Creating a healthy environment for Australian aid in times of inequality and austerity—our professional obligations

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In the decade following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Australian aid experienced a period of sustained growth. Both government aid and public donations almost doubled and, buoyed by pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals and a new bipartisan commitment to aid, the period also saw rapid growth of the Australian aid sector itself. This was evidenced by increasing numbers of NGOs, research centres, development studies courses and enrolments, private contractors and volunteers engaged in aid work.

Then in the fiscal year 2012–13, the sector suffered unprecedented budget cuts as well as the confirmation of a clear trend of declining levels of funds raised by individual donations. This was followed by the loss of AusAID and significant shifts in policy direction for the Australian government aid program. Howes (2015) defines the decade as one in which Australian aid underwent some of the most dramatic changes seen since the aid program began in the early 1970s.

There is no doubt that we are in a period of change. This is unsettling for those of us who identify as part of the sector, and feel that the ways of working established over this last decade of growth are under threat. The degree of discomfort being experienced is indicated by the high level of interest in recent events such as the plenary session at the 2015 ACFID conference 'Creating a healthy environment for Australian aid in times of inequality and austerity'; discussion sessions that we held with practitioners in 2013 and 2014; and the latest round of strategic planning, restructuring and repositioning amongst organisations within the sector. There is a sense that the wellbeing of our sector is under threat: programs have been cut, people are fearful of their job security and facing changes in the nature of their roles, and many organisations have issued redundancy notices.

However we argue that the recent changes in Australian aid budget and policy are not the cause of the current ill health of our sector, even though they may have exacerbated our symptoms. Instead, we suggest that this sense of ill-health is caused by a more fundamental tension between the values to which both individual professionals and organisations subscribe, and the extent to which these values are compromised in practice by organisational imperatives. These are not new issues and have long dominated the after-hours talk of development practitioners, driving high levels of frustration in the sector. We argue in this opinion piece that part of the problem underlying this tension is that organisational identities dominate both discourse and practice within the sector. We anticipate that, by understanding more clearly our own professional identities and responsibilities and our collective potential to shape our own sector, we can find ways to change and improve it.

This piece is based on a discussion series we held in Melbourne during 2013 and 2014 that sought to provide a space for aid practitioners to reflect on their roles and practice and explore, through dialogue with peers, ideas for improving practice. We refer to 'improving practice' not in the technical sense such as increasing efficiency of water and sanitation solutions, but in the relational sense of how to strengthen our work as ethical and accountable development professionals. The piece also draws on the insights and ideas shared during the plenary session of the 2015 ACFID University Network Conference, which we chaired, and at which Chris Roche, Joanna Spratt, Brendan Rigby and Thulsi Narayanasamy spoke to the question of the health of the Australian aid sector and what we as practitioners and academics can do about it. The impetus for these events came from our own experiences as development practitioners and the rich interactions we have had as members, at different points in time, of the Australian, New Zealand, Pacific and American development practitioner communities. Our aim therefore is to give light to the conversations taking place amongst peers, which are often overlooked in academic discussions.

While we refer in this paper to 'our sector' in generic terms, we recognise that the sector is anything but homogenous. There are many organisations, networks and individuals practicing with high levels of integrity and professionalism. There have also been many efforts—now and in the past—to strengthen our sector, enhance accountability, and ensure ethical practice. We want to recognise these efforts and do not mean to discount them by focusing here on areas where we feel we can still improve. While the views expressed in this paper reflect sentiments expressed by our colleagues, they are our own.

The health of the sector

First, let us put the health of the Australian aid budget into historical context (something that we are not always particularly good at, being a sector with high turnover and short institutional memories). As Howes (2015) and Flanagan (2015) have shown, the history of the Australian aid budget has been one of relative meanness, with consistently low levels of aid. The increases over 2005-2015 appear as a blip within a more consistent trend of steady and possibly declining commitment to aid relative to our growing population and our growing GNI. The recent aid cuts have arguably simply returned things to the (meanness) norm.

It is our view—based on what we have heard from practitioners at the plenary at the ACFID conference, as well as our discussion groups held in 2013 and 2014—that discourse over the shrinking aid program is masking more fundamental tensions within the organisations in which we

work. Many of us in the sector came to it and/or the organisations that we work for because we were attracted to the values espoused. Yet these values often conflict with the organisational imperative to raise more resources and the bureaucratic processes that flow from it (Chabbott 2003).

Communication is a prime example. There was an urgent sense in our discussions that we need to communicate better—to politicians and the wider public—about aid. There was a widespread sense in the ACFID conference plenary and within the discussion series that a lot of public communication oversimplifies and inaccurately represents the role of aid and organisations in addressing complex issues of poverty and powerlessness, in order to generate funding. Such communication does not represent the values or experience, and therefore identity, of many of us working in the sector. This fosters a sense of disconnect between ourselves and the public face of the sector as represented through organisational communication. Our own experience, and that of colleagues we have talked with, is that this is part of a broader trend in which priority is too often placed on growing funding and organisation survival, rather than on ensuring we are working towards 'doing ourselves out of a job.' The validity of this feeling is in part evidenced by the proportionately high growth in spend by NGOs on fundraising in contrast to development project or administration costs (Wilson et al. 2015).

The tension between values and funding within NGOs can be traced to the evolution of NGOs and issues of identity. In his recent history of ACFID, Kilby (2015:6) describes the changes that have taken place within NGOs in Australia (largely mirroring that of most OECD nations):

> There has been a shift from the activism for alternatives in the 1970s and 1980s to the adoption of a more circumscribed role in an uncertain NGO world of the 2010s where government and, to some extent, the public have become more sceptical.

A central feature of this change has been that of shifts, and arguably confusion, in the identity of aid organisations and practitioners. As Edwards (1999:28) has argued:

> NGOs are still confused about their identity. They have always been both market-based actors, providing services at a lower price than the commercial sector, and social actors, representing particular non-market values and interests in the political process. These two identities have radically different implications, and although they can be successfully contained within the same organisation for a while, this becomes increasingly difficult as the agency grows and external pressure to perform effectively in each of these roles increases.

While written over a decade ago, we believe this is still true of much of the sector today and applies not just to NGOs, but to academics and private contractors, who also juggle conflicting identities. It is this tension of identity, and the ramifications for us as professionals, which we argue should be the focus of our discussions. While the changes in our sector have been stimulated by changes in the external environment often beyond our control, the choice of how to respond has always been ours to make. As Brigg (2009:1423) has argued: 'who we are may be one of the most important and pervasive motivating and organising forces in how we conceptualise and undertake development efforts.' So we suggest that the important question for us right now is not how we, as both practitioners and researchers, can respond to the current context in Australia but, rather, who are we as a body of professionals, what do we perceive our professional responsibilities to be, and how can we be better at managing the wellbeing of our profession?

Organisations dominate and constrain our professional practice and discourse

We argue that the best way to deal with this tension is for us to focus on our roles as individual professionals and, collectively, as a profession, as distinct from the interests of the organisations that we choose to work for and that typically dominate our sector discourse and representation. In our experience, our identity is shaped, or arguably constrained, significantly by the organisation that we work for; be it DFAT, the UN, a secular or religious NGO, a university or as an independent or private contractor. It is not easy getting your first job, especially in a particular organisation that best reflects your values, and continued contracts or career advancement depends on one's superiors within those organisations; thus often cementing our commitment to them (and potentially our distrust of the approach and contribution of other organisations).

In our own experience, we are incentivised to become well adept at managing politics within our organisations and on behalf of our organisations to survive within them and enable them to survive. This has a significant impact on our practice. As Chabbott (2003:102) has argued:

> …many international development workers sense that the range of their potential action is closely circumscribed by the bureaucratic logic of organisationally sanctioned processes, such as internal project reviews, logical frameworks, evaluations and strategic plans.

Often, this means those of us working within these organisations or contracted to provide services to these organisations are forced to 'do as I say and not as I do', as we strive for implementing good development practice that is often at odds with the operational realities and incentives within our organisations. As noted by Eyben (2010:393):

> What gets reported up the system may be very different from what the front-line aid practitioner may have known to be the case, there are crises of confidence and contradictory behaviour among front-line workers as they struggle with the dissonance between what they do and what they report they do.

We are not advocating here for a revolution with respect to organisational form. However we think that if we step back from our organisations, then our individual and collective responsibilities to shape our environment as members of the development profession (however loosely the term profession is applied) become more apparent. Focusing on our responsibilities as individual professionals

becomes even more important when we consider the diverse nature of our sector, in which often those involved do not necessarily consider development their 'profession' but identify themselves first as engineers, researchers, medical practitioners and so on. This provides a further challenge to establishing a strong professional community, given that we do not necessarily share the same knowledge base, causal beliefs or interest (Chabbott 2003). Articulating our responsibilities and ethics as individual professionals is also essential when considering the nature of our work; aid and development work is an inherently values-based exercise that involves significant power differentials and ethical tensions. Individual practitioners' conceptualisations of their work and the actions they take have direct impact on other people's lives, typically those that are less powerful.

Our individual professional responsibilities and identity

This tension between individuals and organisational interests is likely not unique to our profession but it exists in ours without a defined professional code of practice or a professional association that individual professionals can turn to and hold ourselves (and our organisations) accountable to. Professional communities are typically defined by shared competencies, responsibilities (e.g. codes of conduct) and purpose, each of which are obviously interlinked. To fulfil our purpose and responsibilities as development practitioners we need a particular set of competencies and knowledge. However currently we do not have agreed sets of competencies within our sector. As Spratt (2015) has argued, the absence of clear, agreed professional competencies for aid and development work makes our profession vulnerable to undermining and devaluing. We believe this is, in part, what many of us experience within our own organisations as our experience and skills often need to be 'hidden' in order to align with sanctioned organisational practices. Roche, during the ACFID conference plenary, emphasised this point by arguing for the need to better understand effective 'frontline' development practice and then consider how Australian-based organisations should adapt their systems and operations to better support these ways of working.

Alongside competencies sit responsibilities. So what are our individual professional responsibilities? To be clear, we are referring to responsibilities beyond those that we owe to the organisations that employ us. Arguably such responsibilities might be drawn from the Busan and Paris declarations on aid effectiveness, the good Humanitarian Donorship principles, the Red Cross' humanitarian principles and thinking on human rights and development. The 'principles of practice' that we as professionals have a responsibility to uphold might include: do no harm; evidence based and pro-poor action; recognition of the self-determination and dignity of every person in the contexts where we work; and localisation of resources and power to the extent possible. Coincidentally, the first three of these principles also form part of modernised versions of the Hippocratic Oath for medical practitioners.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider each of these 'principles of practice' in detail, at face value we see immediate implications for emphasis on the complexity of what we do because without that we cause harm, ignore evidence and neglect those with least power. We would thus argue that, as practitioners, our primary obligation should be to focus on the challenge of achieving change in the context within which we work, the reality of our role, and the extent of our influence in contributing to change. Our obligation is to stay aware of power dynamics and the power that we wield; to stay focused on values and ensuring their integrity within our working processes, not just focusing on tasks or results; and to engage with evidence (even though it may be contested) and to reflect on what this means for our own practice.

We believe that articulating such 'principles of practice' will give us more ability to maintain the integrity of our practice when it is threatened by organisational interests or politics. It articulates that our primary obligations are not to the organisations in which we work (or the current terms of reference we have) but the broader goals of the shared project that we are working towards. Unlike Eyben (2010), who argues that managing aid effectively actually hinges on maintaining dissonance and subversion, we believe that this state of dissonance and values conflict is not sustainable at the level of individual practitioners and ultimately undermines effectiveness through burnout or practitioners' simply 'giving in'. Instead, we believe that articulating our shared professional principles would give us greater capacity to challenge poor practice and decision making in the organisations in which we work. Further we think that peer support—learning from and holding each other to account—has a powerful role to play in enabling us to work in accordance with such principles and building critical mass within and outside of organisations to create spaces for good practice. This is one example of where, we believe, the fostering of a strong professional community or association would have a role to play, particularly within our current times of change and uncertainty.

Our collective potential

Collectively, we are yet to harness our potential to influence the environment in which we work. The only way in which parts of the sector come together is organisationally; that is, a sub-set of NGOs gather through ACFID, and sub-sets of other organisations gather through specific coalitions that are typically issue-based. We have much to gain from being members in our own right of a professional association and continuing to evolve as a 'profession' (to the extent that we are). The act of association has power, yet the way in which our profession is currently structured (or unstructured) works against association and collective action (Edwards 1999). We promote collective action and coalitions amongst those with whom we work, but have been relatively ineffective in establishing the same within our own profession; it has been argued that we are generally stymied in this by key barriers of organisational competition and control (Blunt 2014).

Overcoming these barriers and associating as individual professionals could serve a number of important functions. First, such an association could codify the professional 'principles of practice' that we hold as individuals. This would not seek to replace the existing ACFID Code of Conduct, as that applies only to NGOs and does not support or shield us in our own personal ethical dilemmas. Second, such an association could foster better collaboration between researchers and academics to improve the education and mentoring of new practitioners, and continuing education and reflection for mid- and senior-level practitioners. It could identify skills shortages or an oversupply in the job market, and help reskill those in the profession for other justice pursuits in the future. Third, the establishment of a professional body could provide a voice in public discourse for those of us who identify in one way or another as a practitioner, outside of our institutional identities, as well as enabling direct advocacy with DFAT.

We are aware that the path towards greater professional association will be neither easy nor without personal ramifications. It requires us to ask uncomfortable questions about the quality of our current work and how we are working towards the changes that we seek. Although it offers greater solidarity between professionals across different organisations, it also demands us to take further personal risks on top of those that we already take in a sector that is hard and competitive. However a profession that seeks such radical change is never going to be an easy one. We are responsible for shaping our sector and our identity as professionals, so we need to take responsibility for the health of our sector and the integrity of our practice.

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