



The myth of development cooperation

Increasing demands from donor organisations make regional actors' work more difficult.

By Jonas Krumbein

When non-governmental organisations from the Global North cooperate with organisations in the Global South, they impose increasingly stricter demands on what has to be done. Social anthropologist Melina Kalfelis has investigated how local partner organisations deal with these demands.



Bureaucracy at BBN.

Melina Kalfelis, a social anthropologist from Goethe University Frankfurt, travelled with staff from a local NGO along many kilometres of potholed tracks through the province of Ganzourgou in Burkina Faso. She was accompanying them to a child they were looking after as part of the sponsorship programme of a North American NGO. The goal was to take ‘Thank You’ photos and videos for the child’s sponsoring parents as well as for donors in Europe. The North American organisation regularly demands videos, photos and thank-you letters from the children. After all, sponsoring parents should see that their money is improving the daily life of children in countries of the Global South. A good conscience helps to maintain their willingness to donate. What the sponsoring parents don’t know: the NGO staff in Burkina Faso were obliged to pay for the fuel for the business trip themselves and to work unpaid overtime.

A show for Europe

Almost immediately after their arrival at the child’s home, the camera began to roll. The nine-year-old didn’t give the impression that she was making a thank-you video for donors in Europe of her own free will, as Melina Kalfelis

observed: the girl looked down at the floor, didn’t say a word. Finally, she mumbled a few sentences in French, repeating the words dictated to her by the NGO employee. He suspected that the child didn’t dare to speak French. This could cause problems: for him, a negative appraisal of his performance and, for his organisation, the loss of the partnership with the donor because international NGOs and their financial partners expect children of the girl’s age to be able to speak the official language in Burkina Faso – a legacy of the colonial era. After some effort, the nine-year-old uttered the required words of thanks. But too quietly. When she finally managed to recite the sentences in a flawless and audible manner, her expression was not cheerful enough for the camera. “This day,” Melina Kalfelis noted later, “was one of the most uncomfortable during my field research.” Experiences like this have motivated Kalfelis to become involved in advising NGOs in the Global North beyond her scientific work in order to raise their awareness of the working conditions in NGOs in countries in the Global South.

Repressive influence of partner organisations

For a total of nine months, Kalfelis observed employees and members of civil society organisations in Burkina Faso, West Africa, as well as in Switzerland and Sweden, and also participated in day-to-day activities such as meetings or trips to visit sponsored children and film videos for donors. The idea behind this method, which is self-evident for social anthropologists, is that only through participatory observation is it possible to gain an in-depth understanding of social life. The insights that Kalfelis gained and presented in her recommendable book “NGOs

IN A NUTSHELL

- Not only repressive governments worldwide but also democratic governments and foundations restrict NGOs in development cooperation – by imposing more and more bureaucracy on them.
- States and foundations should allocate more money again to non-governmental aid without restricting duration or purpose.
- NGOs in the Global North could then promote more projects by civil society organisations in the Global South and sustainably strengthen the institutional base of the local civil society.

as Lifeworlds. Transnational Entanglements of Civil Society Actors” [NGO als Lebenswelt. Transnationale Verflechtungen im Arbeitsalltag von Entwicklungsakteuren] point far beyond Burkina Faso.

Worldwide, Kalfelis argues, the freedom of non-profit organisations working in development cooperation is diminishing – not only due to repressive governments but also to democratic governments and private foundations in Europe and North America. With this insight, Kalfelis extends the debate on the “shrinking spaces of civil society”, which has long been discussed in expert circles, for example in political science, to actors such as private organisations who have contributed to the problem. After all, many are increasingly earmarking their funds for current global policy issues, such as the fight against certain diseases or climate change. NGO projects are strictly limited, particularly as a result of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness adopted in 2005. Success must be increasingly measurable, and as much as possible of the money used must reach the target groups.

Under pressure to justify their activities

This sounds good at first, but it forces non-governmental organisations to “adopt bureaucratic structures and project-based rationale in order to participate in the global competition for development resources,” criticises Kalfelis. Documentation obligations regarding use of funds, increasingly constrictive deadlines and programme requirements are becoming more and more time-consuming, she says. Under pressure from foundations and public financial institutions to justify their activities, NGOs pass these demands directly to their partners in the Global South – with devastating consequences, as Kalfelis experienced in Burkina Faso.

Lunch break on the balcony of a donor organisation's office in the capital Ouagadougou (2017).

A new school building is in the planning: a ceremony in 2015 to celebrate.



Protected by anonymity

Like many organisations in Burkina Faso's vibrant civil society, the NGO with the sponsorship programme did not start out as a service provider to international donors. Instead, the organisation Kalfelis called Biiga Biiga Neere (BBN) in her thesis was founded by a man named Michel, which is also a pseudonym. All names of contacts and organisations in Kalfelis' work are anonymised because they criticise donors' demands or talk about rule breaking, which could jeopardise their professional future in development cooperation or exclude their organisations from the global competition for development resources.

Like all members of civil society organisations in Zorgho, Burkina Faso's provincial capital, Michel and the BBN staff had a story to tell. A story about cooperation with foreign development organisations, about hopeful beginnings and the termination of project-linked jobs, about social advancement and a relapse into precarious living conditions. Kalfelis also learnt about their strategies for coping with challenges in the NGO sector.

A school for orphans with an uncertain future

As a civil servant in Burkina Faso's Ministry of Education, BBN founder Michel was familiar with illiteracy in the country. He used his expertise and contacts in the capital and in his home region around Zorgho to help orphans who had slipped through the school system. BBN built a school for them. When Kalfelis worked at the school in 2009, she experienced a place that was an important point of contact for many children: “When the children had a problem, they would ask their teachers for help, and I also saw how teachers gave them medicine when they were ill.” Three years later, the school's future was uncertain.

What was behind this sudden change? BBN had a new partner, a development organisation from North America. The organisation had been looking for financial support for the school, but the North American NGO only needed a service provider for their children's sponsorship programme. It did not want to support BBN's school, which was subsequently forced to close. The teachers left. BBN founder Michel hired new employees for the sponsorship programme: young university graduates from Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou, who met the donor's project management requirements. When accusations of alleged embezzlement within the North American NGO and against Michel himself were raised, the young experts moved on to their next employer. BBN was disbanded.

€1,000 for a sun canopy

It is such experiences with donors from the Global North that make organisations in Burkina Faso rely increasingly on their own revenues and resources. A community of women in Zorgho sells fabrics. They invest part of the profits in a solidarity fund for members of their community who are in need. But raising capital by themselves is difficult in a country like Burkina Faso. As Melina Kalfelis observed, capital even for smaller investments is often lacking, for the women in Zorgho too: "The organisation has wanted for a long time to start building a sun canopy under which the women can do their work, which would cost around €1,000."

Kalfelis believes it is essential for foundations and states to give more money to non-governmental development organisations without restricting duration or purpose. NGOs from



Europe and the USA would then have more freedom to support civil society projects in Burkina Faso. Further, it is often local projects and initiatives that improve the living conditions of people in countries of the Global South most sustainably. Researchers like Melina Kalfelis have long provided proof of this. In Zorgho, the site of Kalfelis' field research, most NGOs had a lifespan of three to nine years from 2000 to 2014. "It is striking," notes Kalfelis in her thesis, "that the survival period of NGOs is congruent with the typical development project cycle of three, six or nine years." ●

A parade of women's organisations and NGOs on Women's Day, 8 March 2016.



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ABOUT MELINA KALFELIS



Dr Melina C. Kalfelis, born in 1987, studied historical anthropology, political science and psychoanalysis at Goethe University Frankfurt and earned her doctoral degree in political and audiovisual anthropology. For her doctoral thesis "NGOs as Lifeworlds. Transnational Entanglements of Civil Society Actors" [NGO als Lebenswelt. Transnationale Verflechtungen im Arbeitsalltag von Entwicklungsakteuren], she spent nine months conducting research in Burkina Faso, Sweden and Switzerland. Kalfelis is currently working as a research associate in the research initiative "ConTrust: Trust in Conflict – Political Life under Conditions of Uncertainty". Her current research project is "Trust and Violence in Times of Political Transformation".

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