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Beyond the State? The Everyday Politics of Development in Southeast Asia

Annuska Derks and Minh Nguyen (eds.)

Transnationalising the ‘Moral Neoliberal’? Private Aid Initiatives in Cambodia

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Abstract

Within Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, there has been an increase and greater prominence of informal, non-state development actors. The case of small-scale, private aid activities in Cambodia offers the opportunity to consider how state frameworks and interventions matter for such projects. Typically, theories of how a state may induce its citizens to engage in pro-social behaviour while retracting its own commitments, consider this within the context of a single nation state. Citizen aid in Cambodia, however, is often characterised by collaborations between national and international peers, and relies, to some extent, on resource flows along those networks. It thus encourages us to think through such approaches in a transnational context. Specifically, this means broadening the analytical framework of the ‘moral neoliberal’ (Muehlebach 2012) to account for the fact that activities of thus-responsibilised citizens may expand beyond the confines of their own nation state. Its entails examining how interests and actions of more than one nation state come into play. In the Cambodian context, a lack of public service provision, combined with a hitherto loosely regulated third sector, have created conditions in which such initiatives have proliferated. In other words, a low level of state-provided care, as well as a relative lack of government control create a need for, and offer agency to these non-traditional development actors. The case of private aid thus queries the scope of ‘moral neoliberal’, as this dynamics is often considered within the framework of a nation state, and thus leaves out of view those ‘ethical citizens’ who are active transnationally.

Keywords: Development, Citizen Aid, Moral Neoliberal, Transnationalism, Cambodia

Transnationalising the ‘Moral Neoliberal’? Private Aid Initiatives in Cambodia

Over the past few years, non-state led forms of development assistance and humanitarian aid have become more prominent, in Southeast Asia as elsewhere. These include peer-to-peer initiatives, diasporic groups, and grassroots associations (South 2012). They emerge in-between, and often operate independently of traditional state actors of aid. A pertinent question raised by this collection is what these approaches tell us about the role of the state in development, and how to conceptualise the relationships between them and the state. Derks and Nguyen argue that these are not indicative of either a diminished state, or of extending beyond its realms, but can be understood as a ‘recasting of the role of the state, even as it remains central in setting the conditions and directions of development’ (Introduction). A seminal explanation of the rise of such initiatives is Andrea Muehlebach’s work on post-industrial Italy (2012). This approach revolves around the construction of an ‘ethical citizen’ in a context of a state which is retracting its welfare provision, while morally incentivising its citizens to deliver such care through voluntary activities. These are underpinned by citizens’ convictions that they need to take responsibility for their own success, as well as the welfare of others. Working towards the latter becomes one way of achieving the former, thus consolidating their own, often fragile, sense of belonging and being a valued member of society. **It is important to note that Muehlebach’s study is pertinent and provides a starting point for analysis here, not because her particular case study of a Northern Italian town is comparable to Cambodia. Rather, the dynamics made visible in that study, notably the interaction between absence of state welfare and a rising number of volunteers to replace such lack of state provision, may offer some parallel insights in a Cambodian setting.** The question thus emerges whether we can understand contemporary private aid initiatives in Southeast Asia as an instance of such ‘rendering moral’, recasting but also consolidating the role of the state. Drawing on the case of such aid activities in Cambodia, this paper sets out to explore the role of the state for the inception, conditions of existence and efficacy of these initiatives in more detail.

In the first instance, the paper argues that while the analytical framework of the ‘moral neoliberal’, as put forward by Muehlebach, has proven a powerful analytical tool, it is also characterised by a certain methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), which may limit its relevance for transnational contexts. The framework arises out of the

particular ethnographic, political and historical setting of a disenfranchised population in a post-industrial city in northern Italy. Here, the interactions between responsabilised citizens and a government implementing neoliberal welfare reforms are encapsulated within the setting of a single nation state, demonstrating the interlinking of government-sponsored volunteering programmes, and citizens readily taking up this mantle. I suggest that such interactions become more ambiguous when considering individuals who originate from countries marked by neoliberal reforms and endowing citizens with a sense of personal responsibility, but who go on to implement such moral action not in their country of origin, but do so abroad. The question of why they choose to do this, and to what effect, offers relevant insights into the relationship between state(s) and non-state development activities. Broadening the scope to such transnational initiatives means taking into account the characteristics and activities of more than one national context, and making visible a more complex dynamic than the retraction and consolidation of the state as outlined above.

This may seem counterintuitive, insofar as private aid activities carried out by residents of countries of the Global North, in low-income ones such as Cambodia, display all the features of responsabilised citizens, equipped with entrepreneurial energy and skills, who aim to address social welfare shortcomings. This is certainly borne out by some of the ethnographic material which I present below. It has been described by the journalist Nicolas Kristof as the new ‘DIY Foreign Aid’ revolution (2010). These well-educated and highly motivated individuals, in his account, embody a morally driven attitude to address social inequities - though, crucially, in societies not of their own. This compels us to consider the broader context of these interventions, and in particular the role of the state(s) where they choose to direct their activities.

Cambodia provides a particularly suitable space for such private aid initiatives, as it is characterised by historically low levels of state welfare provision, as well as a hitherto relatively lax control of voluntary and third-sector activities by the government. These circumstances have been recently intensified by neoliberal market reforms, dramatically increasing social inequality and violence (Springer 2015). **It has been critically noted that the term ‘neoliberalism’ is being used increasingly liberally, thus losing some of its analytical value (Birch 2017). Here, I follow Springer (2015) and Birch (2017) in understanding the term as referring to economic systems characterised by ‘free’ market principles which are extending into all spheres of social life. This includes the shifting**

role of the state away from being a public welfare provider (Hamlin 2008), and incentivising volunteers instead. The combination of these creates an environment which provides significant incentives for private, non-state development actors to intervene, given the evident existing needs, with regard to educational opportunities, health, livelihoods, or disability support. As Sothy (2014: 23-36) argues, the ‘triple failure’ of market, government and NGOs creates a provision gap where social enterprises, or in this case, private aid actors, may step in. In addition, these private actors are equipped with skills gained in the Global North, and have been able to operate relatively freely in this context. The constellation of these factors has made Cambodia a prime site where such private aid initiatives can flourish. This sets them apart from neighbouring countries such as Lao PDR or Vietnam, which have operated a much stricter government control of civil society, even though the level of need, in the case of Lao PDR, is just as high. It is important to note that Cambodia represents a particular political scenario which has allowed such citizen aid to emerge.

As a post-conflict society with increasing levels of tourism, and now considered reasonably safe for those purposes, it has for years operated an easily navigable visa regime for foreign visitors. Recent political changes, though, mean that the previously loose regulation of non-governmental organisations is tightening (Curley 2013). While this is felt foremost by political actors such as human rights organisations, it has repercussions for others. The particular constellation of low-welfare and low-control which has characterised the Cambodian environment over the last decade, is currently being refigured, with uncertain outcomes for civil society actors, including private aid providers. Curley argues that the introduction of the controversial ‘NGO law’ means that the government is using ‘legislation as a political tool to control and manipulate political opponents and government critics’ and that ‘its initial impact will be felt via new regulatory requirements, resulting in increased burdens from registration, financial and reporting obligations, especially for smaller civil society groups’ (Curley 2018:248).

This overall context features an increasingly authoritarian state, with the Cambodian government ‘moving further on the spectrum of controlling and limiting the space for civil society’ (Curley 2018:262). This is compounded by the implementation of a loosely termed ‘neoliberal development’, a synonym, argues Frewer, for ‘contemporary Western development practice’. Its ‘neoliberal rationality’ typically includes ‘attempts to ‘render the social domain economic’ through the delimiting and problematisation of state intrusion into

the civil and economic spheres, the cultivation of an autonomous civil society, and the production of a subjectivity centred around entrepreneurialism, and a shifting of responsibility for basic needs from the state to the individual' (Frewer 2013:98). This overall constellation offers a profound logic for why Cambodia has become a prominent intervention space for private aid providers from abroad. Even though the situation is evolving empirically, the theoretical significance of these private aid activities is to offer a nuanced understanding, and complicate the relationship between non-state development actors, and the role of domestic and foreign governments in enabling private aid to come to the fore.

The flourishing of private aid also needs to be understood in the context of global trends in private development aid and its underlying political economic currents. Allison Schnable has documented a significant rise of grassroots international NGOs which are registered in the US (Schnable 2015). The UK has seen a comparable increase of small-scale NGOs operating abroad (Clifford 2016). While the data available is less comprehensive, Kinsbergen and Schulpen (2010, 2013) and Haaland and Wallevik (2017) have identified similar developments with regard to the Netherlands and Norway respectively. Further, such estimates, based on charity databases, only provide a partial picture, as they do not account for private aid projects which are not formally registered (Berman 2017; Swidler and Watkins 2017; Brković, 2016; Heath 2018). It seems fitting, *pace* Muehlebach (2012), that such a spike in private aid is evident especially in the US, arguably an epicenter of neoliberal governance. It is important to remember though, that forms of private charitable endeavours crossing national borders pre-dates contemporary government policies. More specifically, the task is therefore to examine their possible significance in a particular political and social moment.

This includes Cambodia's history as a recipient of substantial overseas development aid, channeled through governments and international NGOs, whose influence has been well-documented (Ear 2007; Mysliwicz 1988). Derks and Nguyen suggest (introduction), that more recently there has been a retreat of traditional donors, both state actors and large NGOs. This may allow more informal, alternative actors to come to the fore, of which the private aid activities described here are one example. While the development landscape in Cambodia is changing, private aid has been an often inconspicuous part of the larger aid system, without attracting much academic attention. The position of these actors within the broader environment is somewhat ambivalent. While many are engaged in supportive peer networks,

few had points of contact with larger aid organisations. While there can be competition for funds, many are intently focused on the particular niche in which they are operating. In this sense, their position is perhaps best described as being ‘under the radar’, or on the margins of the established development sector (McCabe, Phillimore and Mayblin 2010).

With regard to the research context, the material presented here was gathered during fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2015 and in 2018, in several sites in Cambodia, as part of a larger project on alternative actors in aidⁱ. Private aid initiatives, or ‘citizen aid’ as referred to elsewhere, is here understood as small-scale activities and projects set up and run by individuals, aimed at assisting others (Fechter and Schwittay 2019). They are typically funded by private donors, and are often facilitated by the founders’ transnational social networks. Founders include foreigners or 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 operate on the margins of the formally established aid sector. Their activities consist of educational after-school programs; food, health or disability support; vocational training programs, or income generation such as handicraft production among disadvantaged communities. Research was conducted with foreign and Cambodian individuals engaged in these initiatives, whether as founders, facilitators and their supporters, based in Cambodia and abroad. While the interlocutors presented here only represent a small segment of the overall group, they have been chosen to illustrate particular aspects of their activities, including their entrepreneurial drive; a wish to escape constraining bureaucracy at home; and the chance to rebuild their self-worth through carrying out care work in a low-welfare environment abroad, respectively.

Entrepreneurial Energy in Private Aid

As suggested above, it appears that private aid initiatives in Cambodia constitute a prime example of responsabilised individuals, who set out on their own initiative to tackle some of the world’s social problems. This is perhaps most prominently embodied in the narrative put forward by the journalist Nicholas Kristof, as a ‘DIY Aid foreign revolution’. In his words,

‘It’s all about what might be called Do-It-Yourself Foreign Aid, because it starts with the proposition that it’s not only presidents and United Nations officials who chip away at global challenges. Passionate individuals with great ideas can do the same,

especially in the age of the Internet and social media.'

[<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/magazine/24volunteerism-t.html>]

Such an understanding would undoubtedly be appropriate given the entrepreneurial energy, and drive for agency that is clearly evident in the motivations and practices of those involved in private aid initiatives. To some extent, this sets them apart from the 'ethical citizens' described by Muehlebach (2009), who embark on voluntary elderly care in the context of government-sponsored frameworks. In contrast, while private aid practitioners may be similarly outraged at some of the world's ills, one of the hallmarks of citizen aid is its entrepreneurial agency. This also sets them apart, to some extent, from the young 'global citizens' involved in voluntourism (see Vrasti 2012; Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011). While this does not exclusively define citizen aid activities, it is one important component. As indicated above, such agency is directed at, and thrives particularly in a context where state control, regulations and oversight by a government are prominent through their absence, in this case in Cambodia. It also sets private aid apart from activities of staff employed by formal aid agencies, even though they may pursue private aid activities in their spare time. The following examples illustrate some of the ways in which entrepreneurial energy can drive and shape private aid activities.

It may be significant that some, though by no means the majority of those involved in citizen aid, have previously been employed in the corporate sector. Daniel for example, a US national in his forties, had been working in banking after graduating with an MBA in his native Colorado for several years. Disillusioned with his job and divorced, he arrived in Cambodia after a period of traveling, and volunteered at an orphanage for short period. Realising that there was a need for extra-curricular education in the poor neighbourhood in Phnom Penh where he was based, he decided to set up his own educational project, fundraising among his former work colleagues in the US. What motivated him was that,

'I knew I didn't want to go back to the US. I would have to go back to this corporate job, and I didn't like it- and it wouldn't be easy to find, even! So I had private donations... People liked the idea that I had seen something, and I wanted to do something about it. I used my previous skills-I had a strong maths and finance fundraising background, and my writing was adequate for donor correspondence'.

His working life in the US, he recounted, had consisted of been characterised by long hours, self-centred pleasure and a lack of work-life balance of which he grew increasingly weary:

‘[at home] I got through the week, but only thinking about the weekend... I used to go out and spend the money on fun, but with diminishing returns...there was so much emphasis on how to chase personal pleasure- I guess, here I am getting pleasure out of seeing other people building their lives. So [my project] is for people in urban centres, teaching them English- there is a demand for service jobs... it is good to see people on their way. That doesn’t get me up in the morning [laughs], but it keeps me in the office late in the evening’.

While the strain of fundraising, and taking responsibility for an increasing number of young people was beginning to show, for several years Daniel was able to pursue his vision. He found the success fostered in pupils rewarding, with a substantial amount of time and effort required to maintain the projects’ activities. During our conversations, it was clear that he was painfully aware of the highly unequal political and economic setting in which these interventions took place. Walking through poorer urban neighbourhoods, he often pointed to incipient housing developments which were going to displace existing residents, and commented on the high levels of corruption in municipal government. This awareness did not, however, render the ambitions for his pupils futile; if anything, it underscored the continued need for their support, however little the impact of project may have been in this broader context.

Professional Skills in Private Aid

Daniel’s case is also illuminating with regard to a further aspect of private aid activities, namely the role of professionalism. As Malkki (2015) points out, while the Finnish staff working for the Red Cross are often open about their ‘neediness’ to help others, they also emphasise the professional manner in which they carry this out, as trained staff of an established aid organisation. It would be inaccurate, however, to characterise such formalised aid as ‘professional’, and private aid as, by nature, ‘amateurish’. As Daniel’s activities show, just because he was not trained in an aid-specific profession, did not mean he did not possess skills and qualifications which he could draw on to carry out community projects effectively. He underwent a rapid learning process with regard to fundraising, in which he had no prior experience. On the other hand, his accounting and project-managing abilities transferred

relatively easily from the financial sector to private aid. Likewise, Nell's story, which is recounted below, demonstrates how experience in leadership coaching may well be applicable to running a girls' education programme. In this sense, some private aid activities blur the boundary between or formally established aid and private charity work, as the latter cannot, by sleight of hand, be described as 'unprofessional'. This is further supported by the fact that some private aid activities are carried out by former 'professional' aid workers, and indeed sometimes by current aid workers in their free time (see Fechter 2018). This resonates with Cambodian NGOs, which are turning towards a more 'professional' social enterprise model (Sothy and Dahles 2015). They suggest that 'the struggle for social and financial sustainability is one of the major motivations for organizations engaging in commercial ventures.' They find that such commercialization transforms the 'goals, motives, methods, income distribution, and governance component' of those NGOs, leading to greater transparency and accountability towards beneficiaries. This may also risk, however, losing sight of their identified social goals (2015:237). A further parallel is evident in Cambodian returnees who similarly try to achieve social change. Wijers has termed these 'institutional entrepreneurs', as their 'entrepreneurial activities aimed at institutional reform are embedded social actions involving actors that want to make change happen', highlighting especially 'the nexus of personal entrepreneurial skills in the discovery and use of opportunity' (Wijers 2013:6). The entrepreneurial energy displayed by private aid actors thus echoes a trend evident in the wider NGO sector in Cambodia (Lyne, Sothy and Chanrith 2013).

The energy visible in Daniel's case is also evident in others who do not come from a corporate, but human services background. Such individuals may tackle challenges with a similar entrepreneurial gusto. Their ambitions for the scope of their projects, and its future growth, can be substantial. One example is Nell, an Australian in her thirties, who had been working in Australia as a teacher and counsellor. **Wanting to expand the reach of her professional activities and searching personal challenges, she had been looking for opportunities to become active abroad for some time. Eventually,** she identified a Cambodian NGO which was supporting women and girls who had been trafficked into the sex industry. Even though they seemed initially unresponsive, Nell flew to Cambodia and presented herself as a volunteer. Having worked with them for a couple of months, Nell realised that she would rather focus on prevention work, and started the process of setting up her own project. At the time I spoke to her, she had spent over a year researching, planning, and training staff, all the while working part-time to fund her own livelihood. She recounted

the early days of the project, when they had enrolled 36 girls from villages in a programme designed to prevent drop out- thus reducing the risk of being trafficked and exploited.

However, this was far from her goal, as she emphatically declared,

'thirty-six girls.. that was never the point! that's not why I and Kaye [her assistant] spent thousands of hours on this. We always wanted it to grow. That's when the only way to do it properly was to do it myself, full time. That's when it got big. They said it would be hard, but it wasn't hard. Tomorrow we'll enrol 226 girls... and I think in June we will have one thousand... in five years, we might be in a second country... when we have reached all the girls that we can reach here'.

Nell's case is pertinent not only for the scope and ambition for her project. Her activities appear as a prime form of entrepreneurial individuals as agents of change. This is embodied in her project's persistent focus on individuals as change-makers, embedded in a narrative of transforming their own and others' lives. When we first met, her project was in its infant stage. Several years later, it had not only grown substantially, but Nell was working as a motivational speaker, and preparing a book on 'ethical leadership'. Based on her own experiences, it was aimed at business leaders who, it suggested, were *'increasingly becoming aware of their social responsibility [...] to begin addressing how they might solve some of the world's problems'*.

Intervening in a Low-Welfare State Abroad

Such evidence seems to underscore the understanding of private aid activities as an example of Muehlebach's 'ethical citizen', albeit intervening abroad. The fact that Nell had chosen to do so in Cambodia, rather than in her native Australia, is significant. While she did not reflect on this explicitly, it became clear that the impact she had had so far in Cambodia, the rapid growth, the funds raised, and the number of girls she had enrolled, would have been difficult to achieve at home. Notably, even though she first volunteered with a Cambodian-led organisation supporting trafficked girls, her decision to shift towards prevention work was key for attracting funders, with an emphasis on sustainable interventions. Whether neoliberal leanings of the Australian government had exhorted her to take up moral responsibility is hard to trace. Certainly, though, the role of the Cambodian government, and its lack of care for girls at risk of being trafficked, as well as its loose regulations of charities, provided Nell with the opportunities to successfully act on those ethical imperatives.

Engaging in private aid, partly because it offers ways of putting one's entrepreneurial energy to good use, and as a way of meeting one's own needs, including but not limited to the 'need to help', are not mutually exclusive. For example, when Daniel arrived in Cambodia, he was disenchanted with his corporate job in the US, as well as going through the aftermath of a divorce. Applying one's entrepreneurial energy to a children's project may be therapeutic. Similarly, Nell clearly relished the chance to attract greater public attention, and becoming a sought-after motivational speaker, which her private aid work in Cambodia afforded her. Rather than merely being therapeutic or meeting her particular needs, this was interwoven with her entrepreneurial ambition to rapidly increase the number of girls enrolled in her project of a period of the next few years.

A focus on foreign-funded private aid activities provides us with a perspective on how both the sending state, and the state where such activities are being carried out, matter. It adds a transnational perspective on narratives of the 'moral neoliberal', but also complicates the roles that both states play in this scenario. The cases of Daniel and Nell highlight not just how entrepreneurial energy and moral responsibility are deployed, but that they can be most effectively realised in an environment which falls short of the welfare provision existent in their home countries. It is important to bear in mind that, as documented in detail by Springer (2015) and others, Cambodia is characterised by high levels of inequality, intensified through neoliberal governance, with its inherent forms of structural and discursive violence (2015: 41-81). As retracting welfare states, such as Italy in Muehlebach's case, increasingly rely on voluntary and kin labour to carry out care work, the Cambodian state is different insofar as social welfare systems have been almost entirely absent from the start. As Springer states, Cambodians 'have never known state provisions of social welfare, and repeatedly look to the patronage system as their only potential security blanket' (2015:53). This places the private aid providers in an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the state, parallel to Muehlebach's case. They are cognisant that they take on responsibilities that the state has abandoned, thus perpetuating structural inequalities, while deriving emotional comfort from the support activities they provide. Such ambiguous role of aid actors is prefigured, for example, in Taithe's (2016) work on Cambodian refugee camps on the Thai border. There, he argues, aid workers were well aware of, and felt uneasy about their work was political utilised. This included directly and indirectly providing assistance to former Khmer Rouge forces, and thus prolonging the conflict.

This constellation sets them somewhat apart from their Cambodian partners and counterparts, who may be equally driven by the ‘will to improve’ (Li 2007), albeit with differently constructed moral responsibilities and efficacies. While there are various accounts of local charity practice and mutual support in Cambodia (Ovesen, Trankell and Ojendal, 1996; Kent and Chandler, 2008), one salient motivation among some Cambodian private aid providers is their personal experience of deprivation, poverty, lack of education and opportunity, which they would like to see others escape from. Some small aid organisations have sprung up in the aftermath of their founders’ experiences living in refugee camps on the Thai border during the Khmer Rouge regime; or indeed after having fled, and having spent their formative years abroad, in France or the US (Wijers 2013). While there are numerous examples of such transnational returnees, there are also Cambodians who survived the genocide, and devoted themselves to providing opportunities to others which they feel they did not have. In many cases, their visions drive small-scale aid projects, and they partner with non-Cambodians in order to leverage international private funding, which may be harder to source from within Cambodian society. I do not develop this aspect further here, as this paper aims to understand primarily non-Cambodian individuals’ interests in carrying out private aid abroad. A question is if their activities can be understood as a form of ‘moral neoliberal’ practice abroad; and by extension, how their activities might expand understandings of a ‘moral neoliberal’ conceived in relation to a single nation state.

Escaping a Retracting Welfare State at Home

To this end, considering a wider range of private aid initiatives shows additional aspects of how conditions in sending states have a bearing on what happens in the destination countries of private aid. This specifically concerns people who become involved in aid overseas who have witnessed, in their professional capacity, a contraction of the welfare state at home, and were frustrated and unwilling to continue their work under those conditions. In contrast, carrying out similar activities in Cambodia, such as social work, allows them to be creative and agentive to an extent that would not have been possible at home, due to the bureaucratic and managerial restrictions placed upon them. These are experienced as largely absent in Cambodia. Martha’s story is an illustration of this.

A British woman in her sixties, Martha had two grown-up children, and when I met her, was living in Cambodia with her husband for the majority of the year, with a short

break in the summer months spent in the UK. She had been employed as a qualified social worker in the UK for most of her working life, and had witnessed the reduction of state social care provision. Taking early retirement partly for those reasons, together with her husband they travelled Europe for a couple of years. Eventually, they found this unfulfilling, and were looking for ways of ‘making themselves useful’. Having joined an international volunteering agency, they came to Cambodia to support a community development project. After a short time on their placement, she and her husband were given the opportunity to build a local social care project from scratch, on the basis of a plot of land and two huts, which had been set up by the volunteer organisation. As she remembered,

‘when we came here I thought, maybe I’ll have some time for myself... but then [volunteer organisation] had just taken over this site, just two buildings. So they said to us, would you like to get involved? And the rest is history! There was very little there, they really left it to us really’.

Such spontaneous opportunities to ‘get involved’ for the benefit for a wider community were in stark contrast to what she had known in her previous professional life. As she recounted,

‘When I worked in the UK, there were lots of government cutbacks. I used to see a lot of old people, disabled people... and I’d have to say to them, I’m sorry, you can’t have your care anymore. I was very disillusioned....it was all very budget driven. There used to be lots of thank you cards before, but somehow all that had gone’.

While she was unhappy about this, she did not feel that she could effectively intervene or change anything about this situation. She felt constrained by the cutbacks, and by limited room for manoeuvre afforded to her and her colleagues due to the regulations to adhere to, stifling initiative. When I asked Martha if she could imagine running a project like the one she oversaw in Cambodia, in the UK, she answered emphatically,

‘NO. There would be no flexibility. We are registered with the ministry here, but on the whole, we are left to get on with things. I’ve never experienced that in the UK! Like my social work friends in the UK, they are stressed, or off on sick leave... they

get so frustrated with it. We do a lot of problem solving here, but we have more flexibility to get on with it'.

As discussed above, the flexibility that the Cambodian state's lack of control affords her, is paired with an absence of state-provided social care. This is illustrated also by Dani, the Cambodian deputy director of the project that Martha runs. Dani acts as a social worker and outreach officer with disadvantaged families in their area. Coming from a poor family herself, she explained that,

I cannot go to school, I did not graduate. I know what it is like. I want to teach girls. There is no government system.... like when you know about child abuse, there is no support. People pay their way out of it. And school is not compulsory - that is difficult sometimes'.

Dani pinpoints exactly the lack of care, combined with the apparent lack of regulation, which creates the need for their intervention. As a result, Dani and Martha, with a small team of staff and volunteers, provided after-school care for local children. They also established a small unit providing learning opportunities for children with disabilities, who would have otherwise been kept out of school. The Cambodian setting thus affords Martha, frustrated in her profession as a result of UK government cutbacks, an opportunity to provide social care in a low-resource environment. This is enabled through a relative absence of regulation by the Cambodian state, which is one reason for the lack of care in the first place.

Regaining Dignity through Providing Care

In Martha's case, a main effect of the retraction of the UK state was her inability to provide care for others in the way she felt they deserved it- and the lack of reward, such as the 'thank you cards' from clients that had previously been part of it. These intimate connections between neoliberal welfare reforms in high-income countries and how they affect the actions of its 'ethical citizens', show most affinity with the disenfranchised volunteers at the centre of Muehlebach's work (2012). In her account, the role of the (Italian) state is recast, insofar as it is withdrawing its provision of social care, in this case for the elderly. At the same time, its role is consolidated, as the volunteers filling this gap are recruited, encouraged and trained through government-sponsored programmes. In this sense, the government perhaps even intensifies the control it exerts about how, and by whom care is delivered to the elderly, and

over the volunteers themselves. Importantly, the volunteers who participate are often marginalised, partly as a result of Italy's neoliberal market reforms (Muehlebach 2012:153). They comprise workers who have been made redundant or forced into early retirement, so that they look to volunteering as one of the few options available to re-establish their sense of personhood, self-esteem and belonging.

Extending but also complicating this argument, the case of private aid in Cambodia offers the opportunity to consider how this may play out in a transnational context. I suggest that some private aid initiatives in Cambodia can be understood as efforts by citizens of countries in the Global North, some of whom may have been similarly marginalised, to regain a sense of personhood and dignity. Notably, they feel there is a lack of opportunity to redress this within the society where their own disenfranchisement occurred. A transnational lens on the 'moral neoliberal' therefore reveals how in a global context, disenfranchised citizens may be drawn to provide care to others in societies which offer even lower levels of state provision to their own citizens, such as Cambodia; but increased opportunities to citizens of the Global North to regain their dignity through assisting others. This becomes evident in Mick's story.

A retired school caretaker and maintenance worker, Mick had relocated to Cambodia to carry out charity work, and support aid projects. I met him having breakfast at a local hotel, popular among NGO workers, which distributed a share of their profits among staff. The hotel offered a good-value breakfast buffet, which was frequented by hotel guests and local residents alike. Mick was wearing a T-shirt advertising a treasure hunt in aid of a local children's hospital. Muscly, with a shaven head and tattooed arms, Mick was in his sixties, and had come to live in Cambodia permanently a few months earlier. He used to be a caretaker first in a private, and later at a state high school. Initially, he went to Cambodia on holiday, and kept coming back every year, until he decided to let out his house in the UK, and rent a modest room in a guesthouse. One of his activities was fundraising for private aid projects through organising quiz nights, including in the local pub in his hometown, an event which raised around £300 quiz, amounting to around £1000 per year. He recounted a key moment when he felt drawn to Cambodia:

'the first time I went to the temples, there was a little girl, she said, buy me drink, buy me drink! and then she gave me a little piece of paper with a monkey drawn on

it, and she had written, 'my name is Pa'. Just that- my name is Pa. It was really moving. Just a simple drawing'.

The sense of connection he felt after this, and similar encounters, strengthened when he came across several street children one night, on his way home from a bar. He decided to offer them food, because they seemed hungry, at 2am in the morning. First there were three or four children, increasing to ten the next night, then fifteen and twenty. When he came to the end of his stay, he *'had to leave them. But then I had in mind, there are these kids, and perhaps I can do something for them.'* A focal point for his subsequent activities emerged on a later visit, several years ago. Again during a trip to the temples, a girl came up to him, and tried to sell him a bracelet. He took pictures of her, as he knew he wanted to come back the next year. When he did, he returned to the area where her family lived, and brought them the prints. The family was very pleased, he remembered, and since then he has maintained a relationship with them, which has continued for the past seven years.

As he explains, *'it's nice when you can see the kids develop as they go along, now she speaks some English'*. He has been fundraising for the girl ever since, including fees for her education, and a bicycle to enable her to go to high school. He mentions that he likes living in Cambodia because, in his words, *'I like the buzz, it is a happy place, I like that'*. This is in stark contrast to his last few years in the UK. He recounts how for a long time, he felt valued working in a private school; he knew all the students and they knew him, he held a number of responsibilities, and even though he did not have a family of his own, he had friends and shared leisure pursuits with them. This changed over time as he started working for a state-maintained school in the North of the UK. Slowly, he recounts, his duties were redefined, and he was given a *'line manager, a pen pusher, who got more money, while I did all the work. He knew nothing and didn't do anything, and he was responsible for the keys, even though I did all the locking up, all the time'*. He felt that his commitment to the students and the school was not only not recognised, but actively discouraged.

He remembered especially one incident, where they had been heavy snowfall, and his car would not start, he asked a colleague to pick him up in the school van to get him into work. The result was, he recounts with indignation, that

'someone complained about me taking the school van, and I got put in front of a tribunal for that! I had help from the union, but I was furious. I was working seven days a week, one Sunday off every two weeks, and I was trying to come into work – and getting punished for it! Everyone else would have just called in sick. I was done with it. No more overtime, I said I'm just going to do my job, that's it'.

While he had been saving up for his regular travels to Southeast Asia, after this incident he began thinking about relocating to Cambodia in earnest, and eventually took early retirement. His private aid activities, the relationships he was building with some families, and his fundraising achievements, fill him with some pride. Also, he says, at home, when someone would ask him to speak up in front of a crowd, he would be mortified. But once, when he was visiting one of the children's homes in Cambodia, someone suggested that since the regular English teacher was not in that day, that Mick step in, *'here's a whiteboard and pen, off you go'*. He remembers that *'I had no choice, but I had to do it, and I managed!'* Since then, he feels increasingly comfortable speaking at public events, and he says it has transformed him.

The private aid activities that he is involved in Cambodia may have thus not only helped restore his dignity, but boosted his confidence in a way that might not have been possible during his working life in the UK. He feels, though, that the Cambodian families that he is supporting are deserving of his help, not just because they are not well off, but because of their resilient attitude in the face of near-absent state provision of welfare. In his view, *'the good thing in Cambodia is, because there isn't a welfare state, people get off their backsides, and do what they can.'* For example, the father of the family that he is friendly with works as a security guard; in addition, family members make bowls out of coconut shells and sell them, along the woven baskets they produce. He considers them a very industrious family, *'they live basically in a woven grass and bamboo hut, but I'm lucky to be part of it'*. Their attitude seems to him in stark contrast with the people he knows in the UK: *'there is a horrible benefit and welfare culture, they have enough for beer and fags and tea, and have never worked in their lives. They could learn some things from the Cambodians'*.

Nevertheless, this does not make him blind to social inequalities in contemporary Cambodian society, including the way ruling elites exploit the country: *'I sound like a hippie'*, he said apologetically, *'but did you know that this [local entertainment] area is basically owned by one family? And they have got a Bentley- can you imagine, with the roads here, and what it*

costs to ship it over? It's obscene, it's quite wrong'. Mick's views demonstrate on the one hand, his indignation at the stark injustices he witnesses, and that they are at least partly the result of long-term developments such as lack of democracy, transparency, and accountability of the political class. For him, this is separate from the fundraising he undertakes for disadvantaged families, who suffer as a result of such inequalities. While he wishes it was easier for the little girl living at the temples to attend high school, he is disparaging of what he considers a 'benefit culture' in the UK, where relying on a welfare state, he thinks, has replaced resilience and determination to do the best for one's family even under difficult circumstances.

The cases of Mick and Martha throw into relief some of the ambivalences and contradictions inherent in being a transnational 'ethical citizen', and their relations to an apparent lack of state responsibilities. In Mick's case, bureaucratic restrictions led to him retracting his previous commitment to his work. For Martha, it was the lack of state care provision that caused permanent disenchantment with her job. For both, Cambodia provides an environment where their desire for meaningful support for others can be realised. Mick is critical of what he perceives of over-reliance on a welfare state. He prefers to support those who are, in his view, already doing all they can to help themselves, and thus, one might argue, behaving exactly like the responsabilised citizens which neoliberalised governments aim to produce. As emerges from their own accounts, their acute awareness of a highly unequal and neglectful system does not prevent them from engaging in small-scale charity endeavours. Indeed, they perceive this situation as an incentive to try and ameliorate the fate of at least a handful of individuals whom they encounter. Finding personal fulfilment, while being clear-eyed on the state of Cambodia's politically and social violent society is not a contradiction, but these are intrinsically connected. While most of my interlocutors were critical of recent political and economic developments in Cambodia, they categorically stopped short of overtly political intervention, preferring - if only for pragmatic reasons - the under-the-radar approach that guaranteed their continued presence in the country.

Conclusion

A question raised at the beginning was what private aid initiatives may reveal about the changing role of the state in development in Southeast Asia. More specifically, this paper considered private aid as constituted through its interactions with the home societies of aid

supporters, and countries of the Global South, such as Cambodia, where they choose to carry out these activities. A complex and ambiguous picture emerges, which is only partially captured by a framework of responsibilised citizens who set out to provide social care in lieu of a retracting state; or in the case of Cambodia, which has never provided any significant level of welfare to begin with. It does not necessarily point to a consolidation of the role of the state, however. The evidence from private aid activities suggests that their drivers are, to some extent, found in countries of the Global North. This includes finding impactful outlets for entrepreneurial energy; a sense of professional fulfilment denied in one's home country, or restored dignity and confidence among those diminished by restrictive work regimes at home. These may be countries such as the UK or Australia, which have experienced neoliberal reforms, in these cases resulting in a reduction of agency and self-determination available to individuals, in their professional or personal capacities.

At the same time, this form of private aid requires for its implementation countries such as Cambodia, which are characterised by low levels of state provision, as well as relative absence of government control. This combination at once attracts and justifies interventions by 'ethical citizens' of the Global North, who address shortcomings they have borne in their home countries. Both states thus matter for the emergence of private aid, though in a less obvious and more complicated manner than previously assumed. The case of private aid also raises questions of the possibly limited scope of the analytical framework of the 'moral neoliberal', as this dynamics is often considered as playing out within the confines of a nation state. It thus leaves out of sight those 'ethical citizens' who choose to intervene abroad, including the complex intertwining of more than one nation state in negotiations of private and public responsibilities. Finally, it also suggests that the field of responsibilised 'global citizens' is not encompassed by the well-documented activities of voluntourists alone, but extends into a harder-to-trace, and much less invisible set of non-institutional aid activities, whose potential significance warrants further exploration.

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