CONFLICTING NARRATIVES: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE

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Introduction

This article is based on my anthropological research conducted over a period of three months in 2017, while holding an internship position at the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in Côte d'Ivoire. During my time in Tabou, a small town in the Southwest of the country, I became aware of what seemed to be a mismatch between field staff of aid agencies and beneficiaries' understanding of their shared experiences. Beneficiaries' actions (or more precisely their inactions) and attitudes were frequently a source of frustration and incomprehension for many of the staff members that I met. Interestingly, beneficiaries had a significantly different understanding of the situation in Tabou, and their stories revealed a distinctive view on life opportunities and development assistance. I had several thought-provoking discussions with both staff and beneficiaries, which led me to inquire on the logic behind these divergent explanations and worldviews. Hence, the questions that are explored in this article are as follows: *Why is there a mismatch between beneficiaries and field staff's understanding of development assistance and life opportunities in Tabou? What consequences derive from these divergent interpretations?*

From a social constructivist standpoint, it is important to understand how individuals interpret their experiences, because this impacts the individuals' behaviour and thus has real consequences. Accordingly, certain beliefs and attitudes can either enhance or limit the impact of development assistance. To ensure that the assistance provided is as effective and sustainable as possible, it is therefore important to investigate how and with what consequences field staff and beneficiaries interpret assistance and life opportunities in Tabou.

My analysis is focused on two groups, which I refer to as 'beneficiaries' and 'field staff'. It is important to distinguish between field staff and staff at other levels in the organisation, as they

might not share the same understanding of beneficiaries. During my fieldwork in Tabou, I mainly interacted with staff from DRC and UNHCR, but occasionally I met employees from other agencies too. The line between humanitarian aid and development assistance is blurred (Barnett 2005: 723), and thus, humanitarian organisations, like DRC, also provide development assistance. I will refer to this diverse group of organisations as simply 'aid agencies'. The group denoted 'beneficiaries' are current or former beneficiaries of humanitarian and/or development assistance in Tabou Department. Secondly, it has likewise been important for the analysis that they are former refugees. The majority of interviewees had fled to Liberia in 2010/2011 and returned to Côte d'Ivoire by the end of 2016.

Theoretical framework

In order to understand the divergent interpretations, I apply the concept of 'narratives'. A narrative can be defined as *"a representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of aims or values"* (Oxford Dictionaries). My use of the concept is furthermore inspired by Simon Turner, who, in *Politics of Innocence* (2010), describes how refugees in Tanzania used 'tales' and 'standard narratives' of moral decay and loss to make sense of social life in a refugee camp. Like Turner, I understand narratives to be socially significant and collectively constructed accounts of real life events. It means that an individual's experiences are seen through the prism of a certain narrative, and will thus be interpreted and retold accordingly. The narratives are not myths or stories that are always told in the same way, "*but a way of making sense of what has happened and why. It is like a master story or a framework for interpretation, which brings together a multitude of different events and situations in a socially meaningful way."* (Blensted 2017: 26). The concept of narratives thus relies on a social constructivist ontology, which implies that social reality is continuously constructed by humans (Collin, n.d.).

Context and methods

A dangerous cocktail of political rivalry, ethnic tension and economic decline caused the outbreak of civil war in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, and for a decade, the armed conflict continued with varying intensity (Bjarnesen 2013). Since April 2011, the security situation has rapidly improved, and today, the large majority of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have returned home (UNHCR February 2016: 68; UNHCR 2017: 3). Aid agencies have worked intensely to facilitate

repatriation and reintegration of the displaced, especially in the Western regions of Côte d'Ivoire, which were hard hit during the armed conflict.

The small town of Tabou was not spared by the conflict either. Tabou is located in the Southwest of the country, only 15 km from the Liberian border, and is surrounded by large plantations. The infrastructure of Tabou is weak, but the main public institutions are present. Several aid agencies are working in Tabou, but people still struggle to make ends meet. According to a UNHCR survey on 51 households of repatriated refugees in Tabou Department, close to 45% live under the national poverty line (equivalent to 39.5 USD per month (Institut National de la Statistique, n.d.)) and 65% live in food insecurity. The survey furthermore documents that 36% are illiterate (Ilunga Sulu February 2016: 71-74).

It was in this context that I made observations and conducted a total of 24 semi-structured interviews. The internship at DRC facilitated my access to the field and allowed for participant observation and everyday conversations with field staff. Likewise, DRC helped set up meetings with beneficiaries. For practical reasons, a staff member was present during the majority of the interviews but did not intervene. The methodological and ethical implications of the data collection is discussed elsewhere (Blensted 2017).

The social construction of development assistance and life opportunities

I have identified four narratives, which give meaning to the social world that beneficiaries and field staff have to navigate on a daily basis. In relation to life opportunities, beneficiaries have constructed a *narrative of hopelessness*. In stark contrast, field staff interprets life opportunities according to a *narrative of cultural laziness*. They furthermore understand development assistance in the light of a *narrative of dependency*, whereas beneficiaries on the other hand have constructed a *narrative of unfair assistance*. While the narratives are different, they are not independent from each other. Firstly, some narratives share values and worldviews and thus reinforce each other. Secondly, the narratives are upheld by virtue of being opposed to other narratives. Their interconnectedness will become apparent in the following pages.

Narrative of hopelessness

During interviews, beneficiaries would always evoke their problems. Often, they would not only be facing one but a multitude of problems, including poverty, lack of jobs, lack of proper housing, untreated illness or injuries, and the loss of family members. The fact that life in Tabou is not easy, and the fact that interviewees talk about their hardship is not what makes it a narrative of hopelessness. What is important is the way in which they frame their situation and how they interpret new opportunities. For example, my interviewees never said, "*I will soon have saved up enough money to build my house*" or "*Next month, I will participate in a UNHCR project, so everything will become easier*." Moreover, whenever I asked if they were working, the answer was most often *"no"*, but when asked follow-up questions, it turned out that they were engaged in different sorts of economic activity, e.g. selling fruits or cooking small cakes. This is yet another way of maintaining a narrative of hopelessness – while not acknowledging their economic activities as 'work' because it was not an official job with a salary, they also did not acknowledge the possibilities that could follow from this kind of activity. They believed that their current situation was unchangeable, and they did not dare to hope for a better future.

When describing their situation to me, they often expressed feelings of sadness and resignation, which underpinned their narrative. They would not express hope or optimism about their future, because, according to their understanding of the reality in Tabou, a better future was impossible. Hence, I argue that beneficiaries have constructed a narrative of hopelessness around their personal struggles.

Nevertheless, it is not evident that the hardship that repatriates encounter upon their return from Liberia is perceived in terms of hopelessness. Research has shown that people in similar conditions can choose to construct different narratives. Liisa Malkki has written about how Hutu camp refugees understand their struggle as a necessary moral trial to make them worthy of returning to Burundi (Malkki 1996). Thereby, these refugees have created a social construct, which helps them to understand and positively engage with their current situation. Similarly, Simon Turner explains that Burundian refugees in Nairobi interpreted their daily struggles as waiting for miracles. As clandestine refugees, they suffered hunger and harassment from authorities, but they nevertheless maintained a narrative of hope and faith in God (Turner 2015).

The above-mentioned are examples of how the struggles that refugees go through can be constructed and given meaning according to very diverse narratives. On the other hand, Barbara Harrell-Bond, among others, has described how confinement in camps and the way in which assistance is administered can provoke feelings of helplessness. It is argued that refugees are stripped of their agency and autonomy when being forced into camps where they rely completely on humanitarian assistance (Harrell-Bond 1994). Additionally, there are several examples of how aid agencies and media represent refugees as helpless victims (Malkki 1996, Nyers 2006). It seems likely that these experiences become internalised by the refugees and repatriates, who then start to interpret life according to a narrative of hopelessness.

Narrative of unfair assistance

In addition to the narrative of hopelessness, beneficiaries in Tabou have constructed a narrative of unfair assistance. Of course, in theory, beneficiaries understand that aid agencies have limited budgets and that they can only assist those who are particularly vulnerable, but the narrative of unfair assistance nevertheless took over when they discussed their personal experiences.

The narrative of unfair assistance was often constructed around issues with medical assistance. Several of the beneficiaries I met were struggling with different diseases or pain from old injuries, which had a huge impact on their ability to work. Hence, they felt extremely vulnerable and therefore expected assistance from aid agencies. When the assistance did not cover their needs, they were very disappointed.

Furthermore, many of whom I met were worried about their participation in the housing projects. UNHCR, DRC and other NGOs often demand that beneficiaries provide half of the materials for the construction of the house. Beneficiaries were also expected to buy the plot of land themselves. For poor families, these demands were difficult to meet, and some of the interviewees were afraid that they would have to give up on the project, because of the associated costs. Because of these experiences, beneficiaries felt almost betrayed by the system. They could not understand why they, as vulnerable repatriates, had to face such unfair and unattainable demands from aid agencies. Interestingly, even beneficiaries who had received a lot of assistance maintained the same narrative.

Another important layer in this narrative was the fact that many beneficiaries felt misinformed or lied to, which created confusion and disappointment in the system. The interviewees explained that,

while in Liberia, UNHCR had promised assistance until the repatriates were able to take care of themselves. Upon arrival in Tabou they experienced a different reality, where assistance was limited. Therefore, many whom I spoke to felt that they had taken the decision to repatriate based on incorrect information, and they blamed UNHCR.

Adhering to social constructivism, the purpose of this article is not to determine whether the narrative of unfair assistance is objectively true. The purpose is to show that social constructs are not objective, but depend on the perspective applied. For example, by applying certain theories on fairness and distributive justice (e.g. Rawls 1971, Singer 1972, Van Wyk 1988), a narrative of unfair assistance can be supported. On the other hand, aid agencies are subject to donors' demands, which require tangible results, accountability, and effectiveness (Barnett 2005). Rational choices about intervention zones, vulnerability criteria and time limits are necessary in a non-ideal world, where agencies have limited resources. Unfortunately, this sometimes entails more or less arbitrary selection among very vulnerable individuals, because the assistance would otherwise be stretched too thin and the impact would be lost (Blensted 2017: 41). This perspective thus contradicts, to some extent, the narrative of unfair assistance.

Narrative of cultural laziness

As already stated, field staff does not understand their experiences according to the same two narratives as beneficiaries. Clearly opposing the beneficiaries' narrative of hopelessness, field staff has constructed a narrative of cultural laziness, which they use to interpret beneficiaries' actions. The staff members who I met believe that there are plenty of opportunities, which are not being exploited by the beneficiaries, because they are too lazy. The staff members would very often explain to me that *"Kroumanes are lazy"*. Kroumanes are the ethnic group, which originally inhabit the Southwest region of Côte d'Ivoire, including Tabou, and according to field staff this laziness was a *"cultural thing"* which could only be explained by the Kroumanes' cultural heritage (Blensted 2017: 32).

The narrative of cultural laziness is constructed around a series of examples of how Kroumanes allegedly prefer to make easy money instead of thinking long-term. The Kroumanes traditionally own land and should therefore be better off than other ethnic groups who have immigrated to the

region. Nevertheless, according to field staff, today, the Kroumanes are poor, as they have sold most of their land to other ethnic groups, instead of cultivating it. Moreover, many of the jobs in the large plantations or adjoining factories, are occupied by non-Kroumanes. One of my interviewees illustrated this situation by saying that *"without the Liberians [who sell fruits and vegetables at the local market], the Kroumanes would starve"* (Blensted 2017: 33). Hence, this narrative is maintained by stories about other ethnic groups who succeed in taking advantage of the possibilities in Tabou.

Meanwhile, this laziness does not only affect life in general, it also negatively impacts the sustainability of the aid agencies' work. During participant observation and interviews with staff members, I often heard them complain about beneficiaries' lack of motivation and lack of participation in development projects, which require collective work. According to field staff, the same projects are being implemented with success in other regions of the country, inhabited by populations that are mostly not of Kroumane ethnicity. Therefore, the failure of these projects in Tabou is interpreted as being a result of the specific Kroumane laziness.

Other researchers have shown that stereotyping beneficiaries is common among humanitarian workers. For example, expatriate staff in a refugee camp in Tanzania had categorised refugees as idle, criminal, or proactive according to their different nationalities (Turner 2010: 48). Similarly, Mark Graham has shown how civil servants in Sweden have developed an 'emotional cartography', which helps them understand the behaviour of asylum seekers from different countries (2003: 208-209).

Important to note is the fact that these stereotypes are usually rather negative. In a study of humanitarian staff in a refugee camp, Harrell-Bond explains that these negative stereotypes are part of a defence mechanism developed by staff to protect themselves from the misery they witness and the responsibility they carry:

> *"In addition to blaming politics, their superiors, the donors, the bureaucracy, or the host government, they also begin to blame the victims. […] 'refugees cease to be people with problems; refugees become the problem'"* (Harrell-Bond 2002: 73)

Narrative of dependency

In continuation with the above, field staff has furthermore constructed a narrative of dependency. Evidently, this narrative is also opposed to beneficiaries' narrative of unfair assistance.

The narrative of dependency is closely linked to a belief in the dependency syndrome, which has been the topic of many discussions and investigations. Regardless that much research points to the fact that a dependency syndrome amongst beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance does not exist, it remains an influential concept (Harvey and Lind 2005, Kibreab 1993). Field staff in Tabou does not directly mention the syndrome but has constructed a narrative of dependency by emphasising beneficiaries' never-ending demands for more assistance. In this narrative, the legitimate claims of vulnerable individuals as well as examples of successful repatriates are forgotten or ignored. When directly asked about legitimate claims to more assistance, field staff answered with a *"yes, but…"*. According to the narrative of dependency, the persistent demands for additional assistance revealed that beneficiaries expected assistance to continue infinitely, and therefore they would not look for other ways of providing for themselves. This 'fact' was extremely frustrating for field staff.

The concept of gift-giving can help explain why simply asking for additional assistance was so badly viewed by field staff – a gift is a moral exchange, which places expectations of reciprocity on the receiver. A gift can be reciprocated materially, with another gift, or symbolically. If development assistance is (unconsciously) thought of as a gift and not as pure charity (which comes with no strings attached), then field staff expects reciprocity (Harrell-Bond 2002: 54-57). Because beneficiaries are poor and therefore cannot return the 'gift' in material terms, it demands symbolic reciprocity, e.g. expressions of gratitude and responsible behaviour. Whenever beneficiaries do the opposite and ask for additional assistance, it was interpreted as them being ungrateful.

Several staff members told me the same story, to prove that they were right to say that beneficiaries in Tabou are irresponsible and too dependent: UNICEF had ensured the production of late birth certificates for those who had either lost their papers or who had never been registered. Beneficiaries only had to pick up their certificates a few weeks later, but many never did. According to field staff, this was a prime example of the dependency that had been developed – beneficiaries were no longer capable of taking responsibility or being proactive. This interpretation

is not specific to field staff in Tabou. In fact, it is common to think that refugees and other beneficiaries are passive recipients, but several researchers have shown that, on the contrary, they are often innovative, proactive and entrepreneurial (Harvey and Lind 2005: 23, Kibreab 1993).

Lastly, this narrative was constructed around stories of repatriates, who would cheat and manipulate the system. Field staff told me that an uncertain number of Ivorians were continuously crossing the border in order to rebuild their homes and businesses in Côte d'Ivoire, while officially being registered as refugees in Liberia and waiting for repatriation assistance. Some had heard about children being sent back to Liberia to allow their parents to benefit from family reunification assistance several times. Moreover, Income Generating Activities and Food for Work programmes were not sustainable, because beneficiaries allegedly did not take them seriously. This is not actually cheating, but field staff perceived it as such, because the beneficiaries acted in ways that undermined the purpose of the programmes.

Obviously, cheating should not be accepted, but it was interesting to see how these examples were integrated into the narrative of dependency. Field staff would interpret cheating as evidence of the narrative of dependency – beneficiaries allegedly preferred assistance instead of normal work and did not search for ways in which they could provide for themselves in a sustainable manner.

Hiding the causes for poverty and vulnerability

Social constructs are important to understand, because individuals act on them, as if they are unchangeable, objective facts. Hence, I argue that the narrative of cultural laziness and the narrative of dependency have a serious impact on development interventions, because they solely focus on beneficiaries.

Firstly, the narratives serve to shift the blame away from programme failures. According to field staff, the large majority of problems are caused by the actions and attitudes of beneficiaries. For example, the projects which require collective work are continuously being implemented by aid agencies, because *"it makes more sense"* (Blensted 2017: 50), while at the same time the staff explained to me that in the Kroumane culture, people do not appreciate collective work. This contradiction clearly shows that the two narratives prevent field staff from questioning programme failures and design new programmes, which match the local culture better. Again, when

beneficiaries complain that they do not receive all the assistance that they had been promised by UNHCR Liberia, it is interpreted as laziness and dependency. What staff ought to investigate is whether UNHCR Liberia communicates clearly and gives accurate information in order to avoid that beneficiaries get too high expectations.

Secondly, this tendency of blaming the beneficiary is problematic, because it hides the underlying structural causes for poverty and vulnerability. The story about the uncollected birth certificates is a good example of how the narratives of field staff can blur the 'real' causes. The field staff who I met, seemed unable to consider that not only irresponsible beneficiaries were to blame. Other reasons for not picking up the birth certificates could be lack of awareness about the importance for their children, not being present in the village when UNICEF distributed the new certificates, not being able to pay transportation to UNICEF's offices, etc. Moreover, the low sustainability of Income Generating Activities could be due to market failures, low educational levels etc. but according to the staff's narratives it is simply due to the beneficiaries' bad decisions.

Lastly, the fear of creating dependency among beneficiaries helps justify the participatory approach. As described earlier in this article, many beneficiaries were worried about the costs of benefitting from the housing projects. Field staff admitted that the participatory approach could be a challenge for some, but they underlined the need for it anyhow. According to the narratives, staff believed that free hand-outs would only lead to more laziness, and beneficiaries would never realise that they had to make sustainable choices for the future. The result was that the most vulnerable were excluded from the projects.

As noted earlier, the narrative of dependency draws parallels to the concept of the dependency syndrome. Researchers have investigated several cases, which show consequences similar to what I have described above: The fear of the dependency syndrome is taken into account when designing projects and often underpins decisions of reducing assistance. Furthermore, to avoid creating too dependent beneficiaries, agencies often choose to switch to development assistance, which entails a participatory approach, similar to the housing projects in Tabou (Harvey and Lind 2005, Kibreab 1993).

Conclusion

By applying ‘narratives’ as the bearing analytical concept of the analysis, I have been able to explain why beneficiaries and field staff interpret life opportunities and development assistance in different ways. The analysis shows that they have constructed highly contradicting narratives, which obviously creates misunderstandings, confusion, and frustration among beneficiaries and field staff. More importantly, the narrative of cultural laziness and the narrative of dependency tend to shift the blame onto the beneficiary, whenever a problem arises. I have argued that the consequence of always blaming the beneficiary is that the structural causes for poverty and vulnerability in Tabou are hidden, and so are programme failures. In the end, these narratives are thus counterproductive to the mission of aid agencies, as it makes sustainable development unattainable.

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