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**Field report**

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Here follows a report on the six months of fieldwork conducted in Lesotho as part of the MA thesis in Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo. It contains five sections.

- Theoretical and thematic approaches before fieldwork
- Description of fieldwork and access to key sights and scenes
- Overview of data types
- Ethical considerations
- Key themes

## 1. THE THEORETICAL AND THEMATIC APPROACH PRE FIELDWORK

Anthropology has a long and diverse relationship with development. Just in the last few decades we have seen a vast range of anthropological literature on the topic, ranging from attempts to apply anthropological analysis as a part of a stated interest to improve development interventions (e.g. Willigen 2002); to an overtly critical literature, aimed rather at questioning the very foundations upon which development interventions are based, including, of course, the very notion ‘development’ itself (e.g. Escobar). In recent years, however, anthropologists have made the case for a new “ethnographic turn” (Mosse 2005) in the discipline’s relationship to development. A central part of this turn has been towards the cosmologies, practices and encounters of the aid practitioners themselves (e.g. Acre and Long 1993; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Mosse 2005; Lewis and Mosse 2006; Yarrow 2008; Fassin 2008; Englund 2010). It is in this tradition my study is located. And more particularly, it is an attempt to bring this new ethnographic turn towards practitioners back to the place where one of the discipline’s most influential ethnographical accounts of development was born. The baby, of course, being James Ferguson’s *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994), and its home, Lesotho.

My primary guiding question was thus aimed at the practitioners of development, and not its intended or unintended effects: *How do Lesotho’s aid laborers produce social membership, scale and place?* I was to engage with and learn about Lesotho’s aid laborers, actors operating in a perceived ‘middle ground’ between transnational NGOs based in the North and the ‘target populations’ in the South. How did such a group – whose efforts in the eyes of their Northern benefactors directly involves aiding the country – practice and interpret their role? What moral positions, imperatives and puzzles were created in the relation between policy and practice? What ideals of aid conduct existed – within and outside groups of practitioners? What was the actors’ relation to contemporary binaries of city and country side, benefactors and beneficiaries, young and old, future and past, individuality and collectivity, Africa and the West, development and underdevelopment, modernity and tradition? Most broadly, how did they constitute the social, there, in the ‘middle’?

As a secondary approach, to be initiated after returning in Norway was to conduct selected interviews in a donor organization with professionals responsible for funding, coordinating and initiating projects in Lesotho.

As will become apparent from the following, these research questions and thematic orientation remains highly relevant. Parts of the empirical material have nonetheless challenged me to clarify some of the questions.

En diskusjon av analytiske verktøy. Hvilke teoretiske innfallsvinkler og problemstillinger lå til grunn for feltarbeidet? Hvordan endret de seg eventuelt etter hvert? Hvilke nye erkjennelser har du gjort? Hvilke analytiske muligheter synes å åpne seg i ettertid?

## 2. WHAT HAS HAPPENED? DESCRIPTION OF FIELDWORK

### *Getting into the field*

I arrived in Lesotho on January 11<sup>th</sup> 2012 and left the country June 31<sup>st</sup>. In an initial three weeks when I had not decided which organization to study, I split the time between visiting a range of NGOs narrating my study purpose and accompanying my former employer Red Cross on their field visits and meetings. At this early stage it remained a possibility to do my fieldwork in this organization. But as they welcomed me to learn about their work, they also helped me to approach other organizations with a formal letter outlining my study. Some NGOs replied, and after a short while I decided to work fulltime with a Norwegian funded organization for disabled persons called The Organization<sup>1</sup>. After a meeting with its employees and thereafter its managing director, the NGO openly granted me full access to their office and activities for desired period of study. It was at this point when I decided not to engage further with my former employer, the Red Cross, whom I until then had been accompanying on the rather unclear basis of old acquaintance. If I was to proceed fully with this organization I would have to request formal acquaintance in head quarters in both Norway and Lesotho, knowing very well that this process would be lengthy and complex. It seemed more beneficial – both in terms of time-saving and in methodological terms of the benefits of unfamiliarity – to start with a clean sheet.

What is The Organization? It operates both as an organization with activities and ‘target groups’ of its own, and as an assisting umbrella organization for four sub-organizations, so called Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs). The DPOs are divided by in separate areas, with an organization for the blind, the deaf, the physically disabled and the mentally handicapped. Besides intended to function as a support for these four organizations, The organization run and manage its own field-based activities, including:

- Training of villagers in the theory of human rights, and in how to influence local and central government based on such rights.
- Training of villagers in sexual behavior and methods to prevent the spread of HIV and aids.
- Influencing government officials through lobbying for a changed government policy towards persons with disabilities.

Since I started working with The Organization on a daily basis the first week in February, the sights and scenes of fieldwork can roughly be divided into four: In office, out of office, half-structured talks with NGO workers in related organizations, and interviews in Norway. In the following I will elaborate on these arenas in turn, before turning to a more explicit methodological summary.

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<sup>1</sup> Organisasjonsnavnet er sensurert, dette er bare et dokument som eksempel til andre studenter på emnesidene til SOSANT4200, og videre i dokumentet blir navnet «The Organization». (studiekonsulent på SAI sin fotnote)

### *In office*

My every-day place of work and study quickly became The Organization's main office. It is here where I received my own desk space among the other employees. Even though the organization employs only six persons (four operational staff, one accountant and a managing director), much time was spent merely trying to stay on top of the daily stream of events and conversations. What was the status of the funding for this project, what happened at that meeting, with that report? As I became more confident in understanding the everyday of office practice, I increasingly also went to the offices of the four DPOs to broaden the scope of informants.

But it is in the main office where I spent most time. A central strategy remaining throughout the fieldwork was the study of and participation in oral office debates. Informants showed great interest in lively and at times lengthy discussion. Commonly these debates arose by their initiative, only rarely did I start them off by introducing a question. Due in part to the fact that one, and then later two, of The Organization's employees were Western English-speaking NGO workers the office was not an unfamiliar place to speak English, Lesotho's second language. At the same time, of course, there were daily conversations conducted in Sesotho between the local employees. But as my Sesotho improved - I took regular classes from the beginning to the end of fieldwork - I was able to follow parts of those discussions, and soon pose questions for clarification in Sotho. After which the conversation would tend to continue in English.

Early on it became clear that a large amount of time in office was also spent by the development practitioners on making and revising reports. Thus I became curious to follow the paths of documents, mapping their social life. How is a report produced? What is changed and what stays the same in a document's journey to the donor. It turned out that from a first draft made immediately after, say, a village 'empowerment' workshop, to the final draft is submitted to the donor, there can be tens - if not hundreds - of work hours involved by a large set of actors. In this reporting process, some things stay the same while others are contested. One report I was able to track back and forth from between the project officers and The Organization's director 24 times before it went to the Norwegian donor, who again made calls for new revisions. A central question thus became not only how these reports are produced, but also: What did they themselves produce?

### *Out of office*

Weekly activities were held by The Organization, the DPOs - or more commonly both - out of office. It ranged from fundraising event, workshops and press conferences in Maseru - predominantly in English - to village visits and training workshops lasting several days in rural areas - predominantly in Sotho. Thus with the latter, language became a problem. I attempted to resolve this in three ways. In village interventions - mostly training sessions inside 'community councils' or public village gatherings - I paid more close notice to non-verbal forms of practice. Secondly, I supplemented my participation with in-process conversation with the English speaking trainers and workshop conveners. Thirdly, I got translation help. At first this was done with the limited help of English speakers present at actual events. But with little access to the feedback from the workshop

participants *themselves*, which at times was elaborate and lively, I soon realized that I was still missing much. With the informed consent of the trainers – and to a limited extent also the participants – I therefore made close to full recordings of a number of the workshops. This included introductions, lectures, group discussions, lunches and other breaks, and closing prayers. The result was hours of recordings near exclusively in Sesotho. What was I to do with it? In late February I established a formal affiliation with the National University of Lesotho. I committed myself to holding two lectures at the Department of Social Sciences towards the end of my stay, which I did. Through the affiliation I was also able to contact scholars in Anthropology and History. It was through one of these that I was able to engage a well-experienced master's student in transcribing and translating parts of the recorded material.

#### *Half-structured interviews in related organizations*

As fieldwork progressed and a certain empirical patterns became apparent, I became increasingly concerned with the question of wider relevance. While not being something explicitly stated in my project outline, I decided towards the end of my stay to contact Lesotho's three other overtly human rights-based NGOs, which explicitly were engaged in similar types of activity as my main organization. The aim was to test the relevance of some of the empirical topics that had arose thus far, as well as seek more answers to the questions concerning of development practitioner cosmology, or what I came to think of as the project within the projects. I managed to conduct half-structured talks with workers from all of the organizations, and particularly workers operating in formally positions in the organization as my main informants in The Organization. At total of ten interviews were conducted with seven workers, with an additional interaction with some of these practitioners in workshop settings in the capital. I decided not use a tape recorder due to the formalizing effect I suspected it would have on the talks, which I aimed to conduct in an unceremonious manner. But with the consent of the interviewees I was however able to write nearly word-for-word answers on my laptop while still remaining eye contact.

#### *In Norway*

As I was able to locate and work with a Norwegian-funded organization in Lesotho, I could go through with the planned interviews after fieldwork. In March I contacted the donor, and we made appointments for talks in early August 2012, when the relevant staff will be returning from holiday. I aim to wrap up interviews in end of the same month.

### **3. FORMS OF DATA**

What kind of data has the interaction outlined above allowed me to produce? Throughout the stay in Lesotho I wrote field notes. The relative immobile nature of the office space or conference allowed me to write rather elaborate in-process field notes on a lap top. This also helped me record more precisely the flow of conversations. After which I could retreat into other rooms and supply other observations and interpretations. In out-of-office fieldwork the use of lap top became difficult. In

these occasions I always kept a notebook and/or a tape recorder for jottings or recording of personal memos. Back home at the end of each day I would ideally go over the material written or recorded in order to produce a more comprehensive field note. Along with the description of daily participation and observation in the field, I increasingly made separate analytical commentaries, and attempted to internally compare events and outline beginning empirical patterns. I would also include stories from newspapers and the general public discourse.

These comprehensive daily entries remain my main source of data. The secondary source is interview transcriptions and transcriptions of out of office training settings provided by the assisting MA student, as well as the countless reports, evaluations, minutes and other documents collected at The Organization.

### *Stranger and friend*

As time passed in field, I experienced my role developing from being an outside researcher, an expert to whom they could narrate official stories and dry facts – towards becoming an insiders' outsider, a discussing partner whom one also could trust with critique and more intimate reflections, as well as a back channel to air frustrations. As I became a known face in the organization, I also experienced that the laborious task of contacting people in the more peripheral parts of the organizational network became easier. Now people some would also contact me to share their views, learning from others that I was willing to listen. Throughout my stay, my office desk was referred to as the research desk. While there were never any doubts about the limited time which I was to remain in Lesotho, in the office I gradually came to be seen as a representative of the organization. Thus at a late stage of fieldwork I was on some occasions sent to represent the organization alone at a workshops. A sign I took confirming some embeddedness. On the personal side, some strangers naturally turned into close acquaintances which I would also see after work hours and in weekends.

## **4. QUESTIONS OF ETHICS**

Throughout the project I have been committed to establish informed consent with the parts involved, and to present information in a way that would not mislead or jeopardize participants. By also pursuing anonymity for actors and organizations involved, I aimed to ensure that potentially harmful material could not be traced to them.

In the case of the core informants, I was allowed proper time to describe my work, while they were able to ask questions about it at different stages in the process. With some groups and at certain times, however, informed consent was difficult to accomplish. This went in particular for public gatherings or occasions of larger workshops in rural areas. In such field visits the prevailing language applied was Sesotho, and the medium was that of a public address. Practitioners could for example gather villagers in a circle and addressed them in plural. My prescribed role was to observe. But at my request speakers gladly informed the public of the project. The message which was then conveyed, however, was a rather simplified version, in which they could describe me in a sentence as student attempting to learn about people with disabilities. It would be exaggerating to claim that a fully informed consent was secured at these occasions. I hold that there nonetheless are three reasons which help to place my role as an observer within defensible ethical limits. The first is my

commitment to anonymization of all participants and places, making sure that none of the information presented in such occasions can be traced and become harmful for the audience. This might seem like a quick-fix, and I grant that it should not be the single answer. The second reason is that my observation was mainly focused on the practice of the NGO workers, and only to a limited degree on the villagers present. The third reason is that these were events performed in clearly public places. Consequently the speaking out in such occasions were public actions.

The question of anonymity applies also to The Organization, which I have chosen to address with its real name. The argument is that there is only one organization of its particular kind in Lesotho. As descriptions in the thesis necessarily will reveal the nature of the organization's work it would be futile to attempt to hide its identity. The same does not go for the employees, whose identities will be kept anonymous. Nearly all the names in field notes have already been fictionalized. This work is still ongoing.

#### *A note on reception*

Public debates of development and aid tend to be polarized. While my strategy is to reach beyond the collaborative co-construction of applied anthropology and its critical denouncing counterpart, there is a possibility that my results will upset some. But with the precautions of informed consent and necessary anonymization mentioned above, my main commitment remains to produce an uncensored and truthful account.

## **5. KEY THEMES POST FIELDWORK**

Here follows two themes which I see as related and central going forward in writing the thesis.

#### *Participation and patronage*

One of the most consistent empirical patterns has disagreements about the nature of the relationship between the umbrella organization "The Organization", the four sub-organizations and 'target population' villagers. This has been a prevailing topic of conversation in both camps. To explain the matter requires an extensive description of the complex organizational network, for which space at this point does not allow. Suffice it to bluntly note that there seems to be operating two different conceptions of reciprocity in this aid equation.

The first is the official doctrine of sustainability, participation and bottom-up development, which saturates the official discourse surrounding the interventions. One that holds from the outset that traditional 'top-down' approach of handouts is a failed and outdated form of development work. Rather the NGO needs to *empower people to help themselves*, because *they* know what's best. This view was held to different degrees by the employees at The Organization, and particularly by the two foreign volunteers.

The second conception of reciprocity comes with an expectation that assistance should be made in a direct, material and one-way manner. The relationship should entail "something we can touch", as DPO members put it. It should, to follow the metaphor, unashamedly provide them with fish. In this picture, The Organization is the patron – or "mother" as they called it, and the DPOs are its clients –

or the “children” as they commonly referred to themselves. And a version of the patron-client resembling relationship seemed also to exist in the level ‘below’, i.e. in the relationship between the implementing organizations of The Organization or DPOs and the ‘target groups’ in the villages. Against the official doctrine of partnership, participation and equality this view unashamedly highlights the hierarchy between the different actors in the network, and with it the stronger part’s obligation to help the weaker one.

The clash between these two conceptions of reciprocity was illustrated in particular by the heightened conflict between The Organizations Western volunteers on the one hand and its Basotho staff and DPOs on the other. An important part of my analysis will be to map out and explain the complex network of relationships in which these frictions appeared, including in it perspectives from the imagined top to the imagined bottom of this aid chain.

*Practitioners: What kind of project is this for them?*

This focus on practitioners was central from the beginning, and will be remain so in the thesis. Effort will be made to give a careful presentation of their subject positions, as they are engaged in the middle ground between not only donors and target groups – as suggested in the project proposal – but also in relation to their sub-organizations. It is here where I also will draw on the research done with practitioners engaged in overtly similar positions in overtly similar organizations.

It became clear early on that these practitioners were not thoughtless pieces in an abstract development machine. Not docile bodies blueprinting some neo-liberal ethos, but active participants, doubting, consciously discussing and performing. And aware, to a large extent, of the inadequacies of their intervention, of the “correct” way it was to be applied and formulated. To further answer the question posed above, however, is beyond the task at this point. Suffice it to note the focus on practitioners remains central for the overall analysis to be made.



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