Introduction: Commodifying humanitarian sentiments? The black box of the for-profit and non-profit partnership

1. Introduction

While many scholars, practitioners and policymakers alike assume that collaborative ventures between for-profits and non-profits will jointly mobilize their respective strategies, strengths and understandings, the for-profit and non-profit partnership remains a black box. Critics fear it is a Pandora's box of challenges that may include compromising the legitimacy of civil society, impeding (state) accountability mechanisms, and obscuring problematic social relations by shifting the focus from human needs to commodities (Baur & Schmitz, 2012; Richey, 2014; Scheyvens, Banks, & Hughes, 2016; Christiansen & Olwig, 2019). Examining humanitarian and development interventions, this special issue pries open the black box by illuminating the processes of merging business interests and humanitarian sentiments[1] in order to elucidate the resulting tensions, paradoxes and possibilities. This is a matter of key importance in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) era of new actor constellations, hierarchies and relations.

Collaboration and partnerships between for-profits and non-profits are not new and the private sector has a long history of involvement in humanitarian and development interventions (Mitchell-Weaver & Manning, 1991; Ashman, 2001; Reed & Reed, 2009; Blowfield, 2012). However, for-profit and non-profit partnerships in development have gained new significance as the role of the state and traditional development funding mechanisms is reduced through domestic policies. Additionally, the international community now firmly supports and institutionalizes such partnerships, notably through the UN mandated SDGs' focus on partnerships (SDG 17) (Scheyvens et al., 2016; Mawdsley, 2018). This leads to a growing dependence on partnerships to fund, implement, govern and manage solutions that can meet humanitarian needs and accomplish sustainable development (Scheyvens et al., 2016; Mawdsley, 2018; Vestergaard, Langevang, Morsing, & Murphy, 2021). The impacts of these partnerships are furthermore increasingly expected to include transforming the partners themselves (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013; Olwig, 2021; Vestergaard et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there is limited evidence showing how partnerships actually operate and whether they can indeed more effectively manage and deliver a sustainable and just future (Brogaard & Petersen, 2018; van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018).

Through a range of in-depth case studies focused on refugees, "sustainability superheroes," coffee, jewelry, tourism and conflict-related sexual violence, this special issue subjects the for-profit and non-profit partnership to empirical and theoretical scrutiny, thereby contributing to the interdisciplinary body of work that studies the intersection of business, humanitarian sentiments and environmentalism (e.g., Prudham, 2009; Goodman, 2010; MacDonald, 2010; Richey & Ponte, 2011; Dempsey, 2016; Igoe, 2017; Pye, 2019). This literature has shown that while different logics and ideologies come together at this intersection, collaboration between the private sector and other actors often ends up giving hegemonic power to an understanding that profit-making, environmentalism and humanitarian sentiments are compatible and even mutually codependent.

The SDG framework, I would argue, further cements this hegemonic power. This is not only because it promotes partnerships, but also because its goals and targets lead to a concern with tracking, measuring and managing performance in accounting terms. This is a continuation of a larger trend by which civil society and government organizations have increasingly become subject to management strategies and logics typically identified with business, and subsequently more dependent on management consultants (Gladwell, 2002; McKenna, 2006; Ho, 2009; Davis, Fisher, Kingsbury, & Merry, 2012; Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). An important dimension of tracking performance according to this business-oriented management logic is that success is reduced to reaching a certain number. As Fukuda-Parr and McNeill explain in relation to the SDGs, translation "into a number requires simplification of complex ideas into a set of measurable common elements, abstraction from diverse local settings, and reification of intangible social phenomena" (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019, p. 7; cf. Olwig, 2013). Such "governance by indicators" (Davis et al., 2012) leads to a dependence on "experts to determine how to convert concepts into readily countable form" (Merry, 2019, p. 146). The same (management) experts are used in different types of organizations, whether for-profit or non-profit, public or private, national or international. It is thus not surprising that the boundary between for-profits and non-profits is becoming blurred.

Another consequence of indicators and management logics dominating modes of international governance is that by reducing complex ideas to a number, and thereby translating local diversity into generic abstraction, the indicators used to measure success are considered to be universally applicable, as in the case of the SDGs. According to the "global imaginary" adopted by the SDGs,

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[1] Here understood as concerns with promoting human welfare. On humanitarian sentimentality as an affective politics, see Richey et al. (2021).

sustainable development concerns are imagined to be collective and shared globally (Gibson-Graham, 2002; Olwig, 2011). Also known as the Global Goals, the SDGs challenge geographically determined reductive categories (cf. Said, 1978) involving a dichotomous North-South hierarchy where the South is "the disciplinary subject" and the North the "active and benevolent provider of knowledge and material assistance" (Mawdsley, 2017, p. 108). Yet, by governing the SDGs through universal indicators, it appears to become inconsequential whether a development challenge is found in one location or another. Such universalizing management logics and "global imaginaries" risk obfuscating context-specific structural inequalities, and the post-colonial economic and social power relations that characterize interactions in particular places (e.g., Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Liverman, 2018; Mawdsley, 2018; Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019; Büscher, 2019).

The contributions in this special issue further our understanding of the for-profit and non-profit partnership and the commodification of humanitarian sentiments to which it leads. First, they illuminate the power of universalizing management logics. Second, they illustrate the mechanisms by which local needs are overshadowed by global corporate strategies. Third, they demonstrate how the commodification of humanitarian sentiments often goes hand-in-hand with individualized and depoliticized approaches. As a way forward, the contributions emphasize the importance of accountability mechanisms and a specific framework is suggested for analyzing partnerships that keeps human needs, and not profit-making, in focus. The following sections describe these contributions in further detail.

2. Powerful universalizing management logics

A central contribution of the special issue is to demonstrate through concrete cases how partnerships are dominated by universalizing management logics – that is, the idea that specific problems can be addressed through universally applicable solutions and assessment standards. Focusing on the case of refugee camps, Pascucci (2021) provides an insightful example of how humanitarians appear increasingly oblivious to local and political dimensions instead turning all challenges into a refugee logistics problem that can be tackled through generic technology and partnerships with "platform capitalism giants." A traditional view of the humanitarian sector and "middle-men NGOs" as hopeless and inefficient justifies a growing focus on the need to implement (commercial) logistics and replace old-fashioned material aid with access to local and transnational (service) markets and phone apps that can provide information on housing options, or even deliver education. Thus, through improved logistics and private sector partnerships, meeting the needs of refugees – now reconceptualized as (semi) autonomous consumers or clients – is reduced to a question of better management.

Based on event ethnography at business conferences on sustainability, Olwig (2021) analyzes emerging for-profit narratives of "doing good" – a nebulous concept that in a business context has been associated with not just making money but making the world a better place (Falck & Heblich, 2007; Karnani, 2011). The article shows that doing good is now often considered symbiotic with profit-making and linked to the SDGs. Businesses, however, strategically choose individual goals and targets based on measurability, liability, commodifiability and profitability, thereby compromising a more holistic approach to sustainable development that considers the substantive needs of specific places and people. Pascucci and Olwig thus capture through in-depth ethnographic detail the connections between measurability, logistics and management and how this links to universalizing processes.

3. Global corporate strategies versus local needs

A further key contribution of the special issue concerns the mechanisms at play when global corporate strategies and interests overshadow local needs. Richey and Ponte (2021) analyze power relations in global value chains. They examine *Kahawa Bora*, a celebrity-driven coffee value chain development intervention that is focused on improving coffee production in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), yet appears to benefit primarily the external partners and the external elite management leadership. The elite politics of trying to "work aid out of business" instead has produced a development project that is too big to fail. By jointly leveraging their resources and managing their risks, the key business partner (Starbucks) acquires a new and unique specialty high-end coffee while the celebrity (the actor Ben Affleck) and his organization (the Eastern Congo Initiative) obtain another channel for promoting their brand. The elite management leadership profit through revolving-door dynamics that enable the managers to move between lucrative jobs in the for-profits and non-profits involved in the partnership. The coffee cooperatives in DRC do get access to a market and better prices in the short term but are completely dependent on Starbucks as the main buyer. This is in Starbucks' interest, but disadvantages the cooperatives that are given no tools or competencies to compete in the open market. By not addressing power imbalances, the benefits delivered to the beneficiaries are thus limited and uncertain.

Based on their analysis of a North-South business-NGO partnership in Ghana, Vestergaard et al. (2021) similarly find that partnerships are usually built around the interests and capacities of businesses. They argue that businesses do not analyze in depth what society has use for and who are most in need. Instead, they take point of departure in the businesses' own productive capacities and look for a beneficiary group that matches their capacities the best and fits their business agenda – even if it is not in the best interest of that beneficiary group. In a parallel study of tourism partnerships in Fiji, Hughes and Scheyvens (2021) explore how the commodification of tourists' desire to give back to the places they visit centers predominantly on gifting tangible donations, such as school supplies, that tourists can personally hand over, thereby blending tourist experience and tourist compassion. When arranging these tourist experiences, hotels focus on meeting tourist expectations, thereby prioritizing their reputation and brand over the broader priorities of the destination community, that wields little power to make demands. While local governments can to a certain extent enforce regulations preventing, for example, disruptive school visits, they are acutely aware of the importance of maintaining a competitive tourism industry.

4. Individualized and depoliticized solutions

The special issue additionally addresses how combining humanitarian sentiments and the need to make a profit can lead to individualized and depoliticized solutions. Budabin and Hudson (2021) analyze "sisterhood partnerships" that target conflict-related sexual violence in DRC through cause-related marketing. Their analysis demonstrates that while this approach generates awareness and funds, consumption-driven efforts remain individualized activities. By turning activists into consumers, they are thereby disconnected from the realm of politics and collective action and, furthermore, when privatizing solutions instead of supporting public structures, the state's role is diminished. Combining a feminist international political economy lens and a feminist security lens, the authors additionally find that these sisterhood partnerships have a tendency to commodify

feminist activism by linking women's issues to women's brands through women's NGOs. This has consequences for the choice of problems and solutions, often leading to a focus on marketing gendered products that draw on, and thereby reinforce, stereotypes of women as primarily caregivers. This, for example, translates into "empowering" individual women in the South economically through soap making and "empowering" individual women in the North to show solidarity through soap buying, while disregarding broader development issues related to political and societal change.

Another way in which combining profitmaking and humanitarian sentiments becomes individualized and depoliticized is through what Olwig (2021) refers to as the "sustainability superhero." Sustainability superheroes can be consumers or employees who are made to feel heroic through their purchases or work. Olwig shows, however, how the (apolitical) sustainability superhero easily becomes a "selfie-humanitarian," (cf. Koffman, Orgad, & Gill, 2015; Olwig & Christiansen, 2016; Igoe, 2017; Schwarz & Richey, 2019) whose image is at the forefront of the picture, while the historical–geographical structural issues that perpetuate inequality are blurred.

5. Accountability and frameworks to move forward

As exemplified in the special issue, maintaining accountability mechanisms becomes difficult when for-profits and non-profits partner (see also Richey, Hawkins, and Goodman (2021)). Vestergaard et al. (2021) explain that accountability measures that are able to assess development potential and that are accountable to beneficiaries are very resource demanding. They thus conflict with businesses' desire for cost-effectiveness – unless strong incentives are given for providing such accountability. For this reason, the governance logic promulgated by the UN, whereby partnerships with commercial actors are intended to fill development financing gaps, is problematic since accountability to beneficiaries may be at odds with accountability to shareholders. Olwig (2021) likewise points out that partnering with businesses may compromise the watchdog role of actors, such as civil society organizations, in relation to these businesses.

While all the articles illuminate the power of multinational business and commercial management logics, they also show how actors, including less powerful business actors, can maneuver to gain traction. Pascucci (2021) shows how humanitarians maintain influence in refugee camps through their "mediation" of incentives (e.g., through cash assistance and the provision of information) and through the bidding processes that allow the humanitarian sector to retain control by means of its bureaucratic apparatus. Pascucci further finds that it is the private sector, not the humanitarian organizations, that insists government and legislation play a significant role. Richey and Ponte (2021) demonstrate that there is a difference between types of businesses and power relations in partnerships. Independent micro-roasteries with only a few retail outlets, for example, can have a more balanced relationship with coffee producers. Large coffee conglomerates that operate globally are less dependent on one origin at any given time for their top-end coffees and can use this to their advantage.

In order to move forward, Hughes and Scheyvens (2021) emphasize the need for focus on the development impacts of partnerships. This necessitates both challenging power relations between partners and prioritizing community leadership in decision-making. To some extent, they argue, this can be achieved through more direct involvement of local NGOs and governments in partnership organization and management. Similarly, to rectify existing analytical frameworks within management studies that do not take their point of departure in the needs of and potential benefits for beneficiaries, Vestergaard et al. (2021) propose and develop a critical and novel framework for analyzing the impact potential of partnerships in a development context; the *Partnerships for Development* framework.

6. Conclusion

Together these studies illuminate the power structures inherent in for-profit and non-profit partnerships. They further discuss the historically conditioned structural inequalities from which they emerge and to which they risk further contributing when accountability mechanisms are lacking and governance turns into a matter of mere management. The actors involved in these partnerships must attempt to negotiate between the global space of business interests and the local places of need, while appearing to work as a coherent unit. As a result, the unequal power relations between the actors involved in the partnerships may be concealed. It is therefore of vital importance that research on the for-profit and non-profit partnership uncovers and elucidates the increasingly opaque power relations between actors, such as (neo)colonialists and (neo)colonized, watchdogs and the watched, for-profits and non-profits, humanitarians and objects of humanitarian affect, exploiters and exploited, powerful and powerless. Doing so will counter the abstract universalizing tendencies inherent in managerial global development logics and will enable critical engagement with substantive development needs. It is precisely the elucidation of the role of these power relations, and the need to counteract them in developmental policy, that has long been a key contribution of critical development scholars.

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