs and donors unwittingly participated in the destruction of trust within communities by offering small seed grants, because they had no knowledge of the differences between pre- and postwar practices of national NGOs and local CBOs. What were conceived of as simple injections of money to support locally generated ideas were actually embedded in long histories of CBOs’ community operations and in the ways development opportunists attempted to take advantage of the trust that had been built over generations to transform themselves into “professionals.” Foday and his CBO partner Mohamed explained the results of this mismatch:

Mohamed: Whatsoever we are doing with them, even though it is their own project and it belongs to them, even so they ask us to give them something. Even at the end of the day when the foodstuffs are given to them for keeping and they take the major decisions and then they just confirm them with us, it has gotten to the point now that they want money for everything. When we send them out to harvest, they want money. When they want to go and plant, they want us to give them money. Every little thing! And then in addition we feed them again. And we don’t have money, as you can see.

Bolten: Why do they insist on money if they are reaping the benefits of the project?

Foday: Well, in our situation, it is just unfortunate that we are coming in at a time when a lot of people have gone into most of those communities. Some of them make big promises that they don’t live up to. So if anybody comes in now, they think that you are just like that man who has come and left and they will get the same results. These are most of the big NGOs in Sierra Leone, with these four-wheel drives, you see, the implementation is all on vehicles and staff, their staff. When you go to the ground, there is nothing. It is poor and at the end of the day it will not sustain trust.13

When I first traveled to the village partnering with Foday’s CBO, residents pleaded with me to find a donor so that they would not have to
“donate” any money to their project, could design the program themselves, and would not be told that they had to farm a particular way. They did not want to deal with INGOs that insisted they labor on communal plots before receiving any benefits with which to farm their own land. They also chafed at the dictates of Foday’s CBO, which they feared was extracting free labor from them entirely for the board’s own benefit.

This raft of fears only developed after the war, when there was a perceptible shift in the attitude that national NGOs and local CBOs had towards the intended beneficiaries of projects with respect to fund distribution. It is partly a result of the expense of making a CBO appear legitimate to Western INGOs and donors, and the resulting debts to friends and family, and partly a result of those donors deciding to fund, in the main, projects that involved cooperative agriculture rather than individual agriculture and emphasizing hand labor over mechanized labor (Bolten 2009, 2012). Residents did not want to be told how to farm on their own land, but in order to solicit funds from donors, they had to form CBOs and agree to undertake “cooperative” agriculture.

Before the war, according to villagers, national NGOs arrived in villages and asked people what they needed. Villagers collaboratively decided on their priorities, such as roadwork, water wells, or rice mills; the NGOs complied and “development” resulted. One NGO that was active before the war built six wells, three bridges, three schoolhouses, and two community centers in the villages immediately surrounding Makeni. This NGO closed during the war, and with donor funding for new CBOs, organizations with no history in villages appeared with development project plans. According to the people in one village, several men who called themselves a CBO came to the village and promised them an agricultural revolution: tools, seeds, and even tractors. They would do this with a “good-faith” promise from the villagers signaling their willingness to work on this project, amounting to a “donation” to the CBO of Le2,000 per family. “Then,” said the village chief, “they just took our money and left, and never came back.”14 This pattern was repeated in enough villages to create suspicion and distrust among people confronted with any project proposed by a local CBO.

The people think that the CBOs just played them for fools and stole their money. Though possible, it is more likely that Foday and Mohamed’s experience was typical. Foday and Mohamed applied for large grants; however, many people from Makeni who were interested in agriculture applied to some ephemeral INGOs (most of whom had
already left by 2004) to start their CBOs and received token funding, amounting to about Le200,000 ($60). Most of this money disappeared in the erecting of a sign in front of an office concomitantly as they made their first forays into villages to seek support for their projects. Realizing they were running short of funds, many started their programs by appealing to their target communities for support, hoping to be able to repay the debt once they received more funding and their operations were running. The policy of large bilateral donors, however, was not to give additional funding to a CBO that had not produced tangible results, and most of these CBOs closed within a year without implementing a project.

Residents of villages saw a marked shift in the attitude of development organizations towards them from the prewar to postwar periods. According to one development professional I interviewed, the national NGOs that had dominated the development scene before the war were established organizations with consistent funding from the Sierra Leonean diaspora and a more liberal bilateral atmosphere in Europe. The war disrupted their income streams, and most closed their doors. The INGOs that replaced them after the war came with their own priorities and funding from non-Sierra Leonean sources and donors with more stringent reporting requirements, shifting the ground on which development occurred. As CBOs had to answer to their Western funders, they were forced to adopt international priorities and standards of legitimacy, which meant they told the communities what they would do and had inflexible monitoring and results schedules. The emphasis on Western priorities and timeframes forced CBOs to find money owed to their networks any way they could. Village residents were embarrassed and resentful, believing they had been taken advantage of. From this point, any Sierra Leonean promising community development became a suspicious character, and they were equally wary of development promises made by outsiders. Foday and Mohamed encountered such problems with trust when they started their activities, as the conversation at the beginning of this section illustrates. In this light, it is reasonable that the project’s beneficiaries demanded money in order to work on the project, as they were suspicious of any organization that arrived with promises of development and forced people to first contribute money to that effort.

The experiences of Foday and Mohamed revealed a deep tension in the relationship between INGOs and CBOs, CBOs and communities, and the contradictions inherent in such relationships when local social
networks, patterns of investment, and indebtedness come into contact with foreign ideas about the economics of development. There was no way for residents who felt they were victims of development scams to know, merely by an office and a signboard, with whom they were dealing. Many people accused each other of “eating” aid and thereby destroying the foundation of trust upon which community development is built. However, everyone defended the failure of their own CBOs by describing the ill fit between the social environment in Sierra Leone and the demands of Western donors. They emphasized their own problems of familial investment and indebtedness and their primary responsibility to repay debts to their own social networks. Whatever the case, the small grants offered to CBOs in the wake of the war proved to be divisive and sowed mistrust among community members.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have highlighted the ways in which infusions of money into a community characterized by the investment and indebtedness structure of social networks, and the concomitant desire to become socially “big,” complicate the ability of local employees, the INGOs they serve, and the CBOs those international organizations fund to function without battles over resources. Though INGOs came to Makeni with good intentions, they brought an unexamined Western understanding of wages and grants to bear on a social world where individuals are constantly balancing the needs and demands of others, striving to raise their social position, and operating under the perception that people are always hiding resources they wish to “eat” rather than share. People perceived foreign organizations as being extremely wealthy—both postwar INGOs and now international businesses such as mining and bioenergy—which seem to have access to abundant resources from overseas. The main problem is that, unlike Sierra Leoneans whose lives are characterized by “wealth in people” and the emphasis on social networks rather than individual wealth, the financially conservative organizations that worked with them were perceived as being stingy, of hoarding and eating their wealth rather than sharing it. Embezzlement, threats of violence, public slander of organizations, and failed projects were most often the result, as social pressures led people to demand that international organizations respond to their grievances about relentless local poverty, which the latter appeared to have no interest in addressing.
In addition, international organizations misunderstood how local social dynamics affected the perception of why CBOs failed. The demands placed on CBOs to appear legitimate doomed most to failure before they started, as members had to first repay their debts to kin and friends once an initial investment was secured. Intended beneficiaries, though they implicitly understand this conundrum, refused to submit to the demands of supposed development organizations to also invest themselves before reaping benefits. Most CBOs failed, leading to the perception that no CBO was trustworthy, nor were the donors who supported their nefarious “eating.” These situations combined made communities reluctant development partners writ large, and hence also contributed to INGO program failure.

The effects of direct injections of money into the community as wages and grants had a significant effect on whether or not international organizations were able to sustain their programs. Organizations with little knowledge of local social networks or the realities of low living standards and overpriced basic goods found themselves often at odds with local people, who did not understand why wages and grants were so paltry. The experiences of international mining and bioenergy companies in Makeni a decade after the war prove that merely continuing the trend of keeping salaries as low as the standard of living in a country, as well as refusing dialogue with employees who protest this in various ways, leads to embezzlement, strikes, violence, and program failure.

When I was told by one frustrated program manager that “the community doesn’t even know everything we do for them, how much we have invested in this place,” it became clear that the feature linking all of these problems is the lack of dialogue between employees, employers, grant-giving organizations, and their beneficiaries. Each actor begins by assuming that others share their cultural and social understandings of the function and meaning of wages. Who a wage is meant to support and at what standard of living is a cultural interpretation, as much as an economic one. This is why the bulk of the conflict occurs as a reaction to the perception that each has of the other: that organizations are wealthy and stingy, that individuals “eat” all the resources they secure, that people are only responsible to themselves. Though dialogue cannot solve the problem inherent in the infusion and circulation of resources into an environment of scarcity, knowledge and mutual understanding can go a long way in defusing the tensions inherent in this kind of relationship.
NOTES

1. Interview conducted with INGO employee in Makeni, October 12, 2004.
2. During 2004 and 2005, most INGOs focused on agricultural development in rural communities outside of Makeni, rather than humanitarian relief within the township. This contributed directly to the perception that INGOs were not naming “beneficiaries” within the township, lessening any sense of responsibility residents had to support them. A few INGOs, like Medecins Sans Frontières, provided direct benefits to Makeni residents, and for this reason, suffered fewer incidences of theft and conflict.
4. Beginning with J.D.Y. Peel in 1978, many researchers in Africa now emphasize local conceptions of development as “self development”: individuals are interested in “developing” themselves with infrastructure, jobs, and technology before they contribute to the welfare of their community (see Peel 1978; van der Geest 1997; Walley 2003). This resonates with the use of education for social mobilization before social efficiency (see Bledsoe 1992; Labaree 1999).
5. Interviews conducted in Makeni with one expatriate manager on January 15, 2005, and with the other on March 4, 2005.
6. Interview conducted with Makeni woman about her nephew on September 29, 2004.
7. Interview conducted with “Saidu” on September 26, 2004.
8. When I worked for the World Food Programme in 2001, the organization accepted losses of up to 10 percent of the food supplies that they distributed via truck convoys. Managers understood that drivers, logisticians, and manual workers coopted a portion of the foodstuffs they transported to their networks, or sold them in local markets. Traders in Makeni often sold WFP bulgur wheat, lentils, and tuna.
10. Interview with “Foday” in Makeni on April 12, 2005.
11. Foday did not understand or trust banks, a situation that is common in West Africa. People are similarly suspicious of banks in the Gambia (Shipton 1995: 265-66) and historically so in Nigeria (Mabogunje 1995: 286).
12. Interviews and participant observation with Foday took place in Makeni between February and May 2005.
13. Interview with “Foday” and “Mohamed” in Makeni on April 14, 2005.
15. Interview with corporate program manager in Makeni, November 15, 2012.

REFERENCES


