Aid projects: The effects of commodification and exchange

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ABSTRACT

International aid work has been increasingly oriented around the administrative form of the aid project. Aid projects are financial and temporal delineations used for the planning, implementation, and reporting of aid work. Originating as a budgetary reform, the project has grown to become an important unit of conceptualization for donors, subcontracting NGOs, aid workers, and the recipients of development projects. As the project has become the dominant form of disbursing aid, what effects does this administrative form have on contemporary humanitarian and development work? A growing literature on the project form combined with ethnographic research on humanitarian and development aid in Haiti demonstrates how the project is not only an administrative unit but has become a principal product of aid work. Framing the project as a commodity produced within the aid industry illuminates the centrality of exchange, rather than donation, at the heart of the aid industry. Project documents, produced in order to account for implementation, assume the form of a commodity as they are exchanged for aid funding. Accordingly, project documents have a particular exchange value within the aid industry. One of the more prevalent effects of project-based aid is that for NGOs and subcontractors, this exchange value can take precedence over services provided to beneficiaries. In order to compete in the market for projects, sub-contracting organizations seek visibility and documentation, which may come at the expense of service provision. This affects the way in which projects are both implemented and evaluated. By illustrating the impacts of the administrative form of aid, this research argues for a more focused line of research interrogating the politics of the project.

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1. Introduction

Aid projects have become the principal way in which aid work is conceptualized, funded, and measured. While aid funding in the middle of the 20th century relied upon budgetary support for recipient governments, this started to shift within the first two decades of aid work. Following critiques of budgetary support that went to inefficient or kleptocratic states, donors sought increased control over aid funds and their destination (Bebbington, 2005; Hulme & Edwards, 1997; Nelson, 1995). Accordingly, aid funding was routed through project allocations defined largely by their explicit link between funding and outputs or outcomes (Pollock, 2003).

Given its emphasis on financial efficiency and effectiveness within a particular time frame, project-based aid has further been defined by evaluations (Piveteau, 2004; O'Reilly & Dhanju, 2010). To ensure the appropriate use of project funding, donor organizations require documentation of project completion that demon-

strates funding was utilized for previously specified activities (Edwards & Hulme, 1996). In project-based aid, evaluation is therefore a type of financial verification of activities. The evaluation has become even more essential as aid agencies come to rely upon subcontractors to fulfill the basic aspects of implementation. While funders like USAID previously implemented their own development projects, they now disburse projects to subcontractors. Evaluation has become an important part of projects, satisfying donors' need to financially and legally account for money disbursed.

The contract-based nature of aid, whereby funders engage smaller organizations to implement projects, has led to a chain of exchange in which project documentation is provided in exchange for funding (Krause, 2014). This chain of exchange constitutes a "project market" in the aid industry: subcontracting organizations that depend on project-based funding must secure projects in order to continue their work. In return, subcontractors, largely non-governmental organizations (NGOs), must produce project documents that record success (Höhn, 2013). This not only legitimizes the use of aid funding but builds an organization's reputation in order to obtain further funding. The project form and the

markets that have developed around its exchange have far-reaching consequences and affect everything from the way that aid workers are employed to the way that beneficiaries of aid projects experience social services.

This article analyses the profound way in which the project structure has influenced the aid industry. The paper outlines the rise and proliferation of the aid project as an administrative form. It draws on recent literature and ethnographic fieldwork on humanitarian and development aid in Haiti to demonstrate that the project operates within a project market. This market is based on the exchange of aid funding for the documentation of project activities. Documentation and evaluation therefore are essential for producing projects and reward visibility in order to satisfy donor demands for accountability. Despite the emphasis on visibility, the project market renders processes of aid less visible. The article analyzes this occlusion of visibility through the commodification of aid projects, which both hides constituent processes and produces new types of value. As commodities, projects have been imbued with an exchange value, a symbolic value of great importance to donors and to the larger aid industry. Ultimately, this exchange value has created new priorities for organizations and comes often at the expense of the use value of projects to beneficiaries. In this market for projects, donors, and not so-called beneficiaries, are the consumers of aid-in-practice.

As commodities, project documents can mask the origins of their production, focusing attention on the finished document rather than the process and labor of production. Accordingly, as in the production of all commodities, what is made visible and invisible may become hidden. This is the phenomenon of commodity fetishism, whereby the social relationships involved in production are occluded in the very process of production (Marx, 1981). The market for projects and the need for continual project-based funding encourages NGOs to produce "successful" documentation, potentially misrepresenting the services provided. Attempts to make project activities visible through evaluation or audit may further encourage such misrepresentation, obscuring the activities and labor required to produce them (Strathern, 2000a). The need for visibility encourages the staging of "photo ops," with an eye toward donors' eventual consumption of images that represent successful implementation. Critical analysis of the bureaucratic forms at the heart of aid refocuses research from how projects achieve their goals to understanding the social and political process of producing aid documentation and success (Krause, 2014; Mosse, 2005).

Building on interdisciplinary studies of aid, this article contributes ethnographic research from Haiti to identify how the project form might influence zones of implementation and evaluation. Drawing on our ethnographic work, we are interested in consolidating a research avenue, rather than demonstrating the results of one (see for example Ferguson & Gupta, 2002). Two separate research projects in Haiti were carried out, one on humanitarian aid and the other on development aid. Research on development aid occured principally in 2012 and focused on a UN-administered development initiative in the south of Haiti. Participant observation and interviews were conducted with sub-contracted implementing organizations, both Haitian and international, working on agriculture and the environment. Research on humanitarian aid in Haiti focused on camps in Port-au-Prince arising after the 2010 earthquake. Two quantitative studies of 108 camps were followed by a four-year, mixed methods ethnographic study that began in 2011. In addition to camp residents, interviews were conducted with humanitarian aid workers implementing programs and working at the UN LogBase. Both sites contribute to an understanding of the effects of the project that bridge humanitarian and development aid, pointing to a larger phenomenon of the project form.

2. The rise of the project form

A project is a discrete administrative form that is submitted for funding and denotes a limited, measurable set of deliverables. Projects are specified interventions, limited in space and time. They rely often upon a technical matrix that renders some problems amenable to intervention, while leaving out others (Li, 2016). In Li's conceptualization, projects are a form of government in and of themselves in the way that they enroll government officials, aid workers, NGOs, and beneficiaries in a particular set of practices. While proliferating such organizational logics, projects are also the primary output of aid work: agencies produce projects for donors (Krause, 2014). The project is multifaceted in this regard: its form both enrolls and organizes but is also a product and an object of exchange.

The project has not always been the principal form of aid disbursal. Beginning in the 1960s, the project altered what had been the standard operating practice of aid institutions: budgetary support. Such budgetary support supplied donor funds directly to recipient governments and were roundly critiqued for engaging the "antiquated legislative, administrative, and budgetary procedures of most countries" (Grasberg, 1968: 167). Concerns about funding such questionable administrative regimes prompted aid planners and US government bureaucrats to seek alternative forms of budgeting and funding. Their concerns were both financial and social. Innovators sought new ways of ensuring financial control of government funds and at the same time were concerned about the way in which functional forms of organization produced a variety of social problems. As a result, management innovators argued for project management as the organizational form of the future (Reeser, 1969).

Project-based approaches allocated aid funds by conceptualizing a relationship between inputs and outputs (Martens, Mummert, Murrell, & Seabright, 2002). Therefore, project-based funding was seen as a results-based framework for budgetary management. That results-based framework linking inputs to outputs gained "almost universal recognition" during the 1960s (Grasberg, 1968:162). In part, these innovations came from business strategies that had made their way into the procedures and practices of government, and as a result, aid funding. Monica Krause (2014) points to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations as particular moments when such business procedures and innovations moved into government practice. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's Planning, Programming, and Budgeting (PPB) reforms within the Department of Defense served as the results-based framework of the sort that ultimately would spread into the aid industry. These changes eliminated budgeting according to the type of expense (personnel, construction, maintenance), and started budgeting according to the outcome (Krause, 2014). Tying inputs directly to outputs, projects seemingly improved financial accountability, and increased the degree of control over exactly what would be funded.

Since then, the number of aid projects has expanded precipitously. In 1997, according to AidData, the total number of aid projects worldwide was 23,726—a number that rose to 101,628 by 2007 (Fengler & Kharas, 2010). This sharp rise in quantity indicates a growing adherence to the project form. In 2017, 77% of US development aid was project-based assistance (Lawson & Morgenstern, 2019). The prevalence of projects is arguably a continuation of donor interest in controlling funding but may also indicate a growing faith in the project as the best way to implement aid. Some studies have suggested that projects actually resolve some of the previous social problems of aid, arguing that that project-based aid makes statistically significant improvements to economic growth as compared to budgetary support (Ouattara & Strobl, 2008).

However, assertions of the benefits of project funding have not been without critique. In Haiti, Janil Lwijis (1993, 2009) questioned not only the rise of NGOs, but also the rise of the project form. What projects produce and deliver is ultimately quite difficult to convey and may not be readily apparent to researchers and evaluators (Riddell, 2009). Further, aid disbursal through project forms has been accused of sidelining recipient government priorities. Because donors set the output goals for projects, national governments and organizations are marginalized (Riddell, 2009). Further, while the gross number of projects has increased, the average size of aid projects has fallen. This implies that the observable increase in total Official Development Assistance (ODA) has arisen because of the addition of new, small projects (Fengler & Kharas, 2010). Critics raise concern about the way that aid has become both fragmented and overlapping as projects "live their own lives" separate from the planning structures of recipient governments (Degnbol-Martinuessen & Engberg-Pedersen, 2003: 189), and have a tendency toward replication and self-preservation (Beck, 2017; Sampson, 1996; Schade, 2005). Given the predominance of the project, the influence of policy is minimized as the project system constrains both thought and action in development work (Li, 2016).

Nearly 60 years after the entrance of the project form into the aid industry, the project is being questioned both within and outside of aid institutions. British policymakers in particular, aware of the short-term planning and reporting horizons of project-based aid, were inspired to return to government budgetary support (Killick, 2004). This found its way into the 2005 Paris Declaration and the 2011 Busan Partnership. But while donor harmonization might be better achieved by the use of budget support and programmatic approaches, few donors have altered their donation strategies, principally because they fear that performance measurement and attribution are harder, and that budget support is more associated with corruption (Menocal & Rogerson, 2006). This may not be apparent from broader statistics: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimations of aid that goes to recipient governments does not necessarily match actual government budgets, highlighting that much of aid supplied by donors may go along parallel routes like donor operated projects (Morrissey, 2015). For all of the discussion about moving away from the project form, most aid is still provided through projects (Beck, 2017, Mosse, 2004, Riddell, 2009).

In response to project-based contracting, for-profit and non-profit subcontractors have proliferated and have come to rely on projects in order to sustain their work. In such a system, projects are not only a way that donors structure budgetary reforms; they are also the way that NGOs and contractors, private or public, fund their activities. In the context of contracting governments, NGOs have proliferated (Agg, 2006; Macdonald, 1995), but often without continuous sources of funding. Projects have become the lifeblood of subcontracting organizations that may have little continuous revenue and survive by moving from project to project. Though not all NGOs implement projects, and not all projects are implemented by NGOs, the vast subcontracting apparatus required by the project form has in part led to the proliferation of NGOs. Without donors, NGOs would not exist, as ultimately much of what constitutes "NGO-ing" is a performance for donors in order to satisfy the terms of the contract (Sampson, 2017). This close relationship with donors and donor countries means "civil society" may be a complicated label for NGOs (Lewis, 2002). Despite being labeled as "what-they-are-not" (governments) (Bernal & Grewal, 2014:7, Fisher, 1997:442), many NGOs serve as intermediaries for foreign aid projects from external governments (Schuller, 2009). The growth of projects and the NGO form might best be considered together: donors' increased desire for auditable projects created a simultaneous need for organizations to do the work of implementation, and importantly, to be subject to accountability frameworks. NGOs are a bureaucratic form that is acceptable to, and auditable by, donors that disburse projects. Accordingly, the project form and the NGO form are symbiotic, as the NGO form satisfies the need for an institution that can both implement projects and be auditable by donors.

The spatial and temporal limits of the project form, and NGOs' need to acquire further projects, limits working beyond the short-term. In Afghanistan, for example, despite a broad strategic framework, aid agencies on the ground became standardized and geared toward the requirements of aid projects in order to access funding, satisfying only short-term goals rather than reorienting to long-term frameworks. Agencies implemented Logframes and homogenous monitoring and evaluation systems, ultimately adopting the "tunnel vision" of the project system rather than broad orienting goals of a more long-term strategic aid provision (Goodhand, 2002). The standardization of NGOs and other civil society organizations has come as a response to the form of the project and the nature of aid sub-contracting. As organizations grow increasingly dependent on international aid, they have legally formalized in accordance with policies and procedures set out by funding organizations (Alvaré, 2010). The project has expanded beyond just a grouping of funding, papers, and activities: it has produced and shaped an entire industry.

3. The project market

NGOs and subcontracted organizations operate in a specific context of inputs and outputs. Yet these activities satisfy the terms of project financing only through processes of evaluation and documentation. The production of project documents, the written record of project activities that occurs largely in the form of mid-term or final reports, satisfies demands for accountability and are accordingly exchanged up and down the "aid chain," the chain of contracting and subcontracting organizations that now defines much of the development field (Wallace, Bornstein, & Chapman, 2006). Perhaps the most important activity within the project realm is this legitimation of project funds via a coherent account or narrative of project activities (Mosse, 2004).

The aid chain is not merely the movement of information, but more accurately the exchange of documents. Monica Krause (2014) argues that in this light the aid industry is a "quasi-market" in which contracting agencies produce projects for donors as the consumers. Under such market conditions, project documents— the reports that record the evidence of project completion or success— have new value based on the relationships of exchange between donors and subcontracting organizations. This value affects the way in which subcontractors implement aid. In Haiti, this quasi-market creates a set of exigencies within the aid industry that have slowly redirected priorities.

For the Léger Organisation pour le Développement (LOD), [1] an organization based in the coastal town of Léger in southern Haiti, projects are a key component of organizational survival. While not registered officially as an NGO, LOD performed project subcontracting work that places it in the analytical frame of subcontracting NGOs. In Haiti, organizations like LOD may not be official NGOs, but rather are registered through the Haitian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Seen as part of the "grassroots"— organizations that have "bottom-up" decision-making and accountability structures— these entities increasingly perform the physical labor of aid work. While aid funding may arrive officially through bilateral or multilateral donors and be routed to subcontractors, even those subcontractors are not the actual implementers of aid projects. Rather, local and

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[1] Names and organizations in this article are pseudonyms to protect respondents' privacy and confidentiality.

international NGOs often further subcontract farmers associations, women's associations, or neighborhood associations to implement aid work. Living off the projects that they acquire from larger donors, LOD must complete projects successfully in order to acquire more projects that will fund their work and provide salaries for their employees.

As LOD's founder and president Jude explained to me, he had continually positioned the organization in a way that would enable him to catch whatever new projects were available. Their work in 2012 was focused on soil conservation and animal husbandry. This corresponded to the two projects that provided funding. Earlier in 2012, their focus was different. LOD had implemented a construction project as a contractor for a UN agency, helping to rebuild infrastructure underneath a school. After successful completion of the project, Jude heard that UN funding was shifting toward the environment. Accordingly, LOD highlighted their work as an environmentally-oriented institution.

Jude recognized how quickly LOD switched between types of projects. For him, the acquisition of projects is market-based at its core. Even for small community organizations, proposals must be written and submitted for a formal competition, obliging even the most "grassroots" of organizations to succumb to a competitive market process of project selection dictated by donors or larger contracting organizations. Jude referred to it as a "business." The stakes in such competitions are not small. The funding LOD received paid for wage labor, salaries, external debts, and provided funding for administrative continuity between projects. Without the funding of such projects, his organization would cease to exist, as would his salary and the salaries of his employees.

Jude knew well the process for writing a project proposal for the UN and understood the documents necessary to successfully produce a project proposal. Another organization also applied to be the subcontractor for the soil conservation work, a small foundation in town with European funding. But the foundation had no experience in composing funding documents in the requisite form. The foundation was therefore not competitive in bidding for the project. Because of Jude's skill at writing proposals, LOD received the funding in the competition for the project contract. The other organization did not.

After winning the contract to implement the UN project in 2012, Jude and LOD were required to complete the terms of the project. They would be working on an ever-present environmental issue in Haiti: soil erosion. On the steep hillsides that constitute much of Haiti's farmland, the erosion of soil is seen as a core challenge to soil fertility and crop production, stressing Haiti's already economically marginalized farmers. The project funding was short-term— only three months— and was principally oriented towards paying laborers to construct conservation structures. LOD subcontracted another farmers association to dig contour canals, the tree-lined ditches that wrap along the contour of a hillside. Contour canals are designed to catch descending soil and water and therefore reduce erosion. In several locations across the commune, the farmers association had dug the canals and planted tree seedlings along their walls.

Jude, an agronomist by training, was not convinced that contour canals were a particularly effective method for conserving soil or improving soil fertility and agricultural production. They were a remarkably short-term intervention, and though they were widely implemented in Haiti and abroad, their long-term effectiveness in Haiti was questionable (Tiffen et al., 1994; White, 1992, Shannon et al., 2003). Built quickly, the canals were rarely maintained by farmers and would crumble back to their previous form (Freeman, 2017). Another agronomist working with Jude had more recently heard that there was a recommendation coming from senior agronomists in the region to stop building contour canals. But the decision to implement the canals was not based purely on agronomic theory or strategy; ultimately the decision to implement contour canals was due to the structure of the project, which was only three months in this case. A few months after completing the work, Jude lamented, "it would be so much better if there was a way that the funders could support more long-term accompaniment [of farmers]." But, he said, "you cannot change the strategy of the big men (gwo misye)."

Under the current funding form, Jude had to implement short-term interventions. Long-term accompaniment of farmers, often necessary given the nature of soil erosion and degradation, was Jude's preference but was impossible given the terms of funding. Well after the closing of the soil conservation project, he shrugged, saying, "money is the commander" (kòb se kòmandan). Jude's satisfactory completion of this project was essential for increasing his organization's reputation, which would help them to obtain more projects.

Projects function within a market, and small and large subcontracting organizations alike must make themselves anew, incorporating market logics in how they present themselves and complete projects. Under this type of funding regime, their pursuit and completion of projects becomes a principal concern. Within this, the act of evaluation becomes centrally important.

4. Evaluation and documentation

Donors, responding in particular to well-publicized reports on the misuse or failure of aid funding in Haiti (Elliott et al., 2015; Katz, 2013; Peck, 2013; Seitenfus, 2015), have been pushed by citizen and constituent groups to hold subcontractors accountable for aid activities. As a result, they have developed systems of evaluation as attempts for greater transparency. These efforts have been crafted in order to create a type of financial accountability that rationalizes and validates monetary expenditures. It does not, however, necessarily lead to improved service provision for beneficiaries of aid.

The project's budgetary origins and form influence the way that accountability and associated evaluations or "audits" satisfy donor concerns with aid expenditure. The audits demanded by project terms are efforts to make visible, or legible (Scott, 1998; Strathern, 2000a) the activities of the project that are distant from the geographically and administratively removed donors. Yet these efforts to make activities visible are not neutral translations of events. They are themselves transformative, and in efforts to render visible, can render other activities invisible (Strathern, 2000b). The selectivity of the practices of aid audits and accountability are influenced by financial concerns. Perhaps this is expected, as the etymological roots of accountability lie firmly in the financial sector, where dollars must be accounted for (Shore & Wright, 2000). For implementing organizations, there is much at stake, as a poor audit can mean the loss of current or future funding. As governments and aid institutions pursue accountability, Haitian NGOs have become subject to an expanding audit culture (Vannier, 2010).

Unfortunately, LOD's contour canal project did not go as Jude had planned. In 2012, there was a serious drought, which killed many of the seedlings his team had planted on the contour canals. The seedlings were planted on the outer wall of the canals so that their roots would provide stabilization and keep the walls of the canal from crumbling. When the UN aid worker arrived to evaluate the project, he saw the dead seedlings and declared that the project was unsuccessful. Without live seedlings, the UN denied LOD the final 10% of their project funding, which was contingent upon successful completion of the project. Jude desperately needed the final portion of the project funding: his organization had accrued debts throughout the project that he had to pay.

The news of project "failure" prompted quick action. Jude called me (Freeman) to join him and two other LOD employees to plant new seedlings on the contour canals. We drove out to two locations and used machetes to dig holes and plant seedlings in the dirt canals. The owners of the land were not involved, and few individuals living in the area helped. The work was principally about ensuring that the criteria of the upcoming evaluation were met. Jude appealed to the people we saw, asking them to support his work and keep their animals from eating seedlings so that he would be happy.

Jude's targeted replanting strategy was made clear the following day. We met up with the small association that he had subcontracted to dig the canals. He told the leader of the group not to replant and maintain the seedlings broadly, but to "focus on visible areas next to the roads." Canals that were far off the road, where they would not be seen by an evaluator, were not of interest. Those that might be visible to an aid worker arriving in a car were the only ones that received our focus. Jude then called and wrote the UN again and again, imploring them to come out and see the updated condition of the canals. In early September, Jude convinced the UN to re-evaluate the project. UN evaluators came out and examined the canals and saw the newly planted seedlings. Seeing the live seedlings, the evaluators changed their designation from a failure to a success and disbursed the final portion of project funding to LOD.

The value of successful evaluations comes to influence the moment in which they are conceptualized and carried out. Accordingly, evaluations through project midterm reports or "audits" are not a product of transparency. Instead, the demand for success ensures that the emphasis on visibility conceals elements of both failure and the way in which evaluations are curated and performed. Decisions about how to structure the evaluation are motivated by accountability structures that are tied to the project market. LOD, as a small contracting organization, needed to acquire further projects to ensure the continued flow of financing. In order to do so, evaluations need to be deemed successful, regardless of their long-term impacts to the target populations. With project success comes the possibility of more funding.

Organizations and aid workers across rural Haiti similarly attempt to structure supervisory visits in order to receive a successful evaluation. For example, implementing UN funds in 2012, employees from HOEA (Haitian Organization for Environment and Agriculture) engaged in a tense exchange about the best way in which to host an evaluator. The lead agronomist's proposal was to invite a commission to the neighboring communes of Rotò and Lapè. He suggested that the commission could walk up one valley to see a tree nursery, and then hike over the dividing ridgeline and descend into the next valley. Pye, one of the senior agronomists, thought this was a terrible idea: "When you have evaluators coming, you have to have something on the roads so that they can see something without walking…do you really think evaluators can actually walk up far into Rotò after sitting years behind a desk?" He later told me that the reason an international NGO in the region had so many projects next to the road was because "They are aware of how the evaluators work." Keeping projects visible and evaluations pleasing to the evaluators (or auditors) are primary concerns among those whose jobs depend on successful evaluations. The content of those moments is then turned into project documentation to be submitted to contractors and donors.

As practices of accountability and audit have grown in the aid industry, translating those actions into documentation has become perhaps the most significant activity in satisfying the terms of the project. USAID contracts, for example, explicitly specify that reports must be received in order to verify work completed: US government acceptance of the final project report is a main condition of disbursement (USAID Colombia, 2016). Further, any delay in furnishing progress reports throughout the life of the project might cause withholding of payments to subcontractors (USAID Haiti, 2013).

The focus on documentation has become so essential that project report documents are required even in situations in which employees are themselves able to observe, or audit, project activities. For example, Cynthia, a Washington DC-based aid worker employed by a USAID contractor noted that any contract she works on has payment conditional on the submission of a report, even when the report documents a training in which she herself was present. Individual observations of process, then, are sufficient only when converted into a particular type of documentation. In such bureaucracies, people cannot vouch for people, documents must vouch for people (Hull, 2012). Often, Cynthia said, the report seems like "a waste of time," but must be completed in order to satisfy donor financial and legal requirements.

As pushes for aid accountability raise the importance of documentation and tie it directly to funding, the documents that record accountability take on new sets of properties. Project documents create supposed paths of visibility in which the activities of subcontracted organizations are made legible to donors. But because they are exchanged for funding, such documents become important, and in many ways essential, for subcontracting organizations as well. Their contents, like the evaluations before them, must be curated to represent success, even if the results of the interventions were questionable. For example, a UN report summarizing agricultural and environmental work completed in the commune neraby Jude's work made definitive claims in a context of uncertainty. It noted exactly 474 individuals trained in soil and water conservation, 5 demonstration plots completed, 2199.71 m^3 of ravine walls built, and 29,423 forest trees planted. Such reports focus on outputs, those that are visible and countable, but ignore shortcomings observed. At the time of evaluation, some of the ravine walls had already crumbled. Despite trainings that had been implemented, one of the agricultural demonstration plots was quickly converted back into grazing land. The numbers represent a type of static success even though, for example, many of the trees planted in that project would die shortly after planting. Documents, like the evaluations that inform them, are not definitive recordings of information but places where politically motivated interpretations are made (Hetherington, 2011). In representing a successfully completed project, documents come to play a particular role in the project market, becoming themselves perhaps the most valuable commodity produced in aid.

5. Project commodities

Projects have become commodities, entities that can be purchased or exchanged. As a commodity, the project is transformed from a set of funds, documents, and technical ideas to a coherent entity imbued with new logics and demands. When considering aid, a moral economy framework has opened up the way in which exchanges outside of the traditional economic type might be explored, inviting an analysis not only of exchange but intersections of morality and ethics (Fassin, 2009). However, the vagueness of this framework requires a theorization of its constituent components (Minn, 2016). Framing the project as a commodity within this larger economy of aid allows for two salient lines of analysis about the project.

First is an exploration of how the project gains new types of values, obscuring the social relationships of production. Anthropological definitions of value are useful here, in that they lead beyond categories normally considered as economics and draw attention to the way that objects gain prestige according to their definition

in the eyes of another (Graeber, 2001). Here, the project comes to have value for organizations within the system of aid because of its ability to reconcile the expenditure of funds. Produced for exchange within the aid market, the project becomes a commodity. Accordingly, like all commodities, the parts that make up the commodity become hidden. This commodity fetishism occurs as human relationships are transformed into something else: the commodity comes to mask the labor behind its production (Marx, 1981). Marx's observation of the transformation of wood and labor into a table might as well describe how the labor behind project documents is transformed: "So soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent" (Marx, 1981:82). This transformation, which eliminates constituent social relationships and produces an entity that is desired and valued in its own right, describes the transformation and fetishization of a thing into an exchangeable commodity. Like a table as a commodity, the project document does not detail within it the negotiations and work that went into its production.

Second, the framing of the project as commodity permits an analysis of the exchange and use value of the project. All commodities have both a use value (the physical properties that are useful to individuals) and an exchange value (their potential in exchange, represented often through their worth in money) (Marx, 1981). In Marx's example of the table as commodity, the use value is its value to individuals who wish to use it as a table, while the exchange value would be the price it might fetch on the market. Projects do provide utility to their beneficiaries— perhaps the value of shelter built, or trees planted. But projects' exchange value, the value that project documents have to subcontracting organizations and ultimately donors, may come to supersede the use value to beneficiaries.

The problem is that within the project market, contracting organizations may find that the very high exchange value for projects diverts attention from the supposed beneficiaries of aid. The contradictions of capitalism can prioritize exchange value over use value, which means exchange becomes more important than the principal service provided by the commodity (Harvey, 2014). This is visible in real estate: an overwhelming focus on the exchange value of a house results in a restriction on who can benefit from the use value of shelter— only those with enough money, who may see the house primarily in terms of financial gain (Harvey, 2014; Smith, 1984; Robinson, 1995; Smith, 1996). Jude's work here on soil conservation provides an important illustration. The value of producing a successful project is quite high for him and his organization. It allows for increased prestige and monetary compensation. The use value of that project, the long-term benefit of soil conservation to farmers and their lands, suffers as the exchange value of the project becomes inflated and organizations select interventions for their potential to be evaluated as "successful." The inflated exchange value incentivizes implementers to produce projects not for target populations, but for donors.

The analysis opened by understanding the project as a commodity also illuminates the new subjectivities and social relationships fostered. In project reports, the supposed recipients often turn into numbers of individuals trained, or hours worked. Such practices transform individuals into documents, reports or even, in humanitarian aid, "trauma portfolios" (James, 2010), which organizations can use for institutional gain. New subjectivities arose during post-earthquake recovery in Port-au-Prince, as people without housing became unwitting pieces of evidence for NGO activities. People were photographed as they queued up in line, a scene powerfully captured by Raoul Peck's *Fatal Assistance* (2013). Because implementing NGOs focused on capturing a visible record of activities, Josselyn, a resident of a tent camp, felt that she was constantly made to perform, literally singing for her daily needs: "They make us sing and then they play films. They take

our pictures, they pass our image around in cameras with all the adults clapping hands. I hear people singing: 'Burn trash ohhh burn trash!' A bunch of nonsense!" NGOs' need to capture songs about projects and ensure proper photo documentation fostered an environment where IDPs felt continually "on stage," playing the role of "beneficiary" or "recipient." The subjectivities fostered by development are not simply the result of broader discourses of aid (Escobar, 1995) but are also the result of the culture of visibility and photo-ops incentivized by the project market.

In the production of projects, the accumulation of value to NGOs is made possible by the labor of beneficiaries, who may receive certain products like water or shelter, but who also work physically for the production of an aid project. As a peasant leader in Jennie Smith's, 2001 ethnography stated, "Participation just means we get to carry heavy rocks on our heads" (2001:34). This exchange allows donors and implementers to accumulate status and cements the designation of "beneficiary" even though target populations may see few benefits while providing labor for the production of valuable project commodities (Carruth & Freeman, n.d.). For example, the misrecognition of individuals as victims, "beneficiaries," or "mouths to feed" within practices of governing eliminates other ways of defining individuals (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Li, 2007; Sharma, 2006). In contrast, recent ethnographic work is beginning to challenge the depiction of individuals as solely recipients of aid, detailing the work of affected groups themselves following disasters (Schuller, Gebrian & Lewis, 2019; Browne, 2015; Vélez-Vélez and Villarrubia-Mendoza, 2018; Zhang, 2016). Several Haitian novelists of varying ideological stripes have published similar accounts (Victor, 2010, Lahens, 2010, Danticat, 2010). Haitian sociologist and NGO director Chenet Jean-Baptiste (2012) further argued that the solidarity of rural Haitian family members was significant in recovery, but because it was not valued, it was never documented and therefore uncompensated.

This line of investigation, examining the project commodity and its broader effects ultimately provides insight into the ways in which organizations and individuals prioritize particular aspects of aid over others. In what follows, we detail how the design and implementation of aid projects has been influenced by the properties of the project commodity and the associated market for projects in aid.

6. Distorting implementation

Further illustration of how inflated exchange value influences implementation is found within the context of humanitarian aid in Haiti. After the 2010 earthquake, donor dollars flowed into Port-au-Prince ostensibly to improve the lives of those who had lost their homes and to provide basic necessities like food and water. The logic of visibility, the "photo op," was evident in humanitarian agencies' choice of private water trucks as the solution for water provision. Jessica, an aid worker who had come to Haiti from Aceh, Indonesia, as response to the 2004 tsunami was wrapping up, used the language of "getting credit" for humanitarian action: "Where were people getting their water before the earthquake? Look across the camp and there are 2–3 water taps. If we're about 'Building Back Better' [a slogan employed by Bill Clinton as UN Special Envoy, first used in Aceh], wouldn't we rather just fix those? Why not, you ask? Because we aren't given credit." In the camps, photos could be— and often were— taken of long lines of people, mostly women, waiting for their turn at the tap.

As Jessica's phrase of "getting credit" suggests, humanitarian agencies have multiple pressures and motivations. Taking her question seriously, Jeff, who worked for the Haitian government said, "We have all kinds of data. The cost of providing water in

the camps through private trucking companies is easily ten times more than providing it through the Haitian government." The decision to choose private water trucks over supporting public water provision was a calculation that included not just the price of services, but the value of documentable projects. The decision to use private water trucks also inflated the profits of a few elite families, and increased their power within Haitian society. It contributed to the weakening of the state sector as private industry was financed at the expense of government provision of services.

The choice of housing interventions following the earthquake was also profoundly influenced by the premium attached to visibility. Temporary shelters, called "T-shelters" for short within camps for displaced people in Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince, spread largely due to concerns about evaluation and rationalization of project funding. T-Shelters are made of imported plywood and, as the name implies, are not meant to be permanent housing solutions. Recently retired European UN professional Siobhan, who had come to Haiti from Afghanistan, shared her experience with emergency shelters in Haiti. Siobhan explained why NGOs preferred T-Shelters: "First of all, NGOs follow the funding stream. ECHO [the European Union Humanitarian Agency] prefers doing T-Shelters, and NGOs don't question their donors." Siobhan's explanation is hardly novel; many commentators have explained how NGOs follow the money, or in Jude's words, the "commander." What explains donors' attachment to T-Shelters? Siobhan continues: "It's also the most visible, providing the photo opportunity, to show off what our structures are. It's the logic of production: building becomes about logistics, not about consultation, not about development, not about choice, not about working with the neighborhood." Siobhan, who later used the word "industry" to describe the sector, pointedly connected the logic of humanitarian action with that of visibility and production, which she understood as the perceived need to manufacture some measurable, countable, outputs. She argued, following a World Bank manual distilling "best practices" (Jha, Barenstein, Phelps, Pittet, & Sena, 2010), that the most cost-effective, sustainable, and empowering model is to give people materials and specified training to rebuild their homes, wherein people leverage their own capital and labor, "But you can't take pictures of the final product."

In addition to the method of intervention, NGOs' choice of where to intervene was also influenced by questions of visibility. One IDP camp in Port-au-Prince was "off-the-grid" because of its invisibility to donors and evaluators. Spatially, the camp provided several challenges; it was isolated, on a hill, and dispersed. During interviews, the first words from Linda, a leader within the camp in Carrefour and *Madanm Sara* (international commercial importer – see Ulysse, 2008) whose business was totally destroyed with her house, were gratitude that researchers even showed up: "People make appointments and they don't come. I don't know if it's too far or if people are afraid of the mountain." Her colleague Madame Thibault, an elected member of the community council, had another theory: "It's because the donors don't get credit for giving us water, unlike down the hill next to the Route National." One of the most powerful predictors of water and sanitation in the camps was geographic centrality, with core municipalities having statistically significant more services (Schuller & Levy, 2014).

The desire to implement projects that may serve the needs of donor documentation over beneficiary service provision are propelled by a market for projects that emphasizes the visible and documentable. Ultimately, the growth of audits and pushes for accountability outside of the financial sector that occurred starting in the 1980s have created new "audit cultures" in which individuals and organizations, newly subject to financialized audits, must alter their behavior and actions in order to satisfy those demands (Strathern, 2000a). In aid work, this has meant that the behavior of individuals and organizations has altered in order to suit the

accountability processes and procedures of donors (Vannier, 2010). Implementing outside of the parameters of project contracts, or in alternative and non-visible ways, risks a poor evaluation and therefore the loss of current and future funding. As a result, organizations are deeply concerned about constructing projects with an eye towards "successful" evaluations.

The pressures of visibility – an excess attention to exchange value – can have detrimental effects on people's lives, and humanitarian or development goals. When the tap of humanitarian aid went dry, Port-au-Prince families were rendered more vulnerable than before as public water facilities were left unaddressed. The need for a good "photo op" and successful project report encouraged funders to look the other way and ignore warning signs of urgently needed infrastructure improvements.

7. Conclusion

Studying the way in which the aid industry has become a market for project commodities suggests an important avenue for interdisciplinary research on aid. Marx's theorization of commodity fetishism and exchange value offers useful ways to pull together and understand the negative outcomes of aid – often declared or understood as "unintentional." Rather than seemingly haphazard, or the chance ignorance produced by large bureaucracies, the production of value for some organizations and actors over others is a part of the fundamental and hegemonic way in which aid is structured.

The exchange of project reports in return for aid funding inflates the exchange value of documentation as compared to the use value of project activities for beneficiaries. The incentives to provide bureaucratic documentation of success drives a misrepresentation of services and the alteration of implementation and evaluation. As projects are commodified they mask the activities and labor that contribute to the project documents and obfuscate the very political processes of commodity production. Understood as a market for projects, donors are the ultimate consumers of aid-in-practice.

This analytical framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of the missteps of international aid. As demonstrated above, the international response to Haiti's 2010 earthquake is a particularly potent example. Tens of thousands of individuals played a role in one of the largest international humanitarian efforts ever mounted, and certainly among the most visible. After the 7.2 magnitude earthquake that shook the capital and nearby regions on January 12, 2010, international agencies pledged $13 billion to the rebuilding effort, and individuals contributed over $3 billion. With such extreme visibility and remarkably slow progress, a critical conversation about aid began to circulate: where did the money go? Several critical books and documentaries emerged in the years that followed about how despite implementation, little progress was made (Katz, 2013, Peck, 2013, Schuller, 2016, Seitenfus, 2015). A ProPublica exposé on the blunders of the Red Cross received significant attention after the earthquake by exposing the way that the organization had, while publicly celebrating its own work, failed to provide shelter and services (Elliott et al., 2015). The broader failures of aid in the moment of the earthquake are most often critiqued as an occasion in which poor decisions were made, or organizations operated outside of the way in which they ought. Yet the simultaneous catastrophic response and public touting of success is better understood as a constituent trait of the project form, not as an idiosyncrasy. By producing inflated exchange value for the aid industry at the cost of use value for aid beneficiaries, the project market legitimized donor activities as designed. The market for projects and the effects of commodification explain how institutional success is claimed at the same time as target populations fail to receive benefits. Paying attention

to the "political economy of paper" (Hull, 2012) — or PDFs, or Word documents, or websites— shows how the production and movement of documents both relies upon and reinforces hierarchies of aid, where NGOs and donors have increased status while beneficiary concerns are marginalized. In this way, the market for projects hinders long term social change and simultaneously propagates inequality.

While the production of commodities and their exchange in aid has been documented by a small cadre of scholars cited throughout this article, the remarkable extent to which projects are the core of aid funding merits a broader systematic investigation of projects and their effects. To begin, a broader investigation of the project might follow the approach of other commodity studies, which reveals the associations, imaginaries, and labor behind globally circulating commodities (Mintz, 1985; West, 2012; Paxson, 2012; Appadurai, 1988; Freeman, 2019). Specifically, we suggest two implications of such a research agenda.

First, in continuing the tradition of critical NGO studies (Lashaw et al., 2017), this avenue of research suggests an analytical frame of the NGO as producer of projects. Accordingly, research on NGOs should continue to follow activities that occur not only "in the field" but also in documents and in the office in order to understand the incentives that drive NGO work. The question of production further implicates research questions on labor. As subcontractors for donors, what sort of labor is involved in producing projects? If the production of project documents is ultimately at the heart of the political economy of aid, who gains from such economies, and who stands to lose? Our ethnographic research suggests that both aid workers and "beneficiaries" contribute labor towards products that ultimately benefit organizations further up the aid chain. Seen in this light, how do beneficiaries become in effect workers for the aid industry (Carruth & Freeman, n.d.)? Future research agendas might examine the way that value is consolidated and transferred across institutions and towards donors and their stakeholders. This line of inquiry brings questions of justice to the fore: as workers-in-practice, do "beneficiaries" have any claims to rights (to aid, to compensation, to redress)? Taking this seriously might be useful in flipping the script on questions of accountability.

Second, acknowledging the project market is of vital importance to those who manage projects, but also those who produce knowledge for the industry as researchers and consultants. For project managers, understanding the contractions of the existing system of accountability might open the possibility for other forms of social accountability (Fox, 2015). Researchers must understand our connection to the aid industry and examine our own role in producing and selling projects. An acknowledgment of our own position in playing into and propagating project logics of visibility and success must be at the core of any research venture that seeks reform and change of aid writ large (Kapusta-Pofahl, 2017; Lewis, 2017).

Ultimately, in advancing an analytic of the project and its position as a commodity in an aid market, critical research can contribute to new formulations about social accountability that challenge the entrenched inequities of aid practice.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

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