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## Abandoned pasts, disappearing futures: further reflections on multiple temporalities in studying non-governmental organisation worlds

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:** Lewis, David (2015) *Abandoned pasts, disappearing futures: further reflections on multiple temporalities in studying non-governmental organisation worlds*. [Critique of Anthropology](#), 36 (1). pp. 84-92. ISSN 0308-275X

DOI: [10.1177/0308275X15617304](https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X15617304)

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Available in LSE Research Online: May 2016

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# **Abandoned Pasts, Disappearing Futures: Further Reflections on Multiple Temporalities in Studying NGO Worlds**

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## **Introduction**

Anthropologists have long moved beyond an earlier tendency to provide largely static portrayals of an ethnographic present that sometimes paid insufficient attention to the presence of change in social life. Time and temporalities have become established themes within anthropological analyses, and the methodological centrality of time to the immersive practices of ethnographic research has long been central to the way that anthropologists work in the field. Recent work by anthropologists is returning to the subject of temporality in new and interesting ways. Such work is critical of tendencies to inadvertently naturalise assumptions about the nature of time. For example, Laura Bear (2014) suggests that “modern time” is a complex construction shaped in diverse ways by practice, and which orders and mediates between other forms of social time. The apparent coherence and linearity of modern time is only derived after the fact as part of a complex assemblage of diverse and situated practices, representations and technologies. Following Bruno Latour, we find that it is not time that sorts social processes, but rather the reverse, such that it is the very practices of sorting and ordering that serve to produce time.

The articles in this special issue each in their different ways raise the profile of multiple temporalities in relation to the study of NGOs. Issue editors Veronica Davidov and Ingrid Nelson suggest “there are many more temporal themes that warrant critical reflection” and as anthropologists deepen their engagement with the field of “NGO studies”, there is clearly a wide-ranging agenda to explore. This postscript briefly draws together ideas from the work presented by contributors to this special issue, and outlines some additional themes particularly in relation to NGOs, temporalities and changing frames of “development”. A focus on multiple temporalities invites us to explore understandings of how time is, and how time is experienced. When it comes to anthropologists and NGOs there is of course a possible parallel here – though one that is yet to be explored – between the ethnographic practices of anthropologists and the ways that development NGOs work with local communities, where outsider NGO staff move often uninvited into positions of engagement with local people over time.

As suggested by the editors in their introduction, we are only now beginning to explore these themes in relation to the diverse worlds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Each paper here can be seen to throw lights on different aspects of what might be termed temporal “disjunctures” (see Lewis and Mosse 2006) that arise from mismatched expectations and practices. Barbara Andersen’s contribution illustrates the ways in which temporal order and disjuncture contribute to governance through NGO roles in securing compliance, and how this helps to discipline moral subjects. Mary Mostafanezhad’s account highlights the disjunctures that exist between different NGO and local temporalities, and shows how these come to bear on the kinds of representational knowledge that is produced and disseminated by NGOs about local communities. Veronica Davidov’s paper further extends aspects of such disjuncture in her discussion of how an externally generated narrative of fast-moving change about to befall a village becomes a justification for a protective ecotourism intervention. Finally, Ingrid Nelson’s ethnography of homestead sweeping practices as acts of time-making that signify both a social presence in the home space, and an ongoing effort to keep out the forest highlights another set of disjunctures. Such practices are shown to be at odds both with dominant environmental NGO narratives of the disappearing forest, and with NGO staff views of sweeping as time wasting that reflects an unproductive and undisciplined local time management by their hired help.

Where do we go from here in relation to the increasing research engagement by anthropologists with NGOs? In particular, what can be said about how time is experienced within NGO worlds, by the people who work in NGOs, and by those the NGO is claiming to serve? In this coda, brief suggestive comments are offered in relation to time and temporalities at different *scales* within the field of development in which NGOs are located - the individual, the organization and within wider policy processes. For the development NGO, perhaps both the past and the future have become sources of anxiety. The past is experienced in the world of development practice as a murky place where failures can be hidden, where there is an unwillingness to learn lessons, but where glimmers of an idealised past can sometimes be discerned and on occasion, lamented. The future is a place that is promised, and on which present activities are premised, but which never arrives.

#### *Individuals: values, experiences and trajectories*

Let us begin by exploring some issues at the level of the various different kinds of individuals who work within NGOs. As the field of “aidnography” has flourished in recent years the previously largely ignored subject of development people and aid communities has begun to take on firmer shape. For Stirrat (2008) international aid workers can be seen as “missionaries”, “mandarins” and “misfits”, who cannot easily be understood without reference to their personal and professional past lives. In a similar vein, Baillie Smith and Jenkins (2012) show how international aid worker counterpart staff within Indian NGO partner organizations perform related but subtly different spatially-defined roles as “strategic cosmopolitans”, whose work is in part about the brokering of resources and meanings between the local and global realms.

Experiences of NGO people can also be approached through the study of individual life histories, giving insights into work, values and identities as well as into broader

institutional relationships and change. For example, research on the life histories of “boundary crossing” activists in Bangladesh showed how individuals who might have previously joined the civil service were now headed into NGOs, not only because they offered better pay and conditions, but also because they were seen as offering more potential as better sites for embarking on morally and politically-informed activist careers (Lewis 2009). In the Philippines, efforts by civil society activists to move sideways into government in the post-authoritarian era after 1986 was part of a strategy to go beyond the confines of one type of non-governmental organizational space to explore ways of operating within government, closer - they hoped - to the levers of policy change. This was a strategy that led to mixed outcomes and in some cases, disillusionment with the idea of reform from within the state by civil society activists who had crossed over (Lewis 2013). Research on the individual life histories of NGO people is an emerging, diverse and potentially illuminating direction that combines multiple temporalities at the level of the individual.

The policy worlds in which such people move are also temporally unstable. In his book *Ideas for Development*, activist and practitioner Robert Chambers (2005) suggests that “inconstancy is a feature of much aid” (p.17). There are short-term changes in policy and vocabulary and the shift from projects to programmes may have increased the move away from grounded work towards the “more nebulous, permeable and inconstant”. If individuals are going to be able to learn and be effective in their work, whether they are outsiders working on short contracts, or insider civil servants who are moved around in their postings, they need to build longstanding relationships and gain detailed contextual knowledge. The growing professionalization of NGOs, writes Chambers, has led to the perception that staff change jobs more frequently than before, and see posts as “stepping stones” to somewhere else rather than as places to work and stay for longer periods of time. Some NGOs such as World Neighbours are conscious of the problem, and seek to recruit people and build a culture that challenges this trend, coining the attribute of “stick-to-itiveness” as a desirable quality for the job. For Chambers the costs of discontinuity are likely to be high in terms of difficulties in learning lessons effectively, disincentives to address long-term problems, and the unhelpful erasing potentially useful historical knowledge. While there may be disadvantages to a person remain in too long in a job and going stale, he suggests that only after 5-6 years do such diminishing returns set in, if at all. The world of aid is locked into what David Sogge (1996) has called “the continuity of discontinuity”.

### *Organizations and evolutionary time*

Individuals who play leadership roles in NGOs provide another window into temporality as growth and change. NGOs are often bound up with the life cycle of individual charismatic founders, with the organization linked through time to this person’s ascendancy and eventual decline. NGO people have often been interested in understandings of time in organizational terms, drawing on the life-cycle metaphor. Life-cycle theories have a long history in organizational studies, and draw on the evolutionary perspective on organizations that allows reflection on organizational change in terms of structures, values and approaches. This is relevant to NGOs because it helps us understand how they are initiated, how they change and grow, and the problems that some NGOs face when their founder leaders move on and there are

leadership succession issues. Larry Greiner's (1972) work traced the organizational life cycle from initial creative energy of the founder through the inevitable leadership crises that lead either to maturity or collapse. This is a narrative that readers of Stephen Hopgood's (2006) ethnography of Amnesty International *Keepers of the Flame* would recognize, when the organization - or as Hopgood suggests, movement - began to outgrow its founder Peter Benenson.

Within the world of development NGOs the idea of NGO "generations" associated with the work of writer-activist David Korten (1990) became a guiding principle during the NGO heyday of the 1990s. He suggested that NGOs are often born out of an initial burst of energy aimed at meeting immediate needs in a community that creates a "first generation" organization, but from this follows as a chain of increasingly sophisticated approaches to working that factors in growing realization and reflection around ideas such as participation and sustainability. By the "second generation", an NGO becomes more exposed to wider ideas and influences and seeks to build community self-reliance. Building sustainable change through wider advocacy is part of the "third-generation" organization, and links with social movements in the fourth-generation" NGO. This is a timescape of crisis and renewal in which organizations, their leaders and the communities they aim to serve move through stages and incremental learning in a perspective informed by the metaphor of the human family.

A related point that links individuals, organizations and wider history is that similar temporal forms can be seen to emerge across seemingly different scales, as Yarrow (2008, p.334) has suggested in his work on politics and development in Ghana. In his account Yarrow recounts a sumptuous gathering of NGO board members at a hotel dinner attended during his fieldwork at which staff "explicitly imagined national development to have taken place in part as a result of their own 'ideology', 'commitment' and 'sacrifice' as NGO workers and activists". Here there is an inter-penetration between personal histories and wider context in which both individual and national lives are imagined as unfolding according to a common temporal understanding of development.

### *Policy worlds: trapped in a perpetual present?*

Taking a cue from the editors' point that development targets such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) locate NGO projects and programmes within temporal policy contexts and time-bound cycles, we also need to consider the centrality of time to our understanding of the worlds of policy and practice. We have already touched upon the dominant theme of discontinuity. International development is an arena characterised by rapidly moving personnel, organizational relationships and shifting policy agendas along with changing and decontextualized policy discourse "buzzwords" (Cornwall and Brock 2006). One result of this is the production of an ahistorical bias within policy worlds that leads policy makers and development organizations to operate predominantly within a "perpetual present" in which ideas, language and policy goals are constantly reinvented (Lewis 2009). Reflection on, and learning from, policy "success" or "failure" is made more difficult because the past is quickly moved beyond, documents are abandoned, and new personnel take up posts in which their priority is to make a break with the work of their predecessors.

This is not a problem that is restricted to the world of development policy. Paul Connerton in *How Modernity Forgets* (2009) refers to this as “structural forgetting” (p.2) in which the culture of modernity requires the destruction of the past is destroyed the past within modern capitalist societies. This erasure of the past is also familiar ground for postmodern theorists such as Frederic Jameson, who remarked on the “disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past” (p.28) and which results in the production of “historical amnesia”.

Underpinning this tendency, and made possible by it, is the rise of a starkly managerialist ideology in the world of development policy and practice that favours means-ends thinking, private sector values and apolitical technocratic approaches to change (Lewis 2014). This is apparent in the current emphasis among development donors and governments on partnership, harmonization, results and value for money. Managerialism is primarily future-oriented in the sense that it increasingly places a relentless emphasis on novelty and change. Nowhere is this clearer than in the belief - among funders such as the Gates Foundation - in “innovation” as one of the most important ways in which NGOs and other development organizations can contribute to development. Innovation can be seen as another way of devaluing the past, since it values the idea of doing things better through new as yet unknowable approaches in the future over doing things well using the routine activities currently available in the present (Lewis 2013).

Within the world of development, NGOs in particular have been associated with small-scale forms of community-level engagement and with challenging top down approaches that involve outside professionals or bureaucrats. Robert Chambers began advocating for changes in development practice using participatory approaches during the 1980s, the idea and practice of “rapid rural appraisal”, in which outsiders drew on anthropological ideas to learn from local people began gaining ground. RRA was seen as an alternative to development tourism and the top down exercise of professional power. Officials concerned with agricultural extension work for example were urged to get out from behind their desks – rather like anthropologists going into the field - to listen more closely to the voices and experiences of the people they were supposed to be assisting. The aim was to build a picture of local realities from the perspectives of local people. But by the 1990s, anxieties around multiple temporalities had begun to set in. In particular, the “rapid” in the title began to trouble these alternative development practitioners, mindful of the fact that too much temporal compression risked replicating the earlier problem of producing too much superficial outsider knowledge. Instead, outsiders were to be encouraged to spend as much time as possible in the field, and this element was dropped in favour of other formulations that emphasised values such as “participatory learning and action”.

### *Conclusion: the (un)helpfulness of the past?*

Anthropologists engaging with development have occasionally wondered whether they have focused too much on the past and not enough on understanding the future. For example, Arjun Appadurai (2004) has suggested that a key problem for the study of culture within development studies is the tendency to focus on “pastness” in the

form of tradition, custom and heritage while “development is always seen in terms of the future – plans, hopes, goals, targets” (p.60). He goes on to argue that we should pay more attention to understanding how people think about and frame the future – which he calls, building on Amartya Sen’s work, “the capacity to aspire”. What Borap et al (2006) call ‘future-oriented abstractions’ are important objects of study because they are *generative*, helping to guide practice through the structuring of roles, attracting resources and legitimizing structures.

Looking back is not just something that some anthropologists may have over-emphasised within preoccupations with tradition, but there are also forms of nostalgia linked to the anxieties that exist around the modern NGO. In Bangladesh, for example, the popular view of the NGO is one in which the “pure” ideas of altruism and social solidarity has become tainted by self-interest and cold professionalism. In what can be seen as an origin myth, the story of informal beginnings, of associations or “clubs” which existed in pristine village settings without outside support and went about the business of helping underprivileged community members, and is seen as an unqualified good. The associational past of the development NGO is understood as one that ran on pure voluntarism. These informal beginnings become transformed over time into a more professionalised NGO organization that becomes more about paid careers of staff and external donor funding requirements than about the pure motivations of its original founders or members.

Henry Delcore’s (2003) ethnography of NGOs in North East Thailand is suggestive of how such organizations help to shape the wider production of understandings of “the past”. He identifies a set of “memory practices” that are carried out by NGO activists and their local allies and shows how these feed into ongoing wider debates around Thai identity and modernity. Here there are “contending representations of the rural past” in which NGO workers invoke a version of the rural past in which subsistence village communities are threatened by the influence of globalization, and traditional rural elites see their power and influence eroded by state-led development interventions. However, ordinary villagers are revealed to be distrustful of this positive representation of the past. They know that it carries an idealized version of tradition that conceals histories of privilege and vested interest and instead pursue a vision of future prosperity:

... most farmers in Nan shared neither the concerns of a declining rural leadership nor the “identity crisis” of the NGO workers. Rather, their traditional position as subsistence producers, combined with local conceptions of “progress” and media images of urban prosperity, led them toward a desire for the fruits of development. Their memories emphasized the hardships of the past in clear contrast to their hopes for the future.

Policy worlds may seek the suppression of the past, but in Delcore’s account, NGOs are working to produce and reconstruct it. Yet in doing so, an NGO that seeks to reinvent the past does so in ways that risk obscuring the future by creating even more of a disjuncture among and between local aspirations and those of the developers. It is tempting to contrast one kind of “pastness”, in which a pristine ideal is contrasted with a difficult present - and which can be used justify an outsider NGO intervention - with another kind, in which history is downplayed, forgotten or obscured in favour of the present, making it difficult to learn from success or failure in the past. As the

contributors to this special issue have demonstrated, an anthropological engagement with multiple NGO temporalities can help us move forward both research on NGOs and development, and wider anthropological work on an important set of themes.



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