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Why Are Humanitarian Sentiments Profitable and What does this Mean for Global Development?

1. Introduction

Feeling helpful through actions meant to alleviate the suffering of distant others is a recently marketable commodity with a considerable history. In the late 18th century, the ethical subject was democratized as 'more and more people came to believe it was their obligation to ameliorate and prevent wrongdoing to others' (Laqueur, 2009, p. 37). This provoked significant debate over the janus-faced nature of humanitarian sentiments and the kinds of actions they foster. 'Sentimental feelings for distant strangers can bind us to suffering at home for all sorts of self-serving reasons' distorting humanitarian relief and development interventions to follow the 'topography of observable suffering' (Watenpaugh, 2015, 213). While seemingly inspiring actions that are well-intentioned, worthy and prioritizing the needs of others, these humanitarian sentiments often have the effect of disempowering the people on whose benefit the actions are predicated. We three have researched, analyzed and critiqued various aspects of the commodification of care, compassion and sentiment. In particular, we have explored the uses of affect in the 'reputation-washing' of some of the world's largest corporate and celebrity actors and the papering over of the need for larger, structural change effected by the mediated hype of these 'caring commodity' networks (Goodman, 2010; Hawkins, 2011; Hawkins, 2018; Richey & Ponte, 2011; Goodman et al., 2012; Doyle et al., 2019; Budabin & Richey, 2021). But what if these powerful drives, desires and views of how global problems can be solved through everyday human action were actually *designed* and *deployed* to make a profit for the actors who could harness them? And what if these for-profit actors were invited into partnership with non-profit partners, and *specifically* authorized by the international community as *the way* to promote global development in an interconnected world?

In this conclusion of the Special Issue entitled '*Commodifying Humanitarian Sentiments? The Black Box of the For-profit and Non-profit Partnership*' we briefly argue that there is profit in the commodification of humanitarian sentiments and that this contributes to power inequalities across the material and the representational outcomes of partnerships. The prominence of these partnerships within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 'common sense' understanding and agreement that development outcomes cannot be met *without* the direct involvement of for-profit actors, and the focus on working together to 'do good' makes these partnerships seem obvious, benign and void of power dynamics. The articles here document the materiality behind this discursive work and the political economy behind the be-spectacled 'bling' of these alliances. Based on a wide assortment of methods ranging from multi-sited fieldwork, team collaborations, and event ethnography to discursive and value chain analyses, these articles provide evidence that inside the black box of partnerships there are sentiment-driven power relations whose politics, intentions and outcomes merit serious consideration.

These articles move beyond the typical critiques of development as an idea and towards an examination of the actors and practices of its interventions, including both the alleged and actual outcomes for beneficiaries. Notable is the research linking the discursive critique of the representations of 'helping' to the actual on-the-ground material and metaphorical goods that are produced by development and humanitarian partners and 'sold' as outcomes. The only way to understand the value, economic and otherwise, of humanitarian sentiments is to understand the links between the stories we tell ourselves and the actions we take on the basis of these stories. This work builds on well-documented analyses of new actors and alliances in development (Goodman, 2013a; Goodman & Barnes, 2013 2011; Hawkins, 2012; Ponte & Richey, 2014; Richey & Ponte, 2014). In our engagement here with the issue's articles and our own work we outline how the notion of 'partnership' has framed and produced rather particular humanitarian sentiments.

2. Doing Well and Doing Good Become One and the Same

Partnerships in the production of development imaginaries create truths about international development and consumer engagement that make development appear simplified, manageable and outside history or politics (Ponte & Richey, 2014, p. 84; see also Hawkins & Emel, 2014). The humanitarian sentiments invoked through slick advertisements, celebrity speeches and energizing conference sessions make us feel like part of a global sisterhood, a happy farmers' cooperative or a network of entrepreneurial bead makers when engaging in conscious consumption. It is unequivocable that this leads the 'therapeutic value' of superficial not political or structural change in the corporate- and celebrity-fueled 'gestural economy' of corporate social responsibility (Rojek, 2014). Thus, these partnership imaginaries give the impression of 'real change' happening because we can often easily see or be told about the immediate, on-the-ground impacts that can sometimes be hidden when more complex and less transparent structural change is put into place.

No longer is the commodification of compassion only linked in a direct cause-related marketing (CRM) exchange where a donation is triggered directly by a purchase or corporate profit is forgone and redirected to a worthy cause (Bryant & Goodman, 2004; Goodman, 2004; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012; Barendregt & Jaffe, 2014; Richey & Ponte, 2011; 2021; Kipp & Hawkins, 2019). 'Helping' relationships have become an integral part of the products and brands themselves. Yet even as they integrate along the value chain, the power dynamics remain unequal. The SDGs, developed in *direct collaboration* with corporations,

emphasize a different form of partnership that may prove both more flexible but less accountable as the process to decide what is a 'worthy' and 'good' cause is put into the hands of a 'partnering' profit-driven company and its philanthropic public relations department. Partnerships are uniting fundraising with influencing development and humanitarian outcomes as 'second generation Brand Aid' (Richey & Ponte, 2021), a 'logistification of development and aid' (Pascucci, 2021), and as 'internationally sanctioned definitions of "doing good"' (Olwig, 2021a). In this, business humanitarian and development partnerships are framed as and actively encouraged by international institutions as more 'transformative' and moving beyond those we have seen before and studied as CRM to, in effect, (re)direct the full power of markets, corporations and neoliberal capitalism directly into humanitarian development. Through these partnerships, we have effectively reached 'peak' mainstream sustainable development: Doing well by doing good has essentially collapsed and is no longer a processual relationality. Through the blending of for-profit, non-profit, state and non-state global development and humanitarian actors, the humanitarian sentiments of care, compassion and responsibility are realised as utterly and inseparably synonymous with the capitalistic and corporate sentiments of profit. 'Well' and 'good' become one and the same.

3. Accountability Becomes Marketability

These partnerships radically alter accountability in terms of who must be accountable to whom and which things must be accounted for. The marketing drive for the production of development success through photogenic imaginaries shifts any possibility for on-the-ground accountability. As media-genic visibility replaces transparency in the performance of humanitarian sentiments for consumers, private sector partners and donors, demands for downward accountability to local development stakeholders or to humanitarian recipients are over-shadowed. The articles here document a glamorous story of authentic and steadfast humanitarianism by beneficent business leaders, 'nearby sustainability superheroes' (Olwig, 2021a), celebrity humanitarians (Richey and Ponte 2021), philanthropists, consumer partners and compassionate tourists (Hughes & Scheyvens, 2021) that links the work of knowledgeable and hard-working farmers or entrepreneurial refugees to 'innovative and risk-taking businesses'. This is the ideal business solution for 'sustainable development through global partnerships' (SDG 17). The media optics required for upward accountability are not just removed from the structures of transparency and accountability to local interlocutors, they deflect attention from the most fundamental questions of international development: Does it work for the people who are supposed to benefit from it?

What we are accounting for is also shifted in these partnerships. There is a strong pull towards 'awareness raising' as an outcome (sometimes *the* outcome) of for-profit non-profit partnerships; however there remains little evidence that increased likes, views, shares, followers etc. in the realms of social media lead to any material changes. In fact, the awareness raising in these partnerships is often superficial, self-indulgent and apolitical—obscuring structural and political issues (see Budabin & Hudson, 2021) and perilously making it seem as if some change has been accomplished or problem solved without anything actually happening. Additionally, as articulated above, the type of development that is legitimated within international institutions and partnerships is that which does good *and* does well. 'Successful' development is that which generates value (economic, public marketing/Public Relations (PR) value) and which *has to be marketable*. As such, particular types of development projects, partnerships, networks, and funds capture the attention of the global philanthropic, business and celebrity elites that drive these partnerships. There is a rising and dangerous solipsism here: global development *has* to be done through partnerships

or it is not legitimate, not exciting nor marketable to a sentimental public. Humanitarianism and development intervention is simultaneously a business model and a model for business and, thus, the only legitimized model of the global development game in town.

The attention attributed to value creation through the primary motivation of commercial outputs and prioritization of efficiency of the for-profit sector's alliances with traditional development actors makes all these partnerships ultimately *profit-driven*. The seriousness of the sentiment that business has an important role to play, and that businesses themselves feel 'taken seriously' (Olwig, 2021b, p. 4) is made possible by the alignment—and as above—the absolute collapsing of purpose and profit. This results in certain limitations that other forms of humanitarian and/or development interventions have not faced. In particular, these novel partnerships cannot be *fundamentally* pro-poor or exercise 'a preferential option for the poor.' This, as clearly illustrated by Vestergaard et al. (2021), is because the poorest, or those whose needs are greatest, are tautologically defined by their insufficient productivity and inability to respond effectively to incentives of the market. These partnerships are not about – and in fact *cannot be about* – decreasing inequality in situations where the playing field is unequal across gender, race, class, caste, religion, geography, etc. Engaging in those explicitly political struggles of representation and access would endanger the hospitable climate for smooth business relations in what could be called the desire for more 'friction-less capital' travelling across the planet in the search of humanitarian profits (cf. Tsing, 2004). They would, instead, raise frictions over factions and these are not good for business.

Importantly, partnerships can, in some instances, mean the differences between life and death, health and sickness, distress and wellbeing. Thus, at their most extreme, embedded in partnerships can be the power over who lives and who dies, a power now further acceded to profit seeking companies, PR departments and capitalist logics (Goodman, 2013b). This is perverse at its core if we consider that life and the ability to live is an outcome in the move to commodify everything just as the converse is true: what happens to those people, causes or humanitarian concerns that either don't facilitate profit or provide the PR boost these partnerships demand? Additionally, these partnerships are not able to prioritize environmental sustainability or non-growth, because, the only way for humanitarian sentiments to remain profitable is for someone to sell something at a profit. If environmental consequences of production, trade and consumption were to be taken into account in product pricing, products that come from such partnerships would not be competitive on the world market. For-profit and non-profit partnerships are thus potentially effective in acting as tools for development but are not able to act as agents for a more sustainable and just development. The transformational aspects of such collaborations remain part of the imaginary branding of these ever-popular forms of helping, not part of the empirical and material improvement in the lives of their recipients.

4. Conclusion: What Profiting from Humanitarian Sentiments Means for Global Development

It is hard to disagree with 'partnerships' and the cooperative, equal and progressive connotations of the word. This is especially difficult in an age where 'partnerships' are considered central to achieving sustainable global development goals and are legitimated as 'common sense', 'win-win', scenarios. SDG17 has opened the door to these partnerships in a way that fundamentally legitimizes them as a mainstream—and maybe *the*—way to pursue sustainable development. It is necessary to move from the slippery 'global' toward the scale of the everyday, the intricacies of how partnerships work and how they fundamentally shift,

and have the potential to shift, power-relations. Ultimately, these development partnerships appear to promote progressive, decolonizing humanitarian sentiments—a kind of *post-colonial, post-development humanitarianism*—as they are no longer about North-South, developed-developing, core-periphery, us-them binaries. Yet, as these articles document empirically (see Olwig 2021b), they are also about expanding the scale of inequalities and perpetuating existing hierarchies in which global elites are further invited in and *specifically authorized* to dictate the terms of 'doing good' while everyone else is expected to 'partner' in promoting their agenda. The state is no longer the repository for responsibility and power in solving humanitarian crises or development needs. States are now facilitators and/or 'invisible hands' in for-profit partnerships that turn on the reputational and real capital of predatory global corporations, the personal, media and celebrity capital of global mega-stars, the marketing power and capital of charities and the 'choice' power of consumers, all in the name of something we are urged to now call 'global development' (Oldekop et al., 2020). Specifically, we call for Development Studies researchers to be attuned to the everyday practices of power that are inherent in these partnerships, the outsized roles that celebrity and economic elites have in determining their direction and the ways in which outcomes are and are not made visible. Attending to new actors, alliances, networks and power dynamics in these global partnerships will be critical in work moving forward.

Business needs to sell something. That's what it does. We know when business works by looking at its profits. But how do we know when for-profit and non-profit partnerships work, for whom they work and for whom they do not? We must stop kidding ourselves about the common-sense, always, everywhere win-winism (Rajak, 2016; Giridharadas, 2018; Budabin & Richey, 2021) of partnerships. We must look beyond their photogenic, feel-good sentiments and delve into the devilish details of partnership outcomes and the unequal power relationships they reify, expand and deepen.The humanitarian sentiments underlying for-profit and non-profit partnerships benefit from the mis-alignment between high-risk, innovation-reliant, elite-biased partnerships and a sustainable global development that relies on a more democratic agenda. The articles in this issue have analysed these mis-fits and aberrant alignments and point to the need for sustained, critical scholarship on the inescapable role that profiting from humanitarian sentiments will play in the production of the future agenda and livelihood outcomes of global development and humanitarian interventions.

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