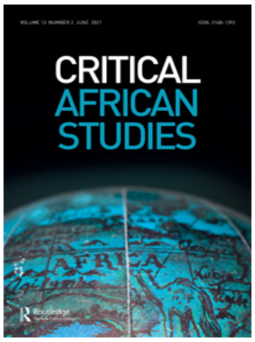

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In the name of development? The moral economy of a private sector–NGO partnership in Ethiopia

Au nom du développement? L'économie morale d'un partenariat secteur privé–ONG en Ethiopie

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Private actors have, over the past decade, entered the field of development operating in new forms of partnerships with established aid actors. Private actors now constitute a central means and objective of publicly funded development aid, causing a growth in actors operating in the name of development but without being compelled to follow established development discourses or principles. This article explores the formation of one such 'strategic partnership' in northern Ethiopia, between a small publicly funded Norwegian NGO and a multinational corporation. The research draws on several fieldworks in Ethiopia, stakeholder interviews, and project observations in 2018 and 2019, complemented with grey literature review. Using the concept of 'interface', the article explores the various encounters between actors with different rationales and mandates that prove hard to reconcile in practice; the seemingly altruistic development aid drawing on participatory approaches to target beneficiaries' needs is at odds with the corporate logic and accountabilities to shareholders and investors. The partnership and project formations are undermined by the practical encounter of these distinct logics, as the private actor gradually withdraws from joint project operations to maintain its corporate reputation. Any notion of participatory planning and local knowledge – here conceived of in terms of moral economy – are omitted from the project formation process, thus, not only undermining a central principle of aid programming, but also making the publicly funded aid project into a proxy for corporate interests.

Keywords: Ethiopia; interface; mining; multinational corporation; NGO; private actors; private sector development; public–private partnership

Au cours de la dernière décennie, les acteurs privés sont entrés dans le domaine du développement en opérant dans de nouvelles formes de partenariats avec des intervenants humanitaires établis. Les intervenants privés constituent désormais un moyen central et un objectif de l'aide au développement financée par des fonds publics, entraînant une croissance du nombre des intervenants agissant au nom du développement mais sans être contraints de suivre les discours ou principes de développement établis. Cet article explore la formation d'un tel « partenariat stratégique » dans le Nord de l'Éthiopie, entre une petite ONG norvégienne financée par des fonds publics et une société multinationale. La recherche s'appuie sur plusieurs travaux de terrain en Éthiopie, des entretiens avec des parties prenantes et des observations de projets en 2018 et 2019, complétées par un passage

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en revue de la littérature grise. L'article utilise le concept d'« interface » et explore les diverses rencontres entre des intervenants dont les logiques et mandats différents s'avèrent difficiles à concilier en pratique; l'aide au développement apparemment altruiste qui s'appuie sur des approches participatives pour cibler les besoins des bénéficiaires est en contradiction avec la logique et les responsabilités de l'entreprise envers les actionnaires et les investisseurs. Les formations de partenariat et de projet sont fragilisées par la rencontre pratique de ces logiques distinctes, l'acteur privé se désengageant progressivement des opérations de projet commun pour maintenir sa réputation d'entreprise. Toute notion de planification participative et de savoir local – ici conçue en termes d'économie morale – est omise du processus de formation du projet, ce qui sape un principe central de la programmation de l'aide, mais fait également du projet d'aide financé par l'État un proxy pour intérêts corporatifs.

Mots clés: Ethiopie; interface; exploitation minière; corporation multinationale; ONG; acteurs privés; développement du secteur privé; partenariat public–privé

Introduction

Private enterprises and large corporations have, over the past decade, entered the field of international development on an unprecedented scale (McEwan et al. 2017). The means and objectives to address and involve the private sector in development aid reflect a potentially new unfolding aid regime, which is contextualized within a rapidly deepening normative discourse that positions private actors as active development agents. This may have potential transformative and consequential effects for the meaning, processes, and mechanisms of international development, which is the scope of this article: including private actors to publicly funded development activities juxtapose distinct set of actors and knowledge systems which may be at odds with each other. Private actors' market-driven logic and accountabilities toward shareholders and investors are fundamentally different to and may impact established development discourses and the principles of how official development aid ought to be done and for what purpose.

The established development discourse and principles state that the overall development process, from planning to implementation, should draw on inclusive, participatory, bottom-up processes so that the beneficiaries' perspectives, interests, and knowledge constitute the starting point for any externally-funded intervention. This discourse, which emerged in the early 2000s and would constitute the core of a new aid architecture (Mosse 2005; Lie 2015), evolved as international development actors sought to respond to mounting critique against existing aid practices for being paternalistic, top-heavy, and driven by donor policy imposition and conditionality. To rephrase, if development aid before was driven by donors' own interests and political economy, the new aid architecture aimed to add moral economy perspectives to the overall development process by complementing external development experts' knowledge with aid beneficiaries' local knowledge and perspectives. However, and needless to say to anyone familiar with development aid, turning development aid upside down and even balancing asymmetrical aid relations proves easier said than done. The international development apparatus' new aid architecture did not manage to alter development aid as intended. Asymmetrical aid relations, donor-driven policy processes, and conditionality approaches have proven highly persistent against the new inclusive and participatory rhetoric. Instead, what has emerged is a structural discrepancy between discourse and practice, between the formal order of aid and how it actually works, where the aid architecture's inclusive concepts of ownership and participation, for example, serve as cosmetic labels to donor governance. This way, donors continue to exert influence based on their interests and expert knowledge while claiming that what is being funded draws on local ownership and participatory approaches (Cornwall 2011; Hasselskog and Schierenbeck 2017; Lie 2019). Notwithstanding such discourse–practice discrepancies, the new aid architecture has created an institutionalized awareness about the existence and importance of a moral economy, here conceived of as representing local knowledge and recipient perspectives as alternatives to external expert knowledge, donor policies, and interests. The aid architecture's principles of bottom-up processes are not governing rules. Rather, they are always subject to interpretation, contextualization, and competition by the involved actors. Corollary, the extent to which the moral economy is included in aid programming is, thus, context dependent. Development partnerships and projects are framed through negotiations and interface situations (Long 2001), by aid brokers and translators (Lewis and Mosse 2006a) and in what Swedlund (2017) called 'the development dance'.

The inclusion of private actors to development aid adds a new and largely unexplored dynamic to the development dance. These dynamics constitute the scope of this article, which argues that the inclusion of private actors to development aid contributes to undermine the moral economy of aid, here conceived as the multiple and diverse knowledge conveyed through participatory bottom-up approaches, nominally meant to serve as the foundation for externally funded development interventions. With the inclusion of private actors to aid, a new set of interests and practices enter the development dance by actors who are not integral to established development discourses nor compelled to follow the established aid norms and principles of partnership and participatory approaches. Extant research on private actors' role in development has largely focused on corporate social responsibility issues and how aid involvement affects their moral legitimacy (Rajak 2011). Instead, this article explores the unfolding dynamics as private actors enter the development domain and the potential transformative effects on development discourse and practice, thus demonstrating how business actors, operating in the name of development, displace existing partnership modalities and, thereby, undermine the moral economy nominally inserted into aid programming with participatory approaches.

The role and relevance of the private sector to development gained traction with the 2011 Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (Mawdsley, Savage, and Kim 2014). In 2015, all UN member states adopted Agenda 2030 that pays due attention to the private sector as both an objective and a means to implement the audacious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG no. 17 regarding global partnership for development stresses the need 'for a more inclusive and relevant dialogue between the public and private sectors'.[1] The World Bank has taken the lead in promoting efforts of greater public–private partnerships in the developing world, 'to spur growth and fight poverty' through larger infrastructure projects, which has received the support of other bi- and multilateral agencies, as well as national, client governments (Bayliss and van Waeyenberge 2018). This both reflects and propels ideological and discursive policy shifts among authoritative aid actors, donor countries, and aid recipient governments in sub-Sahara Africa (Eggen and Roland 2013; Harman and Williams 2014; Kumar 2019). Norway and Ethiopia are examples of such. In Norway, the conservative government embraced the international discourses of private sector development, highlighting 'private sector development and job creation' as one of its five prioritized areas in its 2017 White Paper on development policy (MFA 2017). The White Paper, moreover, aligns with the 2030 Agenda in promoting a concerted global effort, including cooperation with the private sector at home and abroad, to eradicate poverty. Against this background, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) in 2017 announced its first call under the newly established grant scheme 'strategic partnership for strengthening framework conditions for the private sector'.[2] In Ethiopia, changes to the national political economy over the last half-decade have, if not dethroned the developmental state, opened the economy to greater involvement of domestic and international private actors. These are supposed to support the government's efforts to create more jobs for a growing cohort of unemployed youth to stimulate the economy in its bid to become a middle-income country by 2025 and replenish its depleted foreign currency reserves (Government of Ethiopia 2016; Lie and Mesfin 2018; Mulugeta 2019; Brown and Fisher 2020).

The push and demand for greater private sector involvement in global development signal that the political and moral economies of the international apparatus that have claimed monopoly in addressing North–South issues are changing over the last seven decades. Deep-rooted development discourses are being challenged and established development actors are 'scrambling to respond to what may well be the next paradigm shift within mainstream development theories and practice' (Mawdsley, Savage, and Kim 2014, 30). In the Norwegian aid domain, one such scrambled response has been the creation of so-called 'strategic partnerships' between established aid organizations and private actors. Strategic partnerships are conceived of as the light version of public–private partnerships. To aid practitioners, this means that public and private actors collaborate to synergize at the project level, building on a shared understanding of each parties' role and responsibilities, with jointly developed plans and strategies but where the private actor has no financial commitments or formal responsibilities regarding the development project. The formation of one such strategic partnership between public and private actors operating in Ethiopia constitute the scope of this article.

The article explores the strategic partnership between a miniscule vocational training college in Afar, Ethiopia, a small Norwegian NGO, and a huge Norwegian-based multinational fertilizer company. The study is based on interviews and participatory observation over, in total, six weeks of field research in Abala and Mekelle, in northern Ethiopia, and Addis Ababa. The primary empirical data is complemented by review of grey literature and miscellaneous materials from newspapers, blogs, press releases, and policy documents. Interviews were also conducted among stakeholders in Oslo. Access to the area and the involved actors, except the fertilizer company, built on previous research of six months of fieldwork in Mekelle and Abala studying a development project implemented by the Norwegian NGO conducted in 2002 (Lie 2004), since which I have returned intermittently to the area and actors. The fertilizer company's presence in the area is newer and access to them was obtained by initial meetings and interviews at their headquarters in Oslo. For some of the fieldwork, I hired an interpreter and assistant, but most of the interviews were conducted in English, being the lingua franca of development cooperation involving Norwegian and Ethiopian actors. Observations and interviews among the various stakeholders from Oslo to Abala, via Addis Ababa and Mekelle – including politicians, businessmen, bureaucrats, aid professionals and beneficiaries – provide rare and novel insights into the emerging strategic partnership discourse and the role of private actors in development.

In Ethiopia, the multinational fertilizer company established a gigantic potash mine in the desolated Danakil depression, which is among the hottest and lowest (130 metres below sea level) places on earth. As the multinational corporation needs skilled labourers to build and run the mine, it has approached Norwegian aid authorities suggesting a project to develop and renovate a vacated vocational training college in nearby Abala. Consequently, a strategic partnership involving private and public Norwegian and Ethiopian actors was established. But whereas the multinational company was instrumental in proposing the strategic partnership, actively engaged in the joint project formation and policymaking process, it actively distanced itself from the operational level once the project had started. This retreat was a corporate risk mitigating activity. Having its own strict corporate environmental, health, and safety (EHS) standards and being dependent on its reputation vis-à-vis international investors, the company feared being liable, responsible, or associated with anything beyond its own control, such as the less rigid and non-realized EHS standards of the Ethiopian institution and any potential project mismanagement, such as lack of progress, result achievements, and any unintended consequences emerging from the project. As a result, the publicly funded aid project becomes a proxy for private interests, all the while the corporation seeks to build firewalls between itself and the proposed project. The case, thus, illustrates how a strategic public–private partnership may undermine its own project objectives by virtue of merging different logics and discursive regimes, despite bold ambitions among all involved actors. The strategic partnership seeks to harmonize actors, sectors, and discourses that may be hard to reconcile in practice as they draw on different rationalities and epistemic regimes: development aid as a public endeavour seeking to advance the welfare and interests of their aid recipients to whom it is accountable, while private actors are more driven by corporate interests and responsibilities to investors and shareholders.

The strategic partnership brings together different actors and knowledge systems that may be at odds with each other producing, what Long called, a situation of interface, that is, a 'critical point of intersection between different lifeworlds, social fields or levels of social organization, where social discontinuities based upon discrepancies in values, interests, knowledges, and power, are most likely to be found' (Long 2001, 243). Exploring strategic partnerships in terms of interface draws attention to the sociology of knowledge in the encounter of different epistemic regimes; private actors' market-driven logic and accountabilities towards shareholders and investors' interests are different from the due diligence processes, principles, and global standards characteristic of the publicly funded aid regime. Here, the interface concept draws attention to how individual and collective actors, public and private, vie over influencing the partnership and its project formation, thus making the strategic partnership akin to a 'battlefield of knowledge' (Long and Long 1992; Lie 2012) where situations of interface become tangible. This framework allows us to extrapolate from the strategic partnership, using it as the analytical entry point for an empirically grounded, actor-oriented extended case study (Evens and Handelman 2006), to explore various knowledge formations and how they intersect and impinge on each other in various interface situations. The interface concept helps to forward the moral economies at play, consider how various knowledge systems and the political and moral economies intersect, how formal structures and informal practices coalesce, and how various actors' interests frame the project and partnership formations in practice and beyond their formal and structural remits.

Aid partnership modalities and moral economy

Moral economy is an elusive concept and there appears to be little consensus as to what the concept does to, and for, the analysis. Yet, scholars keep returning to the concept. Most authors start with Marxist historian Thompson's seminal work (Thompson 1971, 1991) and Scott's appropriation of it (Scott 1976). Few have seriously sought to refine and define the concept (but see Palomera and Vetta 2016; Wiegratz 2016), and its usage varies according to scholarly tradition where, for example, anthropology tends to see it in terms of resistance and reflexivity or as representing an informal or cultural turn of the economy; philosophers and sociologists of knowledge see it as representing epistemologies alternative to the established ones; economists use it to designate economic activities outside of or parallel to the market economy (Hann 2010; Wiegratz 2016; Carrier 2018). There is a line in Scott's work, reflecting several of these strands which, although different, all somewhat relate back to Thompson and the cultural turn of economy also associated with the formalist-substantivism debate (Polanyi 1944; Hann and Hart 2011). Whereas Thompson applied the moral economy concept to the eighteenth-century urban England, Scott held that people in rural southeast Asia 'were motivated by safety-first principles and a subsistence ethic, rather than profit' (Hann and Hart 2011, 85). Although Scott was criticized for 'romanticising community and denying the rational individualism of peasant decision-makers' (Hann and Hart 2011; see Popkin 1979), his use of the moral economy concept would take some of this critique into account when employing the concept to various forms of resistance (Scott 1985) and, later, designate the kind of informal knowledge, i.e. *metis,* that falls outside any planned order but the planned scheme as parasitic to sustain (Scott 1998). The various usages and inspirations of the moral economy concept demonstrate not only a conceptual elusiveness, but also that the concept has traversed thematic boundaries and, if nothing else and in lack of a stringent definition, is good to think with. That is also the inspiration for the present article. That is, how the moral economy concept purports to explore from below what too often falls outside top-heavy perspectives, formal representations, and interest-based political economy analysis that tend to dominate analyses of aid policy and practice. Seen this way, moral economy relates to political economy as substantivism relates to formalism, but these should not be seen as compartmentalized conceptual binaries. As Hart (1973) pointed out, the formal and informal tend to be seen as dichotomized at the analytical level, while being interrelated and constitutive to each other at the empirical level. There is an interplay between self-interested calculation and moral norms, between formal and informal economies and knowledge realms, and between political and moral economies (Hann and Hart 2011, 86; Fassin 2012). The moral economy, moreover, is not limited to studying economic activity, but rather, in line with Wiegratz' conceptualization of moral economy (Wiegratz 2016, 33), provides for a context to study the formal and informal interrelationships of a context-specific set of social actors, including structures, relationship, and distribution of power between these actors. Although wide, this conceptualization draws attention to the interface of various actors, ideas and interests and their context-dependent interchangeability, which is, indeed, the case regarding shifting aid discourses, partnership modalities, and the intentional involvement of private actors to publicly funded aid.

The notion of moral economy and its relation to its conceptual sibling of political economy are good to consider when exploring the effects of intentional change on the international development apparatus and its practices in aid receiving states. International development aid underwent a major discursive revamp about two decades ago. It sought to turn donor-driven top-down approaches into more bottom-up ones by recasting the partnership concept into more participatory processes aiming at promoting local knowledge, perspectives, and interests into externally funded project (Baaz 2005; Wiegratz 2010; Andersen and Jensen 2017). This partnership concept soon became a governing principle adopted by most bi- and multilateral aid agencies at both the donor and recipient sides of the aid chain, as illustrated by the wide acclamation of these principles at the 2005 High-Level Forum on aid effectiveness in Paris and later reiterated in Accra in 2008 and in Busan in 2011 (Paris Declaration 2005; Mawdsley, Savage, and Kim 2014). The aim was to include in aid programming that which was usually disregarded or forgotten, i.e. local knowledge and perspectives, based on the dual rationale that demoting donor trusteeship was seen as morally right in itself and that it could boost aid effectiveness by creating stronger local commitment to the activities funded by external actors. Known in the literature as the new aid architecture (Mosse 2005), this metamorphosis sought to actively include and enhance various moral economies emerging from the bottom into the policy deliberations at the top, meaning that the local knowledge of aid beneficiaries would inform the benefactor's approaches and models. Nominally, this turn to participatory approaches meant that donors should not only take beneficiaries' interests, perspective, and knowledge as their point of departure in aid programming but also that the beneficiaries themselves should be involved in the policymaking process and that the moral economy of aid beneficiaries should inform donors' political economy and policy deliberations. The new aid architecture's partnership principles of local participation and ownership provide a governing framework for how development ought to be done and constitute central features of contemporary development discourses.

The principles of the new aid architecture, however, should not be equated or confused with practice. Development aid is characterized by structural discrepancies between theory and practice and discourse and agency. Just like democratic principles, for example, are interpreted, bent, and practiced in numerous ways in different contexts, so are the aid architecture's partnership principles. This does not mean, however, that the new aid architecture and its partnership principles are irrelevant, as they have brought attention to the importance of local knowledge and beneficiaries' perspectives and that this moral economy constitutes an alternative to development donors' expert knowledge and policy conditions. It has proven easier to talk about the partnership principles than to practice them. As such, they should be seen more as ideal models providing a framework that is observed differently among actors: some struggle to follow them while others work to get around them by strategizing, resisting or re-interpreting them through brokerage and translation. As the principles are open for interpretation, they constitute a knowledge battlefield where the partnership concept instigates interface situations in bringing together different actors, life-worlds, and knowledge systems (Long 2001). The processes and outcome of such interfaces are context-dependent and contingent on 'the development dance' (Swedlund 2017), i.e. the negotiations taking place in the practical intersection of donors and recipients, principles and practice, and expert knowledge and local knowledge. It is required that one observes the principles to be admitted to the dance, but that the dance itself is subject to improvisation where dancers may lead differently and alternate who takes the lead. The emergence of private actors operating in the name of development in partnership with established aid actors add new dynamics to the interface situations. More actors with different and potentially conflicting mandates and rationales add greater complexity to the partnership relation, with potential uncertainties about who leads and follows in the development dance and where it may lead.

The case below gives insights into this dynamic. The strategic partnership between public and private actors brings forth how different actors that operate together in the name of development may have diverging interpretations of the same principles. The notion of accountability becomes central: while publicly funded aid agencies are accountable upwards to their donors and downwards to their recipients, private actors are chiefly accountable to their shareholders and investors. These accountabilities may be at loggerheads with effects on the public-private partnership and their joint project formation and, thus, have consequences on the scope of influence of local knowledge and moral economies. As the case shows, from being pivotal to the strategic partnership and joint project, the private actor gradually disengages itself from project involvement as it fears that the low standards of its Ethiopian host institution may be detrimental not only to the project but also to its own corporate reputation. To prevent this, it seeks to erect firewalls between its own commercial mining operations and the strategic partnership's vocational training project, thus making the publicly funded development project a proxy for private interests.

The top-down formation of a strategic partnership

In response to Norad's call under the abovementioned 'strategic partnership' programme, the Norwegian NGO Development Fund received funding in mid-2017 for a project in support of a technical and vocational training (TVET) college in Abala, in the Afar-region. Afar, a regional state in the Ethiopian federation, is roughly the same size as Ireland, scarcely populated (1.4 million inhabitants in 2007) with a predominant pastoralist population. Lying in the lowlands, Afar is culturally, economically, and politically marginalized from and by the dominant highland areas. Abala is situated just down the escarpment, less than an hour's drive from Mekelle, the capital of the neighbouring highland Tigray region. Ethiopia's recent decade of double-digit economic growth is mainly observable in the central, highland areas and less so in the hinterlands. Despite a growing economy and bustling commercial activities largely owing to improved roads and highland connections, Abala remains a marginal place, lacking basic infrastructure, capacities, and services. As elsewhere in Ethiopia, Abala also faces rapid urbanization with soaring unemployment rates caused by an influx of highlanders, sedentation of pastoral people, and people from neighbouring villages relocating to the city.

Arriving in Abala in early 2018 for the inaugural project meeting, I soon realized the vocational training project draws on interests and actors beyond the conventional partnership relation between the Development Fund (DF) and the local Abala TVET college institution. In brief, it is an infrastructure and education project concerned with reconstructing and renovating the college's facilities and improving the faculty's competence. DF is formally the project's applicant and managing partner. Since education and infrastructure projects are far beyond its expertise in smallholder farmers and food security, it has outsourced the operational activities by subcontracting the German GIZ as the implementing partner.[3] In the project proposal GIZ and the Abala college are listed as collaborating and implementing partners respectively, while Yara Dallol, a sub-branch of the Norwegian-based multinational fertilizer company Yara International, is listed as DF's main partner. Yara's main shareholders are the Norwegian state (36.2%) and the Government Pension Fund of Norway (6.9%), both professing high ethical standards and public scrutiny. Yara is the private actor that warrants the 'strategic partnership' label. Although Yara was absent from the inaugural meeting, the project architecture suggests not only a different partnership type, but also that Yara is the one providing the project's raison d'être, pulling the strings to serve its interests and propose the project.

Yara is on the verge of establishing a potash mine in Dallol, in the remote and inhospitable Danakil Depression of the Afar-region, about 100 km northeast of Abala. Potash is a natural resource. When processed and refined it is a major plant and crop nutrient and, thus, an important commodity to the multinational fertilizer giant, Yara International. After years of explorations, Yara's feasibility studies concluded that the mine will be profitable for about three decades. Yara is expected to invest about USD 1 billion to make the mine operational and the production capacity will be about 600,000 tonnes annually, which amounts to about 10% of the global market. Yara has a worldwide presence of close to 15,000 employees and sales to about 160 countries. The potash mine represents a significant investment to Yara and will be an important component in its portfolio. Before extraction and production can commence, some central features need to be in place: the mining licence issued by the Ethiopian government, electricity, access to a harbour from landlocked Ethiopia, and a sufficiently skilled workforce to build and run the mine.

In November 2017, Ethiopia welcomed a state visit by the Norwegian crown prince who, followed by a huge business delegation eager to sign contracts, advocated for strengthening bilateral relations beyond traditional aid to foster more private-sector partnerships. Indeed, with the presence of the crown prince and the Ethiopian premier, Yara's president signed the USD 731 million mining agreement with the Ethiopian government.[4] While Yara initially wanted to export the raw material, the government insisted on refining the product locally before export to create more jobs, gain more foreign revenues, and, thereby, replenish its depleted foreign currency reserve needed for other imports. Ethiopian authorities have historically been reluctant of foreign and private investments, instead preferring their own state-owned enterprises that have been a key characteristic of modern Ethiopian statehood and its developmental state formation since the early 1990s. While the developmental state initially produced high growth rates, it is also seen as an obstacle to further growth by containing a tight political setting, limiting the private sector's freedom to operate (Borchgrevink and Sande Lie 2009; Clapham 2017). Following the death of the previous prime minister and strongman, Meles Zenawi, in 2012, the developmental state has gradually transformed and liberalized. The combination of domestic political and discursive shifts, a need for foreign currency, and big monies to realise larger infrastructure projects and diversify its export-oriented sectors eventually made the government liberalize and open the economy to new private actors, including foreign, private investments (Dereje 2011; Lie and Mesfin 2018). The Yara potash mine project reflects these shifts and after years of preparations and explorations, the mining licence was eventually signed. As part of this agreement, the government committed to construct a 130km grid line, financed by a loan from the African Development Bank, to provide the potash mine and processing plant in Dallol with electricity. Moreover, together with a Chinese contractor, the government will rebuild the 900 km road to Djibouti to facilitate over 60 lorries daily that will bring potash to the Port of Tadjoura for export to the global market. As for manpower, it is estimated that about 1000 qualified workers are required during the peak of the construction phase, which will be a challenge: Dallol is the hottest inhabited place on earth and scarcely populated, with 98% of the woreda's 84,000 inhabitants living in rural areas and 82% of the population above five years having never attended any form of schooling.[5] Expanding the pool from which to recruit qualified workers is, thus, key for Yara to build and run the mine. Immediately after Yara signed the mining agreement with the Ethiopian government, the strategic partnership agreement with the Development Fund, Yara, GIZ, and the Abala TVET institution was approved and signed by Norad, also in the presence of the royal, governmental, diplomatic, and private sector dignitaries.[6]

This constitutes the overarching backdrop and context of the public-private strategic partnership, which facilitates what appears as a conventional education and infrastructure project involving local partners. The Abala college was established in 2015 when the regional Afar government converted a former boarding school into a vocational training college, allegedly based on popular demands requesting relevant education opportunities for the local youth. However, this recast did not come with any governmental funding or plans for upgrades to meet the national college standards. Renovating the college would eventually constitute the scope of the strategic partnership. While a conventional development partnership would be between DF and the Abala college, the strategic partnership is between Yara and DF, something which from the outset displaces beneficiary perspectives and recipients' involvement in the project formation. Although there is an undeniable need for improving the college, the common denominator when interviewing project stakeholders is that the project and the partners it brings together never accrued from any local initiative or participatory, bottom-up processes as per the nominal partnership version. The local college had not been part of the initial project formation and had hardly been consulted in the process before the inaugural meeting, suggesting that the project initiative came from elsewhere.

Due to the strategic partnership, the project formation was driven less by bottom-up concerns than top-heavy interests. That is, Yara's need for a qualified labour force and aid bureaucracies' need to act on Norwegian and Ethiopian politicians' shared discourse of job creation, business development and private sector development. Talking with the different project stakeholders at the various scales of the aid chain – from donors to recipients, managers to implementers and beneficiaries, spanning the public, private and civil society sectors in Norway and Ethiopia – there is ambiguity as to how the project came into being and who and where the idea emanated from. Some would claim it was the idea of DF or Norad, others argued that Yara coined the project, while some asserted that the strategic partnership came first and the project emerged to warrant it. None held that the project emerged from 'below' as per the conventional partnership discourse's emphasis on participation and ownership. Indeed, responding to the evolving private sector in development discourse as operationalized in Norad's call for strategic partnership seems to have been a driving concern. Another concern is that the college renovation project would be conducive to Yara's own potash mine project, as well as the dire shortage of both education and work opportunities in Abala.

When Yara realized that the potash mine project would be feasible and profitable, it started to screen the labour market only to realize that the nearest hub from which to recruit enough qualified labourers would be Mekelle in the highland, some four hours' drive away. Recognizing the reciprocal resentment between highland Tigreans and lowland Afaris, as well as the former's challenge to adapt to the remote, desolate, and environmental hardship of Dallol, Yara not only feared a too high turnover rate but also reasoned that importing labour would undermine the mine's local legitimacy and fuel the resentment between the two ethnic groups. A combination of strategic interests, effectiveness, and the will to demonstrate corporate social responsibility made Yara opt for educating people locally rather than recruiting workers from afar. However, when assessing the college and its premises, Yara realized it was a college only in name and far below its own standards and expectations as it lacked basic infrastructure like windows, electricity, a workshop, machinery, and proper dormitories with water and toilettes, as well as sufficiently trained faculty with administrative capacity. While Yara has the money to build a new college itself, the education sector in Ethiopia is a public task and responsibility, which means Yara could end up paying and, thus, be accountable for something which it could not have full control over or be responsible for. Consequently, Yara reached out to the Norwegian embassy in Addis Ababa to request its support and collaborate with someone eligible to provide development aid in partnership with the college.

Representatives of the Development Fund, the embassy, and Norad all recall being approached by Yara pitching the idea of renovating the college. The embassy, already supportive of the mining project and the ongoing licence application, was 'immediately keen on making this happen', as expressed by one of its representatives, since the project would not only be beneficial to Norwegian private interests abroad, but also tick off the boxes of job creation, education, and business development shared by Ethiopian and Norwegian authorities. Moreover, it also overlapped with the mechanism of strategic partnership evolving within Norad. Yet, to qualify as a strategic partnership and receive money, Yara would have to involve someone eligible to receive official development assistance.

Consequently, Yara reached out to the Development Fund, being the only Norwegian NGO having worked in Abala before. DF representatives were initially somewhat sceptic about partnering with Yara. Not only would the proposed education project be far off its institutional scope of small farmers and food security, it would also mean being conducive to the interests of a multinational company resulting in the risk of the NGO being associated with negative socio-cultural and environmental impacts evolving from the education and mine projects. Increasingly convinced of the limited physical, social, and environmental footprints expected caused by the closed-pit potash mine in a deserted and remote area, DF eventually decided to get involved in the project. The initial scepticism soon transformed into excitement over working with a huge multinational actor, as this would directly connect the proposed development intervention with larger socio-economic processes. Moreover, it would also mean responding positively to the discursive policy changes and emphasis given to strategic partnerships with the private sector by Norad, its main funding source. While DF became the project applicant and managing partner, it was decided at the planning level to outsource all the operational activities to GIZ, who, contrary to DF, has experience in education and infrastructure projects. It is not surprising that NGOs do thing to please their funding agency, and the swift project setup and approval with a project applicant going beyond its competence and institutional scope may indicate a strong political and bureaucratic push to realize the novel strategic partnership with the consequence that participatory approaches and beneficiaries' involvement to grasp the moral economy were bypassed in the process.

The project brings together Ethiopian and Norwegian public, private, and civil society interests and actors in a strategic partnership that connects huge, private billion-dollar investments with a smaller publicly-funded development project of about USD 30 million. In the interface of various actors and interests driving the project forward, those controlling the purse have had their needs met: Yara gets the qualified workforce it needs to realize its project and Norad gets a prime case for its novel strategic partnership framework. College employees and prospective students, however, have not been consulted in the process thus undercutting the influence of their moral economy in the project. Despite having no experience with education and infrastructure projects, DF got involved and devised the project together with and on Yara's initiative, underscoring that the project never evolved from any participatory, bottom-up processes or responded to a locally articulated need. Yet, as the project evolved and Yara got to know the capacity and standards of the college better, Yara actively sought to distance itself from the college over fears that potential project mismanagement, weak implementation, or poor college management could ruin its reputation and deter its owners and the potash mine's investors, and, consequently, undermine the strategic partnership itself.

A strategic partnership of proxies and firewalls

Partnership in the traditional sense means a mutual relationship between donor and recipient institutions based on 'a joint commitment to long-term interaction, shared responsibilities for achievement, reciprocal obligation, equality, mutuality and a balance of power' (Fowler 2000, 3; see also Baaz 2005; Pickard 2010; Cornwall 2011). The concept of participation can be seen to promote the moral economy of beneficiaries into aid partnerships by turning top-driven approaches bottom-up. The field of development aid is dominated by highly moralized and normative discourses, like that of partnership. While these mobilising discourses provide legitimacy to aid spending and interventions, they also set the bar high making these principles and standards difficult to attain in practice. As the above presentation shows, the partnership that underpins the Abala TVET project largely bypasses these ideas central to the governing principles of the overall development aid process, from project inception to implementation. Indeed, none of the college representatives nor any of the local authorities expressed having been included or consulted in the project formation phase, despite the fact that the college is listed as an implementing partner.

Not paying heed to the concepts of local participation and ownership does not, however, necessarily imply that the project is ill-conceived, convey bad intentions, ineffective, or that there is no need for the intervention (all of which is beyond the scope of this article). Nor does it mean that the project emerged from a strict donor-driven approach. Rather, the project emerged outside of the conventional aid domain of established development actors and beneficiaries as the project was initially proposed and pushed for by Yara, first and foremost to serve its own corporate interests and need for skilled labour to build and run its potash mine. While not being the prime motive, Yara also underscores the corporate social responsibility effects emerging from the project, by fostering legitimacy and goodwill among the local population, and national and regional authorities. In proposing the project idea to the embassy and Norad officials, Yara – maybe coincidentally – tapped into their ongoing policy processes and discursive shift, emphasizing greater cooperation between aid institutions and the private sector at home and abroad, to contribute to the reorientation of Norwegian aid towards business developments and job creation. This confluence of interests between public and private institutions was, thus, instrumental to moving ahead with the idea and establishing a publicly-funded development project serving as a proxy to facilitate private sector interests through a strategic partnership with the civil society.

The private actor's nominal and practical project role is surprisingly miniscule considering its prominent role in the project formation and the emphasis given to private sector involvement in aid by the funding agency and political authorities in both Norway and Ethiopia. Besides providing in-kind material support for the student dormitories, such as beds and mattresses, Yara's practical role is largely limited to more informal and unspecified activities such as providing students with internship and mentoring programmes and sharing experience and giving technical advice to the college upon request. In comparison, the project document designates a long laundry list of tasks, activities, and responsibilities to the subcontracted and implementing partner, GIZ. Despite GIZ and that the college never took part in the project formation or is nominally part of the strategic partnership, the project's realization is largely contingent on them. Despite the strategic partnership and that the development project Yara initially proposed hovers around the prospective potash mine, Yara is actively disengaging itself from the college project, as illustrated by one of its representatives stressing the necessity 'to construct impenetrable firewalls between Yara and the college development project'.

This notion of firewalls draws attention to an important concern emerging in the interface of public and private actors in development cooperation. Because Yara is not in control of or responsible for the development project, it fears that 'guilt by association' with the college's standards, weak EHS compliance, and potential unintended consequences emerging from the project could be detrimental to its corporate reputation. Establishing a potash mine is a huge investment and being associated with any project or college mismanagement would put off its investors and, thereby, jeopardize the mining project as a whole. Since Yara cannot be in full control over neither the college nor the development project, it would rather opt to disengage itself from them. Constructing firewalls between Yara on the one side and the project and college on the other side is thus seen as an important corporate risk mitigating activity; the main way of building these firewalls is to disassociate itself, formally and practically, from the project and college activities. A key concern is the diverging standards between Yara and the college, not only in terms of the quality of the training, but also issues relating to health, environment, and security. Such differences are immediately felt when visiting Yara's camp in Dallol, where, for example, security screening and health checks are mandatory for all visitors entering the gated compound with its air-conditioned houses and canteen offering various dishes from all over the world to cater to its international staff. The camp in Dallol offers a stark contrast to the college in Abala, which, having been converted from a former desolated boarding school, is a college only in name and does not even meet the standards stipulated by the Ethiopian government. Despite actively disengaging itself from the college and the project, Yara staff is nevertheless attentive to their many flaws, especially those relating to health, environment, and security, and reports them to both the project and college staff. The college's lack of electrical earthing is seen as a security hazard; missing curtains in the dormitories is interpreted as cultural insensitivity to students' need for privacy, female Muslims in particular; and the lack of a canteen, food, toilettes, showers, a compound fence, levelled floors, unbroken windows and study rooms are all examples of standards below what is required by Yara, despite the college standard being on par or even above what one usually finds in Abala. While the local college staff and students are indifferent to these shortcomings, Yara staff fears they may implicate the potash project and deter its owners and investors and, thus, seeks to disassociate itself by building 'firewalls'.

Erecting firewalls between distinct actors that are meant to work together towards the same goals demonstrates some challenges to the strategic partnership, implying that it can never be full and complete because aid agencies operating on public monies, private corporations, and education institutions operate according to different logics, with different responsibilities and accountabilities. The college is a state agency formally accountable to students and national authorities, not to the project or its partners. The project and its applicant NGO partner are accountable to the beneficiaries and the funding agencies. The multinational private corporation, despite incepting the project and engaging in the strategic partnership, remains accountable first and foremost to its shareholders and owners. Those involved in the partnership, thus, have different mandates, responsibilities, and accountabilities that are at odds with each other and prove hard to reconcile. A consequence of this, as seen in the case above, is that the private actor needs to protect itself by operating from behind firewalls. The strategic partnership formation and the ambition of integrating public development aid and private corporate interests become diluted and are undermined in practice despite their formal representations and official rhetoric. Operating under the moral pretext of development, such disentanglements make the publicly-funded project a proxy for the promotion of corporate interests. In the process, the moral economy of aid recipients, that is local knowledge drawing on participatory approaches to aid beneficiaries, has been bypassed as the donor agency and corporate actor's drive for a strategic partnership prevails over other concerns and principles governing aid.

Strategic partnerships and moral economy

The partnership concept facilitates the interface of otherwise distinct asymmetrical actors so they are able to share responsibilities with a joint commitment to common processes and objectives (Fowler 2000). The notion of interface as an analytical concept draws attention to the encounter of different discourses, practices, and knowledge realms, as is here instigated by the partnership concept. Interface situations, more often than not, generate counter-tendencies (Arce and Long 2000) or counterworks (Wertheim 1965), which denote context-specific processes and methods by actors operating in the interstices of different knowledge systems (Lewis and Mosse 2006b). Whether partnership is seen as a reality or an ideal to strive for, most analysts agree that practice generally falls far from its ideal requirements, as interface situations and counterwork may reproduce the aid asymmetries in tacit ways (Lie 2015), undermine the partnership principles (Marriage 2006), or trigger forms of brokerage and translation (Lewis and Mosse 2006a). Various forms of counterworks may either sensitize, translate, or subvert the original plan, the result of which is dependent on the context-specific interface and negotiation between donor and recipient institutions (Swedlund 2017).

The case above, with the formation of the strategic partnership, demonstrates a form of counterwork occurring in the interface that subverts the intended idea and girding notion of partnership. Discursive changes and donor-driven pushes to intersect private sector development involving private actors in partnership with public aid agencies gradually undermine the tenets and principles otherwise so central to institutionalized development aid, that is, inclusive, bottom-up processes and participatory planning mechanisms. Indeed, the partnership concept has been widely criticized for reflecting practice. Practitioner perspectives point to the discrepancies between the official order of development and how it works in practice. The more critical post-structuralist approaches refer to inherent discourse–practice differences and hold that discrepancies between development discourse and aid practice reproduce already lopsided aid relations. Highly moral partnership discourse and the normative participation concept can install tacit governance mechanisms through which donor institutions wield influence and even a form of indirect conditionality, or developmentality, where the liberal partnership rhetoric of local ownership is a conduit for global governance (Rahnema 1992; Baaz 2005; Lie 2015; Lie 2019). The inclusion of private actors through strategic partnership offers a new dynamic to how beneficiaries' moral economy is displaced in aid programming, since adding new, external actors and interests to the dyadic aid relation not only undermines established aid principles but also dwarfs donor institutions' scope for carrying them through.

Participatory approaches to include beneficiaries' moral economy are among what aid practitioners see as enhancing aid efficiency by virtue of their instrumentality in addressing aid beneficiaries' own concerns, in sensitising external funded projects to local realities, engendering local commitment, and ensuring a form of local ownership. As Hann notes (2010, 196), the moral economy can be seen as society's defence against the incursions of the market. In parallel, partnership and participatory planning mechanism, in forwarding local knowledge and perspectives, can be seen as a defence against donor trusteeship and policy conditionality. As with the formation of partnership in general, this line of defence is framed and articulated in the donor–recipient interface. The strategic partnership outlined above, however, produces a different interface and counterwork. It represents an eclatant case of how moral economy and the principles of forwarding local knowledge are being subverted due to top-heavy project formation where realizing that the strategic partnerships appear to have been more important than what that partnership accomplished. Once the project started, it became obvious that the aim to merge actors drawing on different logics with different interests and conflicting accountabilities was a bridge too far. Including private actors to public aid planning and management practices not only undermines the influence emerging from bottom-up, beneficiary perspectives, and local sensitization and contextualization produced by such approaches but also degrades the potential influence and defence provided by a moral economy against top-heavy and externally-driven perspectives.

The strategic partnership converts the publicly-funded aid project into a proxy for corporate interests. The corporation gradually detached itself from the project work, actively separating itself in fear of becoming liable for something it is not responsible for or has control over. Yet, the actors are connected as the project partners provide each other with much needed paraphernalia: the corporation gains social responsibility and legitimacy by being involved formally in a strategic partnership in the development sector, despite not actively taking part in the project at the practice level. It also expands the pool of the qualified labour force to work at its potash mine. The managing NGO can assert it is engaged in a novel and innovative partnership with the private sector, as requested by political and funding authorities, all the while acknowledging that important features of the project formation are at odds with established aid practice. The college is being renovated, and the youths' access to education and jobs improve. The project idea never emerged from any participatory process, but from an external, private actor who needed skilled labour to realize its commercial activities and an NGO who wanted to respond positively to its donors' evolving strategic partnership discourse, despite meaning that the NGO had to outsource most of the project activities. As such, the project's trajectory demonstrates the inversions of established aid processes and accountabilities: whereas aid actors are nominally responsible and accountable to beneficiary and recipient communities, corporations are first and foremost accountable to their shareholders and investors. This not only impacts the project formation and interface between public and private actors, but also undermines the scope of including beneficiaries' moral economy in aid programming. Indeed, as the case demonstrates, private actors add a new logic to development partnership that proves hard to reconcile with public actors and dominating development discourses. Furthermore, the drive among donor representatives and policymakers to act on the evolving discourse of private actors in development and realize the strategic partnership seem to have further displaced participatory planning mechanisms and the influence of moral economy.

Conclusion

The moral economy concept was seminally used to designate economic activities taking place outside of, or in opposition to, the rational political economy of the free market (Thompson 1971). Although the concept itself is somewhat elusive, with diverging disciplinary usages and still in need of further theorizing, the concept is useful to think with, notably in drawing attention to practices and knowledge that the formal order or dominating theories of specific fields fail to grasp, neglect the existence of, or simply forget. The moral economy concept, as such, constitutes an important reminder about the diversity of knowledge and perspectives, especially those that fall outside established theories and models. This was also the rationale behind the participatory turn in development, to provide a normative framework that would take the moral economy of aid beneficiaries into account in donors' programming activities. This turn led to a greater awareness of the discrepancies between expert and local knowledge, and that aid benefactors and beneficiaries do not necessarily share an understanding of what constitutes a problem and how to solve it with development aid. The turn to participatory approaches, which represents a key feature of the new aid architecture, has not transformed development practice as intended. Lopsided aid relations and discrepancies between the discourse and practice of aid persist. So, while the new aid architecture is not reflected in development practice, it established some principles and ambitions which practitioners aspire to realize. Based on the case above, the inclusion of private actors to development cooperation not only displaces the potential role and relevance of moral economy, but also comes with a logic that is at odds with existing development discourse.

While private actors may operate in the name of development, and even in partnership with development actors, they are not compelled to abide by established aid principles. Public and private actors have different accountability regimes and operate at the behest of not only different but also potentially conflicting logics. The result of their strategic partnership is that the moral economies and local, informal knowledge are omitted in aid programming and practice. As demonstrated by the case, the public aid altruism and principles are dwarfed by private actor involvement, not due to bad intentions, but rather because of a capitalist logic to preserve the corporation's reputation, which suggests a logic that is hard to fully reconcile with public aid principles.

Celebrated for its mobilising and transformative effects on conventional aid, the private sector is increasingly recast as a means and objective for international development by donor and recipient governments alike, illustrated, for instance, by its designated and prominent role in realizing the audacious SDGs. Against the backdrop of seeing conventional aid as being driven by good intentions and reliant on big budgets by a few governmental actors, the inclusion of private actors to development assistance has indeed transformed conventional aid, pushing it to be more date-driven and results-oriented. There are, however, two sides to this coin, as the established development principles are degraded and undermined by the proliferation of private actors' involvement in public aid, as, for example, the strategic partnership between a government-funded NGO and a multinational corporation explored in this article. Formally, all involved actors abide by these principles but by moving the analytical attention to their practical interface, as instigated by the strategic partnership, informal practices and knowledge undermining the formal order surface. As such, attending to the project formation and informal practices occurring in the partnership interface demonstrate how private actors' interests contribute to undermine the extent to which aid recipients' moral economies and local knowledge are included in aid programming, as intended by the formal order and principles of aid. Strategic public–private partnerships bring together different actors with different rationales such as corporate capitalist logics and the altruism of public aid, shareholder interests, and donor responsibility and accountabilities to both owners and aid recipients. These logics may not only be at odds with each other, but can also, in practice, subvert the original intention of development aid that the strategic partnership was meant to support.

Notes

1. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg17
2. Also called 'Cooperation on framework conditions for private sector development in the South.' See 'Call for concept proposals', https://norad.no/en/front/funding/private-sector-development/cooperation-on-framework-conditions/call-for-concept-proposals-strategic-partnership-for-strengthening-framework-conditions-for-the-private-sector/. Accessed October 30, 2019.
3. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeid (GIZ) is a German development agency that mainly implements technical cooperation projects for the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. It also works with other governmental organisations, the private sector, and – less frequently but as the present case is an example of – with non-governmental organisations.
4. Ethiopia signs mining agreement with Yara International. See http://ethemb.se/ethiopia-signs-mining-agreement-with-yara-international/. Accessed 6 November 2019.
5. Woreda roughly translates to district and is the most central local administration unit in the bureaucratic hierarchy in Ethiopia. Each woreda is composed of several kebelles, or neighbourhoods. Figures taken from the 2007 census report, available at www.csa.gov.et/census-report/complete-report/census-2007. Accessed 11 November 2019.
6. https://www.bistandsaktuelt.no/nyheter/2017/yara-med-gruve-i-etiopia/

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