

Development and the search for connection

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Development and the Search for Connection

Abstract

The stated purpose of development is often characterised by the motivation to ‘help’, that is, to intervene in the lives of others in supportive ways. This paper argues that this perspective has obscured how development activities are also animated by its twin desire to ‘connect’. While this holds significance for development more broadly, it becomes particularly evident in a mode of assistance that has gained prominence more recently. These are privately funded, small-scale projects led by individual founders, here described as ‘citizen aid’. Based on ethnographic research among citizen aid initiatives in Cambodia, the paper argues that the relevance of ‘connecting’ has been insufficiently recognised so far. It explores different aspects of what participants mean by ‘making a connection’, including face-to-face contact, direct experience of aid activities, and their tangible efficacy. It also finds that establishing interpersonal relationships across national, ethnic and cultural differences, while potentially challenging, is a key motivation for those involved. Finally, the paper argues that acknowledging the desire to connect questions notions of the ‘distant stranger’ as the archetypal humanitarian object, highlighting the wish for familiarity and closeness as potentially just as important for motivating and directing assistance to others.

Key words: Development, Cambodia, Citizen Aid, Connection

Development and the Search for Connection

The stated purpose of development is often characterised as the motivation to ‘help’, that is, to intervene in the lives of others in ways that make a positive difference to them. This paper argues that this perspective has paid insufficient attention to the extent and the way in which development activities are also animated by its twin desire to ‘connect’. In this case, it means the wish to establish personal relations with those who are the objects of intervention. While this holds relevance for development as a whole, it becomes particularly evident in a mode of assistance that has grown and gained prominence more recently. These are privately funded, small-scale projects led by individual founders, here described as ‘citizen aid’. Based on ethnographic research among such initiatives in Cambodia, the paper outlines how the relevance of ‘connecting’ forms a backbone of these activities. It highlights some of the features of the relations that are envisaged and enacted; and finally, sketches the implications that this search for connection might have for development practice more generally.

The term ‘connections’ is, of course, notoriously slippery. As an emic term, it is an apposite starting point for analysis. It warrants systematic scrutiny insofar as it is frequently invoked by research participants themselves. This does not necessarily render it suitable as an analytical lens, at least not without some caveats. While both Cambodians and foreigners involved in citizen aid spoke of the importance of ‘connections’ for what they were doing, the term is not neutral, but held multiple meanings for them. This paper sets out to identify some of these, being mindful of the imbalances of power that it can mask. As Pedwell has warned, ‘the risk of a focus on intimacy, proximity and ‘face-to-face’ encounters in (...) international development praxis is that attention is directed towards individuals as if they could be extracted from structural relations’ and as such risks ‘obscuring analysis of the

transnational circuits of power in which ‘subjects who feel’ are differentially embedded and produced’ⁱ. The foreigners who come to Cambodia with the purpose of intervention, from the Global North and neighbouring countries, are in many ways privileged- not least in the way that their transnational mobility affords them the opportunity to actively pursue such ‘connections’ in countries other than their own. This does not mean, however, that the balance of power is entirely skewed in their favour. Citizen aid as discussed here is carried out by both foreign and Cambodian ‘do-ers’; though what kind of connections they seek in this context, and how they matter for them, differs. The paper thus aims to also be attentive to how differently positioned practitioners are able to fulfil their desire for ‘connection’.

In a broader view, the notion of ‘connections’ refers to establishing personal relations. The debate to which this paper contributes examines the ways in which such social relations, or relationships, matter for aid and development. Even though one might assume that development, a profoundly humane project at its core, is necessarily underpinned by relations between people, their theoretical visibility is uneven. As a productive approach, I propose here to understand development as ‘practices of responsibility and care’ⁱⁱ. As Raghuram et al argue, adopting a postcolonial lens on these practices draws attention to them as ‘forms of existing and evolving relationalities’, and most importantly, leading us ‘to interrogate the deployments of these terms in the context of past and present inequalities’.ⁱⁱⁱ Rather than being wary of focusing on relations between individuals as losing sight of structural power imbalances, it is possible, following Barford, that ‘a more public and emotionally engaged appreciation of connectivity and relationality could diminish the conceptual, and ultimately socio-economic, distances between people’.^{iv} Through interrogating the ethnographic material in this manner, the paper will probe some of these possibilities.

From this broader view follows an imperative to understand the role of social relations in aid. One way in which this has been acknowledged is how relationships matter for aid implementation^v. This perspective draws attention to the instrumental value that relationships have for aid delivery and effectiveness. With a focus on institutions, Eyben argues that, ‘the quality of relations within and between organizations in the web of aid is crucial for organizational performance’^{vi}. This concerns relations between practitioners within the ‘aid bureaucracy’^{vii} in both formal and informal capacities^{viii}. Further contributions include how friendships between differently situated aid workers, such as local and international staff, matter for capacity building^{ix}. Mawdsley et al^x emphasise the importance of face-to-face encounters to improve mutual understanding and trust between Northern and Southern NGO partners. These accounts examine social relations among aid practitioners themselves, and their role in enhancing aid effectiveness.

While such recognition has been necessary and overdue, it leaves out of view the possibility that relationships are essential to development processes, not merely for operational purposes, but as a key motivating factor from the outset. This paper aims to explore how the ‘desire for development’ and the ‘search for connection’ are linked in less formal, and privately funded modes of assistance, and what these insights in turn contribute to how relationships in aid are being theorised. There is broad acknowledgment in the literature that relationships matter for aid. Erica Bornstein, in her account of charity practices in urban India, claims that ‘only (...) through a relational prism, does humanitarian activity make social sense’^{xi}. The acts of charity she is exploring are, at least partly, driven by the ‘impulse of philanthropy’^{xii}. Liisa Malkki provides a differently orientated reading by foregrounding not the ‘desire for development’^{xiii} but the ‘need to help’^{xiv}. This means casting the helpers - in her case, Finnish people working or volunteering for the Red Cross- as those who are in need, searching for

purpose, for companionship, or for ways out of what they consider the mundane realities of their lives in Finland.

The relevance of relations is acknowledged in both Bornstein's and Malkki's works. In Bornstein's account of charity in Delhi, she identifies a 'relational empathy' that is at stake^{xv}. More specifically, this means that in contrast to forms of liberal altruism based on individual autonomy, what matters in the Indian context is the forging of kin-like relations. In a more tangential manner, Malkki emphasises that 'connections' are an important - if not the most important - aspect of helping others. For many of the elderly volunteers for the Finnish Red Cross for example, the making of connections was of vital concern^{xvi}. Such connection could be with a child for whom they had knitted a soft toy, even if this was an imagined connection across a geographical distance.

A more comprehensive proposal of how the desires of helping and connecting are intertwined is provided by Heron's work on Canadian women development workers in sub-Saharan Africa^{xvii}. Her analysis is also grounded in the assumption that development is a relational experience^{xviii}. In fact, she observes a 'disappearance of altruism' from participants' narratives once in situ, and instead a focus on establishing relationships with local people. A key question is thus how the two desires are linked^{xix}. In Heron's reading, central to the desire for development is that it offers 'new dimensions of identity formation for Canadian women development workers'^{xx}. Drawing on Ann Stoler's^{xxi} work on the making of bourgeois identities through the colonial project, Heron argues that the development encounter is instrumental in for constituting white identities. There is, however, 'a constant tension for us in these connections born of our need for African people to be 'different' and our simultaneous desire for the kind of pure meeting across and beyond difference'^{xxii}. The

wish for relations is further complicated, she notes, by the fact that ‘seeing African people as fully equal, that is, ‘just like us’, however, is risky because it erodes the ethical basis for our presence “there”^{xxiii}. Relationships with aid beneficiaries are thus imagined and practiced in particular ways to justify development interventions. All these accounts articulate, more or less explicitly, the importance of relationships in development. The search for connection among some development actors thus warrants a more comprehensive discussion than has occurred so far. Based on research with forms of aid which fundamentally revolve around a person-to-person connection, this paper aims to provide a fuller, more nuanced exploration of what participants mean by ‘connection’, and how it matters for development practices. In order to examine this, the paper draws on the case of small-scale private aid activities, where having a personal connection with the recipients of aid matters greatly for individual project founders, supporters and donors.

Research context

The material presented was gathered during fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2015 and in 2018, in several sites in Cambodia, as part of a wider project on alternative actors in aid^{xxiv}. Specifically, research was carried out among private aid initiatives, referred to as ‘citizen aid’^{xxv} (see also introduction, this volume). ‘Citizen Aid’ is understood here as small-scale activities and projects set up and run by individuals, aimed at assisting others. They are typically funded by private donors, and are often facilitated by the founders’ transnational social networks. Founders includes foreigners and Cambodians, who often work in close collaboration with each other. The small scale of the initiatives is defined here as involving fifteen or fewer staff or volunteers. While some of these projects are registered as NGOs, they typically operate on the margins of the formally established aid sector. Their activities comprise educational after-school programs; food, health or disability support; vocational

training programs, or income generation through handicraft production. The ethnographic material presented here was gathered from engagement with over 30 private aid projects. Research participants were those actively involved in citizen aid, including Cambodian and foreign project founders, local partners, supporters, and to a limited extent, beneficiaries. Participant observation, informal conversations over repeat visits, and semi-structured interviews were carried out with 45 individuals. Their nationalities included Cambodian, Japanese, Singaporean, Malaysian, Australian, North American, and several European countries. The ages covered a wide spectrum, ranging from their mid-twenties to those who were retired, in their late sixties. With regard to gender, participant numbers were about evenly balanced between women and men, both among foreign and Cambodian nationals. They included those of Southeast Asian ethnicities, white and mixed, across all countries of origin. Participants included college graduates; those in full-time employment in their home countries; self-employed people across all ages, and those who had taken early retirement. While some relied on other sources of income, such as property or savings, others were engaging in income-generating activities while pursuing citizen aid projects.

It is important to note that while some projects were set up by foreigners, others by Cambodians, most intensely relied on collaboration between both. While some of the foreigners resided in Cambodia on a long-term basis, others stayed there for periods between a few weeks and a few months per year. Fieldwork was carried out in the capital Phnom Penh, and in two provincial towns. In addition observation at project sites, methods included attending fundraising and networking events, and drawing on material and debates as they were presented via the projects' social media communications. They entailed engagement with occasional project visitors and volunteers, and extended to donors, those whose main involvement took the form of providing resources, but who were less directly involved with

the day-to-day activities of the projects. The paper highlights the crucial roles of Cambodian founders, partners and facilitators in these projects. One aspect which this paper does not address, are the Cambodians who are being targeted, and their experiences with these private aid initiatives, as they lay outside the scope of the original research project. While the perspectives of beneficiaries of citizen aid are clearly important, there is, as yet, insufficient research being attentive to their perspectives. ^{xxvi}

What does it mean to ‘Make a connection’?

Establishing the sense of a ‘personal connection’ between donors and a cause, or a group of beneficiaries is a well-recognised challenge for large international NGOs. Specifically, individual donors may feel that the promise of connection, such as presented through campaign materials, is tenuous, and often not realized to an extent that they find meaningful or rewarding. This apparent disconnect between donor and beneficiary in large-scale, state-funded or formalized modes of aid is one reason why small-scale aid initiatives -citizen aid- appeal to potential supporters, and even motivate people to found their own projects. Going further, I propose that the significance of ‘connection’ is not limited to an instrumentalist incentive for fundraising, or a tool for aid effectiveness, but can be understood as a desire which is sought to be fulfilled through acts of assisting others. This does not mean that one excludes the other, but offers an expanded perspective on how connections or relationships, and acts of giving are interrelated. A fundamental question is what people mean when they invoke their desire for ‘connection’. The following sections begin to unpack some of these meanings.

A helpful distinction arising from the material may be between what could be called ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ connections: the latter being sought after, in the sense of providing a holistic,

immersive experience. In the first instance, a key element identified was being physically present in a place, at events, and having face-to-face contact with those involved. The desire for *'being there'* resonates with its perceived lack in formalized aid work^{xxvii}. This was illustrated by Adam, an Australian in his late twenties, who ran an education-focused project. He observed that,

'in fact most of our supporters are looking for small organisations [to sponsor]: they say they used to give money to the Red Cross, but they have such big operations, big cars, they don't want that. People really want to do the work themselves, in a hands-on environment. They want to be part of it, to build that house; to know the students who are benefitting'.

Variably described as *'being there'* or *'being part of the process'*, physical presence and participation were cited by many as essential to *'making it real'*, and to bring about a 'connection' - with the people, a place or a process, that they were looking for. This wish was for a 'connection' that was as little mediated as possible. As Laura, who runs a small education project says, *'what our supporters are looking for is direct, first-hand experience of the situation'*. In this sense, people who are engaged in citizen aid as supporters, founders or volunteers are looking for relationships imbued with physicality and authenticity - displaying some resonance with what the Kiva fellows, as described in Schwittay^{xxviii}, seek in their personal visits.

'Making a connection' thus indicates a desire for being actively, directly and effectively involved in acts of supporting others. This was also illustrated by Patrick, who runs an after-school club in a disadvantaged community on the outskirts of a provincial town, which he had co-founded his Cambodian project partner, Khean. Patrick talked about one of their

supporters from Northern Europe, who raised funds among his work colleagues for a number of bicycles, to be distributed among families in their community. As Patrick pointed out, it was not sufficient for him to send over the money, but

'he came over [to Cambodia] because he wanted to meet the people and learn about the culture. He bought and delivered the bicycles himself, he wanted to be part of the process. So he knows, this mum doesn't have to walk far any more to the market- it's very concrete'.

In this case, Patrick attributed their supporter's decision to travel and organize the delivery of the bikes in person, to their wish for connection. On another occasion, Patrick and Khean were supporting the construction of basic houses for families in Khean's home village. In a similar fashion, some of their overseas supporters chose to come along and help because, as Patrick put it, *'they wanted to be part of it, to build that house; to know the students who are benefitting'*. Being physically present and immersed, combined with a sense of their tangible efficacy, was a significant incentive.

This was also evident in a related project, named 'Food for Life'. Its main activity consisted of distributing hot meals on a weekly basis to marginalized families, and elderly Cambodians without recourse to other assistance. Their meal-preparation sessions were often well attended by a mixture of tourists, resident foreigners, and some young Cambodian volunteers. Asked about what attracted them to this initiative in particular, Rob, an older Australian who frequently helped out, explained that he and his wife *'want to do the work ourselves- this is a hands-on environment. The best bit is at the end, when we get to distribute them to the families who are waiting for us'*. The activities of the organization encapsulated two of the aspects of 'connection' mentioned above, that is, providing an immersive experience, as well

as establishing contact with fellow human beings in a supportive manner, in this case through the act of food provision to some of those living on the margins of Cambodian society.

Another example was provided by Borey, a young Cambodian working in the hotel sector. He explained that he often encountered hotel guests who wanted to make a donation, so for this purpose he took them to a rural area he was familiar with:

‘they want to do something to help; they bought school uniforms, fish, rice, and took it out to the village. They are back in the States with their careers now, but they told me that that was a special moment for them’.

Through taking them to the village, they said, Borey had *‘made it real’* for the tourists. Such quests for ‘realness’ or authenticity have been widely documented and critiqued within tourism studies^{xxix}. It is nevertheless worth noting that in the context of development, this desire plays a more substantial role for engaging networks of supporters than is often acknowledged, or indeed achieved. With this in mind, Borey actively sought out and valued the interactions and connections with international visitors. He tended to give up his free time to facilitate donations to communities he considered deserving. He was providing visitors with a ‘real’ experience, and, one might argue, a sense of connection. While their visits, and indeed donations, were at the discretion of the tourists, it was in Borey’s control to let them materialize, and decide on who would receive them. Uneven power balances, as discussed at the outset, were therefore not a straightforward distribution between privileged visitors, and disadvantaged residents, but played out in more nuanced ways.

As discussed by Schwittay^{xxx}, the appeal of a unique person-to-person connection for aid donations has long been recognized by NGOs. While early forms of child sponsorship are emblematic of this^{xxxii}, this has more recently been extended to, for example, microlending through organisations such as kiva. It is also reflected in campaign materials by large NGOs, which seek to present possible beneficiaries in a personal, intimate style, often with curated quotes and biographies. As the case of kiva demonstrates, these can be perceived as ‘thin’ connections, insofar as supporters are aware that, for administrative reasons, their donation or loan may not be received exactly by the person they were presented with on the platform or campaign website. As Schwittay suggests, one way of addressing this relative distance is to become a ‘Kiva Fellow’, in order to establish face-to-face contact with loan recipients^{xxxiii}. I suggest that when those involved in citizen aid speak of ‘making a connection’, they aspire not to managed, distanced and to some extent fictive connections, but rather those of a ‘thick’ quality, that is, holistic and immersive, as mentioned above.

Such desire for ‘thick’ connections was illustrated by Patrick’s and Khean’s experiences in their after-school club for marginalized youth. As an initial fundraising strategy, they set up scholarships for named children, but realized that they were not particularly popular among supporters, compared with other forms of fundraising. As Patrick explained, the most effective modus was indeed for supporters to have personal knowledge, either of young individuals through visiting, or through personal acquaintance with Patrick or Khean as the founders; or through following regular updates on particular children’s progress posted on the project’s website. The person-to-person approach in itself was therefore not sufficient to get people involved; it had to be someone known to the supporter or donor, even if that extended to just the project founders. The following examples illustrate some of the ways in which these ‘thick’ connections are pursued and made.

Ronan for example, an American in his late fifties, runs a small project for young people with impaired hearing. Alongside this, he facilitates contacts between visitors in a Cambodian provincial town and local communities, schools, or groups of potential beneficiaries. In this role, he is sometimes asked by local friends, both Cambodian and foreign, to take hotel guests or personal visitors to projects or communities that he considers worthwhile recipients of donations. He reflects that it is the '*personal connections*' that are sometimes made during these trips, which prompt visitors to make financial contributions, often towards the end of their stay, as they feel they caught a glimpse of the '*real Cambodia*', as Ronan says, as opposed to what they consider a façade presented to tourists. Making these kind of connections begins, and sometimes end, with a single donation. Occasionally, though, they set in a motion a train of events, where acts of helping and establishing relationships are closely interlinked.

Such emphasis on experiential immersion surfaced in participants' accounts, as reflected in phrases such as the enjoyment they derived from '*seeing the smiles on the kids' faces*'. This was frequently cited as a key reward when visiting communities or interacting with those they were supporting. This desire for face-to-face contact for a sense of reward and evidence of one's impact was also mentioned by those involved in educational activities. Sawa for example was a retired teacher from Japan, who had set up a small art school. Together with an assistant, she ran workshops and weekly classes for young people on the outskirts of a provincial town. As she explained to me, she had made a conscious decision not to 'grow' her project, even though that would have been possible, as it would have meant that she would have had less time available to in direct interaction with her students, which was what really mattered to her. Such sentiments are well-documented in other human service

professions such as in teaching or health care, and in this respect not unique to citizen aid. They do, however, illustrate the centrality of immediate interaction for those engaged in private aid activities. Citizen aid relations can, of course, not be considered by default as less mediated and more holistic or authentic than other forms of development. Rather, they are mediated to a different extent and in other different ways. For example, much of citizen aid is facilitated by local and foreign brokers or facilitators^{xxxiii}. What matters to supporters is that they often know these brokers personally, and thus feel that the information that is related through them provides them with a more trustworthy connection than if they received letters from a sponsored child, sent via a large NGO. With regard to relationships being 'direct', then, it is important to recognize that citizen aid also depends to some degree on forms of mediation.

It also becomes clear that the 'personal connection' is also understood by supporters as an idiom for personal knowledge and trust. Time and again, those involved in citizen aid projects reiterate how for themselves and their supporters, the sense of *'knowing where the money is going'* matters hugely. George, for example, runs a Christian-oriented project for children affected by HIV/Aids in the capital, Phnom Penh. Talking about how they recruit both donations and volunteers, he explains that after people have visited them, *'they've been touched, they can tell a story about kids and HIV to the people at home- and they tell the others where the money is going to'*. While their personal knowledge of the project makes them credible witnesses in the eyes of others, their own lives have been 'touched' by these visits, too - they can 'tell a story' to widen the fundraising circle, but they have also become part of the story themselves.

An example of how this works is provided by Kevin, a UK national in his sixties, who has taken early retirement after becoming disillusioned with his job in the UK. Having relocated to Cambodia, in due course he became friendly with some families living in the residential area near the Angkor temple complex. He subsequently decided to specifically try and fundraise to allow one of the families' children to attend school. To this end, he regularly organizes pub quiz evenings in a pub in his home town, with the proceeds directed towards this family. They are often successful and his friends are inclined to participate because,

'with my mates in the UK, they know me personally, it's a personal connection. They know that I know the places that I am fundraising for. Of course you have to have a certain amount of trust, of faith. They know me, and this is for Mai- you know the person it goes to. It makes it more real. It's going to be for Mai's education. I know the pub people all personally, and I take photos and bring them back to them. They are always only one step away from what is happening, and where it goes to'.

This, he explains, constitutes the key difference compared to other, large organisations, which are unable to provide that level of assurance where and how the money is spent, and who exactly it is supporting. A similar effect was identified by Samantha, who runs a small food security project. A 'personal connection' for her exemplifies accountability not just to one's supporters, but to the community her project is serving:

'in my project, I know these kids... I know what they need, and that they deserve it. You need a business mindset; but it's the personal connection that matters. You don't want to have a disconnect; you come in with these awards... but these awards begin with the community, and the big organisations, they've lost sight of it'.

Rin for example, a Cambodian graduate in his late twenties, had been working in a small, privately funded project as the ‘second in command’, as he put it, to the Australian founder for several years. As he explained,

‘why we have foreigners: because of the social connections, the funding connections. When it comes to funding, you need a combination of Cambodians and foreigners. It’s not easy for me to look after the donor. They need trust. We need Ben [the Australian founder] to help us with that’.

However, Rin found that he, like others, *‘need to go to the communities as well. For motivation, but also so I know what has happened there. So I can be a better storyteller for them, so I know the story to tell to the donors’*. As in the case of Borey described above, Rin became a mediator between the people receiving support, and the private donors to whom he related the stories of what is happening at the ground level. This put him in a position of responsibility and not least, power, as it was in his hands to increase the level of trust and sense of accountability that the project aspires to provide. This is often cited by donors as a reason that draws them to private aid, rather than to formal organisations. For development practice more broadly, it is noteworthy that it was not the well-established monitoring and evaluation practices of large aid agencies, but the small-scale, individual relationships enabled by private aid that functioned as a basis of trust and loyalty for supporters.

Connections across Similarity and Difference

An immersive presence, ‘thick’ relationships and personal knowledge of founders and beneficiaries can all be part of what it means to ‘make a connection’. In order to understand

how this matters to citizen aid and development more broadly, I now turn to connections in the sense of establishing personal relationships, the aspect that emerges most prominently in debates in development research. How central this is for citizen aid practitioners emerges in an exchange I had with James, from New Zealand, who set up a community development project in a Cambodian village. When I asked him why had done this here rather than in his native country, he responded emphatically, *'because it's so fulfilling here! It is about making a connection with the people'*. His expression pointed to the desirability of relating to people who were very different from himself. Erica Bornstein finds similar experiences among charity volunteers in India, and describes how seeking out, and 'empathising with persons or contexts radically difference from one's own becomes desirable'.^{xxxiv} A question, raised at the beginning, then becomes how the making of connections has the capacity to overcome those differences. Bornstein argues that these efforts remain ambiguous. She concludes that 'volunteering has both the potential to enhance distinctions between groups and to surpass them.'^{xxxv} This leaves out of sight, however, who is in a position to 'reach out' to begin with. In the case of the community project, the initial step had been taken by the village leader, who had put out a vision for his community, and a plea for support on the internet- where it had been picked up by James, who had been searching both Cambodia-related sites for information, and scouting, by his own account, for possibilities for intervention. One might read this as another instance of how power imbalances are visible, but do not entirely favour the privileged visitors from outside: after all, James was looking for something which the village leader was able to offer him, that is, an opportunity for intervention.

One argument animating this paper was that the desire to 'support' and to 'connect' with others are closely related, and may therefore indeed form two sides of the same coin. This may hold to the extent that wanting to 'make a connection' can be a motivation for 'making a

contribution’, as much as the other way round, as in James’ case. The previous sections have aimed to differentiate what participants mean when they speak of such ‘connection’. Further, I suggest that a vital component of ‘making a connection’ is, in a more literal sense, to establish a meaningful, personal relationship with someone who is very different from oneself – but also offers similarities, shared experiences and perhaps mutual recognition. It emerges that such relationships can be highly valued, in spite, or perhaps because of their possible tensions and the challenges they offer. Among many citizen aid practitioners, there is clearly a desire for connection across national, ethnic, or cultural difference – indeed, this difference may be part of what makes them appealing in the first place. Citizen aid constitutes a prime example of the significance of such personal connections in development, partly because they are actively encouraged (rather than frowned on), and because the search for connection is at the heart of what animates citizen aid activities in the first place.

In many citizen aid activities, a moment of ‘connection’ becomes a starting point, and a motivation for donors to become involved in more comprehensive forms of assistance. One such example were Al and Donna, a retired couple from Australia, who used to run their own farm, and whose grown-up children had left home. According to their own account, at this stage they were actively looking to ‘*do something*’. As Donna searched the internet, initially for volunteering opportunities, she came across a YouTube clip about a small village school in Cambodia. A school teacher who had posted the video was hoping to raise funds through inviting people to become involved. In Donna’s words, ‘*when I saw this, I was hooked. It was the kids- definitely the kids*’. On the strength of this sentiment, they travelled to Cambodia, and after an abortive stint of volunteering at an NGO, they visited the school, decided to get involved, and ‘*that was it*’. It turned out to be the start of an ongoing engagement, first fundraising for the school, then leading to a wider approach including health and livelihood

support, as well as a greater role- in collaboration with village residents - in planning, financing, and delivering assistance.

The ‘spark’ of spontaneous connection is often the beginning of a longer-term relationship, where assistance is provided in the context of more personal relationships. Significantly, these are sometimes couched in kinship terms. Ailish for example, a retired woman from Ireland, ‘adopted’ a Cambodian young man as her godson, including the obligations of support that this entailed. As her friend Joan explains:

‘It’s just about human relations- something clicks. My friend Ailish first came here nine years ago- she met a tuktuk driver, sponsored him to go to Ireland, and to buy land here. She’s at the moment volunteering with another organisation, near where he is based in Kampong Chang. She made her own connection. There is some spark, and then it takes off from there’.

As in Ailish’s case, people may engage with organizations to find volunteering placements. Finding the personal relations that they may be looking for can, however, be done informally, and independently: Ailish had ‘*made her own connection*’. It cannot be fully explored here, but it is worth noting that drawing on kinship terminology for shaping and understanding social relations - such as ‘adopting’ a godson- can accommodate existing socio-economic inequalities, as well as justify (or even call for) ongoing support between a foreign older woman and a younger Cambodian man. Similar practices involving kinship idioms are evident in Bornstein’s account of philanthropic activities in urban India^{xxxvi}.

In cases such as those presented here, the desire for development and the search for connection can be difficult or impossible to disentangle. In others, the wish for continued involvement -with people, a project, a place- is more clearly in the foreground. Ongoing assistance can be a means of maintaining those relations, and provide a rationale to return. This was the situation for Anette, a retired teacher in her sixties from Denmark, who I met in Stephane's music school. Stephane's project combined a for-profit school, offering tuition for guitar and piano, with a non-profit section. The latter consisted of two educational projects in deprived areas, where children from the surrounding neighbourhoods took classes in English, IT, and life skills. Several years ago, Anette had spent time as a volunteer there, and had got to know Stephane, his team, and some of the children well. Following on from this, Anette kept returning, first twice, and now once a year. This time, she had come for a two-week visit with her daughter. When I asked her about her ongoing support for Stephane's project, she explained that *'it's all because of having that personal connection'*. While some of her time was spent sightseeing with her daughter, they were both keen to visit the classrooms, participate in lessons, and wander through the area, greeting people and chatting to those that they recognized from previous visits.

While the 'connection' that Anette was referring to did not always relate to particular young people, but to the team and the project more broadly, in other cases more fine-grained aspects of the relationships became evident. Al for example, found it important that many residents in the village where they supported the school, were rice farmers. He recounted how he and his wife were once invited to sit with some of the villagers under a tree while they were having a break from working the fields. He was particularly touched by how one older woman, knowing Al had been a farmer too, took his palms to examine if they showed signs of hard work. *'Then she said that "we're similar". That's what makes it so fulfilling'*, Al explained,

'that we share the experience. We know what it's like to farm, we can talk about crops, we're coming from the same place'. As they went out to the villages, they were looking at some fields, and got talking to the farmers. As they took a break from rice planting, the local people asked them if they wanted to share their breakfast. Al enthusiastically recounted that *'they've never sat down with a couple of white people before and had food with them. So we sat down under the tree together... it's great to make that connection'*.

Al felt that there was the same enthusiasm of meeting someone very different, yet familiar among the group of local rice farmers that he and his wife experienced. Significantly, motives and interests that local Cambodians may have to seek a connection, or a personal relationship with foreigners, tend to be much less explored in literatures of development, voluntourism, or indeed in the emerging debates on citizen aid, though I have indicated some of them above.

As Schwittay^{xxxvii} points out, while the search for connection may or may not be reciprocal, motivations and opportunities to establish and maintain these relationships are bound to be asymmetrical. While there is some work on social relations among local aid workers^{xxxviii}, less is known to what extent the desire for connection may be one-sided, reciprocal, or indeed imbalanced. Heron argues that, in her case, some local NGO workers intentionally 'assert boundaries in response to our insistence on relations'^{xxxix}. Heron's material, however, was gathered in the context of formalized development, among established NGOs. In contrast, among those involved in citizen aid, the valuing of relationships may take on a different significance.

In some cases, Cambodian founders of citizen aid projects appreciate not just the potential funding streams for their project that are opened up by making connections with foreigners, but also what might be described as cultural, or indeed cosmopolitan capital. In the premises of some citizen aid projects, for example, evidence of their transnational connections was pinned to concrete walls, such as images of shared meals and volunteer visits; ornamental, symbolic cheques that had been presented; drawings and cards that had been sent from afar. Rather than putting up barriers to foreigners' insistence on contact, a more complex picture emerges where such contacts may be purposefully sought, managed, and put to service for a particular project, as well as benefitting local founders or facilitators of citizen aid in more personal capacities.

Further, it would be inaccurate to present these relationships solely in terms of their functionality for the purposes of citizen aid projects. In the context of such initiatives, relationships emerge which extend beyond this, and which are experienced as friendships across cultural and linguistic differences. One example was Sophea, a Cambodian who had been working for several years with a café supporting a small NGO, which regularly received foreign volunteers. One year, Sophea struck up a particular friendship with a Dutch young woman, also called Sophia, a coincidence which both remarked upon. Sophea recounted how over the course of the year, they had lots of fun together, learnt from each other, ran the café and improved the project. They got on so well that, after Sophia had returned to the Netherlands, she invited Sophea for a visit during the European winter months. At the time she was talking with me, more than five years later, Sophea pulled out a photo she had taken during that time, including of Sophia's parent's front lawn, covered in snow, with both of them throwing snow balls. Sophea spoke of their friendship with warmth, even though Sophia had not been back to Cambodia since, and had gone on to pursue her university

studies; they kept in sporadic contact. Clearly, differences between them, but also apparently incidental similarities such as their shared name, made their relationship a rewarding experience. Perhaps necessarily, it turned out to be temporary, and marked by asymmetries, such as Sophea's limited ability to travel and choice of livelihoods, contrasted with the educational opportunities and outlook available to Sophia.

Conclusion

This paper took as its starting point the observation that relationships matter for development, as recognized in some of the relevant literature. Taking the case of citizen aid as an example, it argued that while the desire to help has been foregrounded in development studies, an equally important role is played by the desire to connect- that is, to establish meaningful personal relations with the people who are being supported. Based on ethnographic research among small-scale aid initiatives in Cambodia, it emerges that the shorthand of 'making a connection' includes physical presence, face-to-face contact with people, direct experience of aid activities, and their tangible efficacy. The examples also demonstrate that 'thick' person-to-person connections are being sought, furnished with first-hand knowledge of the projects. Personal knowledge here stands for trust and accountability both towards donors, as well as local communities. Finally, a key aspect for choosing to provide support, as well as where to direct it, is the creation of personal relationships between those involved. Perceived differences perhaps offer as much incentive as constructed similarities, such as shared past experiences. A complex picture thus emerges, which supports the argument that rather than the desire to help being a primary incentive, the desire to connect may matter just as much. The latter having been rather backgrounded until now, it leads us to nuance our notions of what development is about.

Such understandings must be tempered by the recognition that the search for, and the ability to make ‘connections’ is embedded in wider structural inequalities. On a hopeful note, Barford suggested that making such connectivity and relationality between people more visible^{xl}, might eventually contribute to reducing those inequalities. On evidence of the material presented here, the workings of power in the making of connections, are more complicated. It emerges that those foreigners who are in search of a ‘connection’ depend on finding an opportunity for intervention. This may be offered to them by local residents who are also looking to make such a ‘connection’, who have identified a need in their community and are seeking ways to address it. This may be not primarily a need for sharing experiences with a stranger, though that can be part of it, but a more substantive, material form of assistance. Further, the role of some Cambodians in citizen aid activities can be powerful, insofar as they are able to invite donations from visitors and their transnational networks, and direct donations towards causes of their choice. Making connections with foreign visitors affords them a privileged position vis-à-vis their own social contexts. Whether these different forms of connectivity indeed contribute to the reduction of power imbalances, or their redistribution, is a matter for further debate.

What are some of the implications that the search for connection may have for development theory and practice? At the least, it implies that the impulse of philanthropy^{xli} has been unduly foregrounded, and perhaps limited our understanding of the reasons why individuals become involved in supporting others. In addition, an equivalent ‘anthropological impulse’ comes into view, that is, the desire to establish connections with others who are in some ways very different from oneself. Rather than pure exotic attraction to a needy other - a distant stranger, as it were - the material here suggests that this is inextricably twinned with a desire to find commonalities and sameness. As Heron suggests, the difference of the other both

justifies intervention and creates attraction. At the same time, identifying similarities between oneself and others provides a rationale for where to intervene, for example, supporting someone whom one knows personally, and feels in some ways close or connected to. The tension between similarity and difference, making these relationships challenging as well as desirable, is inherent in making such connections in a development context. Arguably, such tensions complicate, and question the well-rehearsed notion of a 'distant stranger' being the object of individual charity donations. On the face of evidence from citizen aid, the wish for familiarity and closeness is a central element in motivating and directing assistance to others. This holds for overseas donors, visiting supporters, and for both foreign and Cambodian founders and facilitators. It is less clear, and needs exploring, how such connections matter for the people and communities who are being supported. As a way of differentiating existing notions of what drives individual development activities, it is a useful first step.

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- ⁱ Pedwell, "Affective (self-)transformations", conclusion.
ⁱⁱ Raghuram, Madge and Noxolo, Rethinking Responsibility and Care, 5.
ⁱⁱⁱ Raghuram, Madge and Noxolo, Rethinking Responsibility, 5.
^{iv} Barford 2017, conclusion.
^v Eyben *Relationships for Aid*; Chen, *Understanding Development Impact*; Schech, Skelton, and Mundkur, *Building relationships*.
^{vi} *Ibid.*, 2.
^{vii} *Ibid.*, 43.
^{viii} Eyben, "The Sociality of International Aid."
^{ix} Girgis, "The Capacity-building Paradox."
^x Mawdsley et al, "Trust, accountability."
^{xi} Bornstein, *The Spirit of Development*, 170.
^{xii} Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts*.
^{xiii} Heron, *Desire for Development*.
^{xiv} Malkki, *The Need to Help*.
^{xv} *Ibid.*, 149.
^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 134.
^{xvii} Heron, *Desire for Development*.
^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 55.
^{xix} *Ibid.*, 88.
^{xx} *Ibid.*, 123.
^{xxi} Cooper and Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*.
^{xxii} Heron, *Desire for Development*, page.
^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 89.
^{xxiv} The project was funded by a Leverhulme Grant (RF 2013-535) whose assistance is gratefully acknowledged.
^{xxv} Kinsbergen and Schulpen, *The Anatomy of the Private Initiative*, Schulpen and Huysse, "Citizen Initiatives", Develtere and De Bruyn, "The Emergence of a Fourth Pillar, Kinsbergen and Schulpen, "From Tourist to Development Worker", Haaland and Wallevik, "Citizens as Actors".
^{xxvi} Though see e.g. McLachlan & Binns, "Exploring host perspectives towards younger international development volunteers"
^{xxvii} Irvine, Chambers and Eyben, *Learning from*.
^{xxviii} Schwittay, *New Media and International Development*.
^{xxix} Kuon, *The Pursuit of Authenticity*.
^{xxx} Schwittay, "Digital Mediations of Everyday Humanitarianism".
^{xxxi} Bornstein, *The Spirit of Development*.
^{xxxii} Schwittay, *New Media and International Development*.
^{xxxiii} Fechter, "Brokering transnational flows", McKay and Perez, "Citizen Aid and Social Media".
^{xxxiv} Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts*, 121.
^{xxxv} Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts*, 122.
^{xxxvi} Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts*.
^{xxxvii} Schwittay, "Digital Mediations of Everyday Humanitarianism".
^{xxxviii} Yarrow, *Development*, Goetz, *Women Development Workers*, Heaton Shresta, "They can't mix".
^{xxxix} Heron, *Desire for Development*, 85.
^{xl} Barford, *Emotional Responses*.

^{xii} Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts*.