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## **Aid Work as Moral Labour**

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## **Aid Work as Moral Labour**

### Abstract

This paper argues that some of the engagements and practices of international aid workers can be productively understood as forms of moral labour. Taking Hardt's concept of 'immaterial labour' (1999) as a point of reference, the paper examines the moral practices that aid workers engage in the course of their work and personal lives. Much of the relevant literature focuses on the humanitarian imperative - that is, the implied moral responsibility of better-off nations and individuals to assist others in need. Less extensively, some development literature has adopted the understanding of aid and development assistance in moral frameworks of the gift, or 'doing good'. What happens, though, in terms of experienced and practiced moralities in the concrete situations and scenarios generated by such helping imperatives? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among aid workers in Cambodia, the paper examines some of the perhaps inevitable moral entanglements which these workers find themselves in, and have to negotiate. The analytical benefits of framing these efforts as 'moral labour' include a broadened understanding of how morality matters in aid beyond the helping imperative, as well as raising the question whether aid workers effectively participate in a division of moral labour, vis-a-vis, for example, fellow citizens in their home countries.

Morality inhabits the world of aid and development in many guises - whether considered as an overarching driver, such as in the form of humanitarian reason (Fassin 2011), or deplored for its apparent lack in what some regard as an overly bureaucratized aid sector, shaped by managerial preoccupations rather than moral imperatives or sentiments (Cooke and Dar 2008). Given the wealth of literature on development, explicit investigations of the role of morality within the aid sector have been comparatively muted. Nevertheless,

some contributions have highlighted the efficacy of morality, such as in charity and philanthropy (Bornstein 2012), or more recently the significance of self-sacrifice in the context of a professional aid workforce (Fast 2014:124). A main purpose of this paper therefore is to situate ‘morality’ in the experiential context of those whose professional livelihoods are concerned with alleviating poverty and reducing global inequality through being an international aid worker.

So far, debates on the morality of aid professionals have often suggested a binary: between aid workers’ moral sentiments and their performance of professional selves. An exemplar is Tony Vaux’s portrayal of aid workers as archetypal ‘selfish altruists’ (Vaux 2001), who are struggling to reconcile these contrasting elements of their personal and professional selves. This tension also underlies rather more cynical characterisations, such as Roderick Stirrat’s array of stereotypes, casting aid workers as missionaries, mercenaries, or misfits (2008). However, it has become clear that these binaries are unhelpful or indeed false (de Jong 2011). As has been argued elsewhere, the lives of many of these ‘passionate professionals’ (Roth 2015), are not adequately summarised by being either passionate or professional, but are rather constituted by an amalgamation of both. Similarly, in her work on Finnish Red Cross workers, Liisa Malkki distinguishes between a humanitarian and a professional sensibility, which she describes as ‘mobile affective states’, which, while incommensurable, are also ‘dialectically related and interdependent’ (Malkki 2012:219).

Building on these approaches, I propose that aid work contains a dimension which could be called ‘moral labour’. This labour is related to people’s desire to support others - not as in contrast or even in tension with professional activities, but rather as an integral part of them. In the following, I use this concept of ‘moral labour’ to provide an innovative perspective on an increasingly recognized, but not systematically discussed features of the experiences of international aid professionals employed by organisations. The arguments

presented here are based on material gathered during several periods of fieldwork undertaken in the aid sector in Cambodia from 2009 onwards, in the context of two research projects broadly concerned with aid workers as mobile professionals<sup>1</sup>.

### **Moral labour as immaterial labour**

The concept of ‘moral labour’ that I propose draws on what Hardt refers to as ‘immaterial labour’ (Hardt 1999; see also Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004)<sup>i</sup>. Originally conceived in the context of, and in contradistinction to industrial labour, Hardt argues that ‘immaterial labor in its various guises (...) tends toward being spread throughout the entire workforce and throughout all labouring tasks as a component, larger or smaller, of all labouring processes’ (1999:97). The key difference between immaterial and industrial labor, Hardt suggests, lies in the products of immaterial labour being intangible. These products may include, for example, such things as ‘a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion- even a sense of connectedness or community’ (1999:96).

For the present purpose, I am less concerned with how appropriate the distinction between material and immaterial labour and their products may be. It is insofar as immaterial labour is defined as producing ‘an immaterial good, such as a service, knowledge, or communication’ (Hardt 1999:94), that it may be usefully relayed to the domain of aid work. Specifically, I derive from it a term for a process which could be called ‘moral labour’. It is worth noting here that the concept of immaterial labour has been further differentiated to describe its more specific forms as these are enacted in specific work sectors. These include, most notably, Hochschild’s notion of emotional labour (1983), ‘mental labour’ (Ross 2000) as well as Gregg’s formulation of ‘intimate labour’ (2011). Their descriptions of different dimensions of immaterial labour all make visible activities which workers are implicitly or

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explicitly expected to perform as an aspect of their routine tasks, but which are typically not adequately recognised or remunerated. Each of these focuses on different aspects of the concept. Hochschild's analysis is pertinent to gendered forms of immaterial labour in service industries; 'mental labour' highlights the efforts of artists and musicians, while Gregg observes how paid work is seeping into the intimate spaces of contemporary knowledge workers.

While important precedents to my use of the term here, none of these forms of immaterial labour adequately captures the situation of aid workers and the labour they perform. My use of the term 'moral labour' aims to identify a particular manifestation of immaterial labour which constitutes a core dimension of aid workers' experiences and practices. I suggest that this notion is required to make visible a kind of act or activity which is evident in aid workers everyday lives, but which has not been made explicit in existing debates. Substantial research on aid workers foregrounds their motivations, commitment, and desires, often in the paradigm of a helping imperative, paying attention to the role of gender (Heron 2007), and with an awareness of its paternalistic, racist, and postcolonial implications (e.g. Goudge 2003; Baaz 2005; Charlés 2007; Cook 2007). At the same time, an originally medically-orientated literature has highlighted the stresses as well as coping strategies that result from the inevitable frictions between aid workers' aspirations and their frustrations, witnessing of human suffering and traumatic events (Comoretto 2011, Fast 2014, Roth 2015). What is missing here, I suggest, is a recognition of the labour that is performed as a consequence of aid workers' ideals, but which does not constitute a coping strategy. In the space between commitment and coping strategies, we fail to recognize that their everyday professional and personal lives require of them the performance of what I propose to identify as moral labour. This is specifically moral rather than emotional, intimate, or mental, as it

engages with questions of what is the right course of action when faced with morally complex situations.

The kind of moral labour that is invoked here is immaterial in the sense that it does not produce tangible objects; furthermore, I suggest that even resulting intangible products in Hardt's sense, such as services or knowledge, are not at stake here. Rather, what matters as the outcome of moral labour is not a tangible or intangible product, but the process of performing this labour. It is helpful to draw on Michael Lambek here, who considers acts 'as activities whose primary outcomes are not products (objects) but consequences' (2013:144). Drawing a parallel with Austin's (1965) theory of performative speech acts, Lambek suggests that an act characteristically 'accomplishes its goal directly in the enactment' (2013:148). In this sense, labour – and in the present case, I suggest, moral labour – is best understood as an activity, where the outcome is not an object, but the outcome is already achieved in its performance. There may well be products resulting from that labour, and it may not always be possible to distinguish between the two. The explanatory power of 'moral labour', however, lies in capturing activities which arise spontaneously and perhaps inevitably, from discrepancies between aspirations and ideals, and achieved- or achievable-realities.

Moral labour therefore matters not in terms of what it produces, but with regard to whether it is being enacted at all. Lambek argues that performative (speech) acts have value not because they make or produce something, but because of what they are 'doing'.

In the context of forms of immaterial labour, it is worth reflecting on the potentially gendered dimensions of moral labour. Hochschild (1983) suggests that although emotional labour may be required by both female and male service workers, such expectations are particularly pronounced for women. Such a confluence is also noted by Heron (2007) in relation to aid work: as in other human service professions, women workers tend to be

overrepresented, including in overseas settings, and in many ways the ‘helping imperative’ is being regarded as a characteristically feminine desire. Building on these accounts, I suggest that while many instances of moral labour often become visible or are being reported among female aid workers, the expectation and performance of moral labour is not exclusive to them. The concept of moral labour that I am proposing here emerges from an analysis of practices among individuals of both genders.

In the following, I draw on ethnographic material gathered among international aid workers in order to illustrate what such moral labour can consist of, and to demonstrate what it might explain with regard to contemporary aid work. Particular instances where such labour is performed include working commitments to the impossible, moments of distress, and moral entanglements at the professional margins. The material presented here was gathered over the course of several periods of ethnographic fieldwork between 2009 and 2014 among international aid workers based in Cambodia’s capital, Phnom Penh, and in several provinces. Research consisted of participant observation of their project work, field trips and meetings; it includes informal conversations with a range of individuals, as well as over 40 semi-structured interviews. Participants represented a monitored balance with regard to employers, nationality, gender, age, and professional experience. While some of the instances described are specific to the Cambodian context, these might resonate in other contexts where international aid workers are based.

### **Committed to Impossible Missions**

It is a characteristic of international aid work that it is formally committed to achieve the impossible. Global development targets, such as the Millennium Development Goals, are by definition ambitious, and unlikely to be realised in the timeframe given (UN Report,



2013). There is satisfaction among involved parties if significant strides towards those goals have been made, though in many cases, they are still a long way off reaching their target. Moreover, improvements may not necessarily have been achieved through specific ‘development’ efforts, but are due to broader political or economic factors. For international aid workers, this environment means that the results of their efforts are destined to remain incomplete and forever falling short of public or personal expectations and ambitions. One might of course argue that their everyday work tasks and targets are quite clearly defined and can reasonably be completed in the allocated timeframe. This is often countered, however, by development discourses which consistently over-emphasise what has been and can be achieved. This becomes manifest for example in reports to donors, or in bids for funding. Mosse (2005) describes how ‘success’ is manufactured in and through such formal representations, amidst what has been denounced as a general climate of ‘unrealistic expectations’ (Eggen and Roland 2014; see also Henson et al 2010 on public perceptions of government aid). In this sense, and based on conversations with aid workers, it is reasonable to assume that the big-picture-view of their mission looms large for many aid workers, more or less in the foreground or background, even if it does not determine their achievements on a daily basis.

This matters because, I argue, being in a default position of falling short of expectations requires the performance of moral labour. This is not simply a coping strategy. It refers specifically to the effort required by having to deliver aid on a daily basis, in the knowledge that it will be impossible to make poverty history, halve maternal mortality rates, eradicate tuberculosis, or whatever the goals might be. Simply inhabiting the situation and accommodating this knowledge while expending one’s effort on making strides towards them, and the awareness of at least partial futility of their professional endeavours can be

understood as a form of immaterial labour. This is not incidental, but systemic: performing this labour constitutes an implicit part of an aid worker's contract with their organisation, aid donors, and the general public. The following cases provide some illustrations.

In a Cambodian provincial town, a small team of national and international NGO workers supported local residents who had been, or were at risk of being evicted from their homes, in so-called 'informal settlements'. One evening, Gemma, one of them, joined some colleagues for dinner in a local restaurant. She and Christie, an intern, arrived late, dusty and sweaty, parking their motorbike in the front yard, and cast a quick, exhausted glance at the laminated menu before collapsing on the rickety plastic chairs. '*We've been zooming around all day*', Gemma explained, visiting sites that were under threat of eviction and assisting the residents with practical and legal issues, as part of their organisation's broader programme of support and advocacy for so-called 'informal settlement' populations. While Gemma and her colleagues were very committed to their work, the issue of forced evictions and the treatment of residents were a politically contentious and sensitive topic. As Gemma recounted, with some regularity the team had to witness how local people whose relocation they had tried to avert were forced to leave their settlements and look on as their houses were destroyed. In many cases, this was done in order to make way for commercial developments, driven by powerful and well-connected property tycoons. Their efforts were substantial and sustained - in Gemma's case, over the course of her two-year contract, and over ten years in the case of her boss. They were part of a dedicated and close-knit team. Still, there remained a stark discrepancy between what they were able to achieve to improve the residents' living conditions on the one hand, and powerful commercial and political interests on the other, the latter often riding roughshod over the human rights and wellbeing of those residents. The moral labour performed in this kind of scenario, I suggest, consists of accommodating this

discrepancy on a continued basis. While Gemma might have displayed an activists' zeal, and her energies were directed at fighting forced relocations, she was also aware from experience that commercial forces would often win out: *'it is depressing when you think about it... but that is not a reason not to do it'*. Her case is characteristic of others insofar as she acted in her capacity as a paid NGO staff - and the moral labour required of her in this situation constituted part of her job.

A similar situation was evident in the case of Lorraine, who had lived in Cambodia since the 1990s. Her main task was to help improve the quality of Cambodia's higher education sector. Her sustained efforts through engaging with university staff, participating in countless donor and government meetings, and setting up initiatives often seemed to be contending with the apparent indifference and lack of effort by government officials and policymakers. As Lorraine put it, *'the government is trying very hard to keep the quality lowered... because they don't want educated people!'* When I asked her if she ever felt a sense of futility, she responded emphatically, *'Oh God, every day... every day!'* As a response to this situation, Lorraine concluded that, *'we laugh a lot ... we are all in the same boat'*, while also reminding herself that although it might not be tangible on a daily basis, it was worth recognizing that some progress that had been made: *'they've come a huge way since 1980 ... HUGE in thirty years'*.

I suggest that this constellation - being mandated or feeling committed to do something, while unable to achieve it to the full extent desirable due to adverse political circumstances - demanded of them the performance of moral labour. In Gemma's case, this refers to the dissociation between the team's desire to support the squatter families, and the disadvantaged and often deteriorating situation of the latter. While accommodating the knowledge that even though they were doing all that was in their power, the team had to face the impossibility of reaching the desired outcomes. This situation is arguably not unique to

aid workers, but may be characteristic of activists as well. What, if any, significance is attached to the fact that these aid workers are paid employees, rather than unpaid campaigners or volunteers? Through the following examples, I probe in what ways their moral labour may not be incidental to, but intrinsically related to their status as a professionals and employees. In a broader context, this raises the question to what extent moral labour may be an integral part of the symbolic system of overseas aid.

### **Moral distress as moral labour?**

A related, but different manifestation of moral labour from the one discussed above occurs, I suggest, in constellations where aid employees are prevented from doing what they think is right by the policies or practices of their own organisation. Sian's story provides an example. Sian held a senior position in a large international NGO. Although that NGO's main mandate was long-term development work, it also on occasion received funds to address emergency situations in the areas where they were normally operating, in order to deliver short-term humanitarian assistance there. Sian recalled a recent situation in which a cyclone had wreaked havoc among some coastal communities in Myanmar. In this particular area, her organisation had been overseeing a number of rural livelihood projects, serving people living in severe poverty. In the aftermath of the natural disaster however, her organisation received funds specifically designated for cyclone victims in that area. When Sian visited there, she realised that some of the people in that area, which were to benefit from these emergency funds, were doing relatively well, compared to the long-term poor communities in the vicinity, who her organisation was normally providing assistance to, but who had been unaffected by the cyclone.

As she explained,

*'It was mad, it would have been much better to direct the emergency funds to the really poor people, not just to those in the cyclone area. They were not doing so badly, and there were lots of other organisations to help. I wished I could have directed the money to the others... they needed it more. But because of the way the budgets were organised, I wasn't allowed to'.*

Given that Sian had been with international organisations in Africa and Asia for more than two decades, she had experienced similar situations before. Nevertheless, what appeared to her as the 'madness' of the situation clearly troubled her: the sense that she was not able to follow what she considered the right course of action- that is, channeling funds to the most destitute communities, rather than towards comparatively better-off areas to remedy a short-term problem which was already being provided for by other organisations.

The situation Sian found herself in is not uncommon. Different from Gemma and her colleagues fighting evictions, her frustration was caused by the rules governing the allocation and use of funding, imposed by donors and observed by her own organisation. During my encounters with aid workers, many offered similar versions of such quandary. They were exasperated about funding decisions, when their organisation had, often seemingly arbitrarily, terminated funding for projects which were going well, and thus depriving communities to which the aid workers themselves felt accountable. Kieran, for example, was responsible for setting up a farming cooperative in a provincial area, and had made good progress getting farmers on board. As organisational priorities shifted, however, his project was abruptly discontinued. This left him to consider whether he should complain to senior management, resign in protest, or try to raise funding himself to be able to complete his work. As it stood, he was left reeling and ranting to friends and colleagues who lent a sympathetic ear, and had stories of their own to add.

Rita, another case in question, was passionate about her work campaigning for landmine removal. Rather than engaging with local partners in Cambodia, which she considered the most urgent and effective way of benefitting local people, her organisation increasingly required her to travel abroad, in order to coordinate their established best practice in the other countries where they were operating. In all of these cases, aid workers were required to implement decisions they disagreed with because they were not in the best interest of the target groups, but found themselves beholden to changing donor priorities and organisational policy preferences. This particular experience is not unique to aid workers. It has been identified among nurses and care workers as ‘moral distress’, defined as the result of knowing the right course of action, but not being able to pursue it due to institutional constraints (e.g. Gallagher 2010; see Hunt 2008 with regard to humanitarian personnel). It is worth considering that medical personnel is also likely to suffer from a more fundamental distress which does not arise from institutional limits, but from the sometimes ‘impossible’ nature of their tasks, such as saving lives in emergency situations (e.g. Regehr, Goldberg, and Hughes 2002). In healthcare and social work sectors, there has been a push to recognize this, and support in the form of mentoring or resilience training may be provided (e.g. Glasberg, Eriksson and Norberg 2007).

In contrast, such recognition and support is still relatively rare in the international aid sector. Insofar as it exists, it used to be mostly aimed at emergency relief workers who witness extreme human suffering, such as in war zones or natural disasters (Comoretto et al 2011). It is rather absent in relation to moral distress which may have been caused by the impossibility to achieve development goals; the apparently arbitrary nature of donor funding priorities, or the institutional limits of their own organisation. While one might denounce this state of affairs, this might also enable a different reading. This apparent lack of support could

be part of a tacit expectation that experiencing such distress is an implicit, unwritten part of the aid workers' contract – not just with their employer, but perhaps also symbolically with the general public in their home countries.

### **Entanglements on the professional margins**

In the cases discussed above, the demand for moral labour from aid workers arises from being unable to achieve their aims, either due to the sheer scale of the tasks, or to wider political or organisational constraints. A different facet of moral labour emerges as aid workers are called on to support others in situations which are only marginally related to their contractual work. Griet, for example, a Dutch woman in her thirties, who was trained as an engineer, recounted how she was working for a development organisation for several years near a heritage site, where her main task was to train a team of Cambodian workers. Another team, with whom they were collaborating, was managed by a Japanese development agency. Once, one of their Cambodian trainees had sustained a foot injury at home. Left untreated, and not having the financial resources to get medical help, his condition worsened. After waiting and observing this for more than a week, Griet decided to accompany him to a doctor, where she paid for his treatment. Having been alerted to this, the worker's Japanese line manager became angry and accused Griet of being disruptive, because he held the view that since the injury had been sustained at home, the employer was not responsible for addressing it. Griet argued that the injury had been relatively simple to remedy, but left untreated the worker would have been at risk of losing his foot. While Griet reasoned with her Japanese counterpart, he demanded that she refrain from such activities in the future, the reason being that *'if we had paid for the treatment, what if his family comes, they will all want something'*. The moral labour performed by Griet consisted of deciding whether and how to get involved, and what action to take. This example demonstrates the kinds of moral

entanglement that aid workers may get involved in, even if they only marginally relate to their professional positions or capacities.

In a related situation, Ruth, a trained nurse in her early sixties, had taken me around her workplace, a provincial hospital. She had worked in international aid since leaving Europe in her thirties and was now nearing retirement. On my visit, as she was about to go on annual leave, she listed things to complete before going. One was looking after her housekeepers' sister, Srey Mom, who had been injured in a road accident. Riding her bike while transporting a sack of rice, a young man had driven into her with his motorbike, and she sustained serious injuries, including a punctured lung. Srey Mom's sister had asked Ruth to check on her after she had been admitted to hospital. Ruth noticed shortcomings in her treatment, and raised the alarm as she saw her condition deteriorating. On Ruth's insistence, Srey Mom received better care, and improved. However, after Ruth had followed up with the medical staff, she later learnt that they had threatened Srey Mom and her sister, telling them that if they were to return to the ward, they would '*give them the wrong medicine*'. This was in retaliation, Ruth reasoned, for her intervention, which had compromised the staff's position. Nevertheless, Ruth wrote a letter to the director complaining of malpractice, and received an assuaging response. Even though Srey Mom was eventually able to leave hospital, she continued to be in pain, as well as suffering from the psychological aftermath of the accident. At the end of my visit, Ruth ran out of time for completing a further check up on her. She was aware that her six-week absence might leave Srey Mom in a vulnerable position should she experience further difficulties, so Ruth left with the intention of picking this up on her return.

These scenarios occupy a grey area, insofar as the situations where Griet and Ruth intervened were marginally related to their professional roles - for Griet, this entailed responsibility she felt as a colleague, while not being a line manager; in Ruth's case, she was



drawn in through her medical competence as well as her professional affiliation with the hospital in question. One might therefore argue that being an aid worker means being placed in positions where one is called upon to perform moral labour- in this case, having to decide whether and in what ways to assist a vulnerable person, without there being a formal, work-related responsibility. This also entails dealing with possible consequences, such as alienating colleagues or superiors, as well as considering the limits of their involvement.

Other acts of moral entanglement on the margins of aid workers' lives arise in their relations of support to domestic workers outside formal employment arrangements. It is worth stressing that although in the following examples, financial support is at stake, I suggest that the performance of moral labour becomes manifest in the reasoning and decision-making processes around the provision of such support, not in the financial arrangements or money transfers themselves.

Kirsty, for example, was working for a Dutch development agency, and considered herself left-leaning and politically engaged. Kirsty recounted how she had recently been approached for financial help by her housekeeper, Dara, who was going through a difficult divorce and needed funds to support her family. Kirsty was reluctant to simply give her the requested sum, since we was concerned that further demands might follow. Dara then suggested that this could be a loan that she would pay back, but knowing her precarious financial situation, Kirsty did not want to add pressure through becoming her creditor. They eventually settled on an arrangement where Dara would receive the requested sum upfront, but would work additional hours for Kirsty over the next few months in order to repay it. In this sense, their interaction was slightly unusual, insofar as their arrangement had been negotiated, rather than being the result of a unilateral decision made by Kirsty alone.

Pieter, a Belgian who had been working for a UN agency for several years, commented that engaging in this kind of support did not amount to being ‘morally good’. Rather, he held that supporting domestic workers above and beyond contractual responsibilities was ‘*the white man’s job*’. He recounted his first posting in East Africa, where he and his wife, a development consultant, decided to employ staff, because, as he explained,

*‘that’s part of your contract- you’re the white man, you’ve got money, it’s your job to hire local people. When we first went to live in Malawi, we knew that we had to pay all kinds of things for our housekeeper and their family. That’s not being morally good, it’s just what’s expected of you as a white person. You come into that house, into the job, well that’s part of your contract. You have to draw lines, but it’s not about being generous; it’s just part of the job’.*

Even though this provided him with a basic guideline, this still left a raft of smaller-scale moral decisions to be made in the course of daily life. These included how to respond to demands for financial support from neighbours, or how far to extend help to employees. For example, Pieter remarked, their housekeeper had to cycle home in the dark on dirt roads after finishing work at their house. The area where she lived was often flooded in the wet season, so to make her journey easier, on particularly rainy evenings Pieter or his wife made a point of driving her home.

If one concurs with Pieter’s view that such assistance is simply ‘part of the job’, it would follow that this job is not unique to aid workers, but is shared by foreigners in developing countries more generally, irrespective of whether they are based in the business, education or other sectors. One might ask whether the fact that the main rationale for aid worker’s presence in the country is one of assistance, entails a particular responsibility towards local populations, putting an onus on them to perform moral labour above and

beyond what is expected from wealthy foreigners, or, for that matter, wealthy Cambodians. Certainly, public indignation seems to be much more pronounced in instances where aid workers appear to fail to perform this, compared to other foreigners whose presence abroad is not primarily framed in a supportive capacity.

Further, instances are significant where moral labour is performed - in the sense of considering possibilities for intervention – but where the ensuing course of action does not include any provision of support. Rob and Carly for example, both working for aid agencies, were about to relocate to a new posting after a period of nearly ten years in Cambodia. During most of that time, Srey Oun had been working for them as a cook. As their date of departure was approaching, she had resigned and left to set up her own beauty salon in the countryside near where her family lived, which had been her long-held dream. I asked whether Rob and Carly had offered her any financial assistance to help her realise this dream, either during her employment, or as a bonus at the end. *‘No, we didn’t’*, remarked Rob drily, *‘she did it all by herself, saving bits from her salary’*. *‘We could have done’*, admitted Carly, but as Rob added with a half-embarrassed grin, *‘she was a very good cook’*.

Pieter and his wife emphasised that they didn’t consider themselves ‘good people’, and thus pre-empted expectations of acceding to particular moral expectations. In contrast, Rob seemed to imply that they had considered other options- such as financially enabling Srey Oun to leave their employment sooner to set up her own business- but that their own comfort, in the sense of enjoying excellent home-cooked food, and avoiding the hassle of finding a replacement- had taken precedence. In this sense, one might say that Rob and Carly performed moral labour through recognising the option to intervene, even though they chose not to realise them. This illustrates how understandings and performative acts of moral responsibility may differ significantly among aid workers. The question also re-emerges to what extent, or in what ways these entanglements are related to their position as aid workers.

One could argue that any other foreign employer, manager or medical professional will find themselves confronted with similar challenges and demands. The issue might therefore not be a responsibility which arises from those particular situations, but rather from their own or others' perception that their status as aid workers demands of them a particular sense of care and duty in other areas of their life, irrespective of how closely these are related to their professional activities. Understandings and ascriptions of such duty doubtlessly vary; but as the previous examples indicate, it is worth exploring if being in Cambodia in the capacity of an aid worker makes a difference to them, and the people whom they could potentially assist.

### **Collective but not participatory**

Finally, I suggest that the concept of moral labour offers an understanding of an additional feature of aid work, namely the frequent individual and collective moral reasoning which many aid workers engage in. Such reasoning may concern the deliberation of one's actions, including perhaps self-criticism or justification for one's actions, and an amount of general reflection which characterises private and public conversations among aid workers. After-work conversations among some of my informants for example revolved around their efficacy. Was, for example, the trickle-down effect from an emerging Cambodian middle class more impactful than the efforts of their own organisation over the years? Or, in the aftermath of a national election that for the first time signaled a shift towards the opposition party, were there any indications that their work had contributed to this emerging democratic confidence? Pieter asked his colleagues: *'we were supposed to change things here. But did we have anything to do with this? Have the Cambodians not done that all by themselves-?'* Dealing with such fundamental issues, alongside everyday quandaries such as how to deal with corruption or bribery, arguably constitutes another form of moral labour. Further, understanding this collective reasoning as moral labour also captures ongoing debates on aid

workers blogs (Denskus and Papan 2013). These are fora where contributions and comments reflect on, for example, what the author has done, should have done, or could have done differently. While some are more leaning towards this kind of soul-searching or public self-criticism than others, a shared concern with the ‘morality’ of their activities runs through many of them.

However, the fact that this kind of moral labour often appears to be performed collectively- among colleagues, within professional social networks, or friends - may disguise the fact that it can engender its own exclusions. For instance, such discussions are often conducted without the voice of the people whose lives are potentially most impacted by the result of those deliberations. It was relatively unusual, in the case described above, that Kirsty engaged in negotiation with the housekeeper about how to respond to her request for a loan. More often than not, it seemed the deliberations were held among exclusively those who had made, or were in the process of making decisions affecting others. In this sense, one could say that while these processes were often collective, they were not normally participatory, in the sense of intentionally involving those directly affected.

This may also hold for the more public manifestations of moral labour, such as reflective papers or published memoirs. In a prominent example, Duncan Green of Oxfam raised the question on his blog, *From Poverty to Power*, as to whether Oxfam should make use of a defunct swimming pool which was part of an existing guesthouse that the organisation had recently acquired in Nairobi for their travelling employees (<http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/wrapping-up-the-great-nairobi-guesthouse-pool-debate/>). While the online invited comment function was open to anyone, one might ask whether this question should have been explicitly directed at the communities in which the organisation was working- would they have thought it was a good idea? Instead, it seemed that the quandary was explained to a rather different audience - individual donors and taxpayers from the

Global North, employees, and members of the wider aid sector. Similarly, while memoirs by aid workers can revolve around questions of ‘what is the right thing to do’, such musings are often conducted without taking the voice of the recipients of aid into account. The right to decide what is ‘right’, or mere critical self-reflection, in this instance may remain the prerogative of those making the decisions. The performance of moral labour, it seems, is therefore not free from the mechanisms of exclusion of the affected that the aid sector is so often being accused of.

## **Conclusion**

The main purpose of this paper was to investigate in what ways aspects of aid work could be understood as a form of ‘moral labour’, and what insights might be gained by such a perspective. I have presented a range of scenarios, which, I suggest, encapsulate different manifestations of the performance of moral labour. These include the situation that those doing aid work, by its nature, are engaged in impossible missions insofar as many of the stated goals of international aid are unlikely to be realised in the time available. Moral labour, in this case, captures the recognition and acceptance, or accommodation of this knowledge. A related, but different challenge arises from the fact that aid workers sometimes feel that they are prevented from doing what they think is right by the policies or practices stipulated by their own organisation- a phenomenon which has been labelled ‘moral distress’ among care workers, but which is also part of the cluster of moral demands made of aid workers. Going beyond the narrowly defined professional realm, I suggest that aid workers may feel required to intervene in a capacity that is only marginally related to their professional role, and that the ensuing deliberations and negotiations -or the refusal to get involved- could also be understood as a form of moral labour. More broadly, the moral labour which aid workers may

be required to perform aligns with the notion of overseas aid as being, at least partially, a symbolic endeavour.

Given the diverse range of instances of moral labour discussed here, one might ask how moral labour is best described, and what the analytical value of this concept may be. One key imperative for conceptualising these instances as more than individual ‘moral reasoning’ – namely, as a form of immaterial labour - is that the term ‘labour’ usefully highlights mental efforts that may be required as an unwritten part of aid workers’ contracts with their employers. An informal expectation of engaging in moral labour may be part of what it means to be an aid worker. This would explain, for example, why humanitarian staff care and support is relatively underdeveloped, compared with other, domestic-based helping professions. At the same time, the concept of moral labour and its division between staff and employing institutions renders these implicit relationships and hidden responsibilities visible. Finally, the case of aid workers discussed here could contribute to the concept of immaterial labour. Rather than perpetuating a focus on products, even immaterial ones, as a result of immaterial labour, aid work demonstrates that its value may lie in the very process of its enactment. This value may be considerable: Lambek proposes that the effects of performative virtuous acts can be wide-ranging, inspiring compassion as well as cynicism, including the affirmation of the value of life itself (2013:149). In the context of aid as an enduring concern of both state and individual actors, recognising the performance of moral labour as a significant dimension of aid work may indicate that something exists within, and to some extent fills the persistent gap between its stated aims and its evident achievements.

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<sup>i</sup> For a more detailed discussion on Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) as well as critiques see Camfield (2007) and Yanagisako (2012).