'I was like a one-man band': the theory and practice of national development experts' work at the messy-middle

Jack Covey[1]

University of Edinburgh, UK

Abstract

Despite their importance to project outcomes, the work of individuals who occupy the meso-level of international development projects at the interfaces between an ever-growing number of actor groups is often poorly reflected on. Using four typically disparate bodies of literature (brokers and translators, street level bureaucracy, policy entrepreneurs, and institutional bricolage), I analyze how the work of national development experts (NDEs) at the meso-level influences how project intentions become social realities that reshape local lives. Normative and personal-professional motivations underpin NDEs' work at the messy-middle, encouraging them to work in a 'bottom-up' manner and to formally and informally create room for maneuver for all actors involved, drawing on relational skills and negotiating and utilizing multiple aspects of their individual identities. NDEs also work through conscious institutional bricolage, which they try to manage formally through contracts and informally through relationship-building, to integrate the project with the social environments in which it is being implemented. The analysis helps address key questions in existing meso-level actor literatures. It also shows that understanding meso-level work can facilitate improved understandings of how development projects move from intentions to social effects, which is a key concern for political ecology. I conclude by proposing that critical reflection could be a suitable methodology for assessing meso-level practice as it allows meso-level work to be discussed and learnt from without fully removing the spaces of informality and discretion that are vital to its success.

Key words: Development projects, meso-level actors, bricoleurs, facilitators, national development experts

Résumé

Malgré leur importance pour les résultats des projets, le travail des individus qui occupent le niveau méso des projets de développement international, aux interfaces entre un nombre toujours croissant de groupes d'acteurs, est souvent peu étudié. En utilisant quatre corpus de littérature typiquement disparates (courtiers et traducteurs, bureaucratie de rue, entrepreneurs politiques et bricolage institutionnel), j'analyse comment le travail des experts nationaux en développement (END) au niveau méso influence la façon dont les intentions du projet deviennent des réalités sociales qui remodèlent les vies locales. Les motivations normatives et personnelles-professionnelles sous-tendent le travail des END au niveau méso, les encourageant à travailler de manière ascendante et à créer, de manière formelle et informelle, une marge de manœuvre pour tous les acteurs impliqués, en s'appuyant sur des compétences relationnelles et en négociant et en utilisant de multiples aspects de leurs identités individuelles. Les EDN travaillent également dans le cadre d'un bricolage institutionnel conscient, qu'ils tentent de gérer de manière formelle par le biais de contrats et de manière informelle par l'établissement de relations, afin d'intégrer le projet dans les environnements sociaux dans lesquels il est mis en

---

[1] Jack Covey, University of Edinburgh, UK, jcovey777@gmail.com. I thank the facilitators and other members of the POP for being generous with their time and candidly reflecting on the personal and professional aspects of their work. It was always a privilege to listen to how they navigate their unique roles and I hope I have captured their key sentiments in this article. Doing so would not have been possible without the help from Margaret and Efraim who carefully helped me conduct the non-English language interviews. I would like to thank my supervisors at the University of Edinburgh, Dr. Clare Barnes and Dr. Sam Staddon, whose comments have undoubtedly improved the quality of this manuscript. Further thanks go to fellow contributors to this special issue, (Sam Staddon, Floriane Clement & Bimbika Sijapati Basnett (eds.). 2023. "Political ecology of professional practice: plurality and possibilities in environmental governance", Special Section of the *Journal of Political Ecology* 30, 32.) referees, and participants in the POLLEN20 session of the same name, who heard and gave feedback on an early iteration of this work. Finally, thanks are given to The Leverhulme Trust for providing the required funding for the fieldwork and subsequent writing time necessary to produce this article.

œuvre. L'analyse permet de répondre à des questions clés dans la littérature existante sur les acteurs au niveau méso. Elle montre également que la compréhension du travail au niveau méso peut permettre de mieux comprendre comment les projets de développement passent des intentions aux effets sociaux, ce qui est une préoccupation majeure de political ecology. Je conclus en proposant que la réflexion critique soit une méthodologie appropriée pour évaluer les pratiques de niveau intermédiaire, car elle permet de discuter du travail au niveau méso et d'en tirer des enseignements sans supprimer totalement les espaces d'informalité et de discrétion qui sont essentiels à son succès.

Mots-clés: Projets de développement, acteurs au niveau méso, bricoleurs, facilitateurs, experts nationaux en développement

Resumen

A pesar de su importancia para los resultados de los proyectos, el trabajo de los individuos que ocupan el nivel meso de los proyectos internacionales de desarrollo en las interfaces entre un número cada vez mayor de grupos de actores no suele estar bien reflejado. Utilizando cuatro tipos de bibliografía típicamente dispares (intermediarios y traductores, burocracia a pie de calle, emprendedores políticos y bricolaje institucional), analizo cómo el trabajo de los expertos nacionales en desarrollo (END) a nivel meso influye en cómo las intenciones de los proyectos se convierten en realidades sociales que remodelan las vidas locales. Las motivaciones normativas y personales-profesionales apuntalan el trabajo de los expertos nacionales en desarrollo en el nivel intermedio, animándoles a trabajar "de abajo arriba" y a crear formalmente e informalmente un margen de maniobra para todos los actores implicados, recurriendo a sus habilidades relacionales y negociando y utilizando múltiples aspectos de sus identidades individuales. Los END también trabajan mediante un bricolaje institucional consciente, que intentan gestionar formalmente mediante contratos e informalmente mediante la creación de relaciones, para integrar el proyecto en los entornos sociales en los que se está ejecutando. El análisis ayuda a abordar cuestiones clave de la literatura existente sobre los actores a nivel meso. También demuestra que entender el trabajo a nivel meso puede facilitar una mejor comprensión de cómo los proyectos de desarrollo pasan de las intenciones a los efectos sociales, lo que constituye una preocupación clave para la ecología política. Concluyo proponiendo que la reflexión crítica podría ser una metodología adecuada para evaluar la práctica a nivel meso, ya que permite debatir y aprender del trabajo a nivel meso sin eliminar por completo los espacios de informalidad y discreción que son vitales para su éxito.

Palabras clave: Proyectos de desarrollo, actores a nivel meso, bricoleurs, facilitadores, expertos nacionales en desarrollo

1. Introduction

As the number of actors working on development projects increases in number and diversity, individuals whose explicit role it is to work across and connect project actors, have become essential and often institutionalized parts of project governance (Hönke & Müller, 2018). These actors (hereafter meso-level actors) work at what Cleaver & de Koning (2015, p. 6) refer to as the 'messy middle' or meso-level, terms that describe the multiple interfaces seen in development projects "between scales of organizations, between sets of values, between professional and lay knowledge, between individual, community, and state action […] between regulation and practice." A growing body of literature has shown that individuals working at the meso-level are key to shaping the practices and thus outcomes of development projects (Mosse & Lewis, 2006; Watkins & Swidler, 2013; Haapala & White, 2018; Funder & Mweemba, 2019). Despite their importance, several gaps exist in how the work of meso-level actors is theorized in the literature and reflected on in practice (Watkins & Swidler, 2013). These gaps perpetuate the 'black boxes' of international development projects, where a lack of reflection on inner-workings inhibits understandings of how project inputs and intentions become social effects that restructure local lives (Mosse, 2013; Ika, 2015). As better understandings of how and why meso-level actors work on projects in the ways that they do are key to understanding and influencing projects' social, economic, and environmental outcomes, they are of key concern to political ecology (Roberts, 2020).

In this article, I aim to fill existing gaps in the literature on both the theorization of meso-level work and its implications for project practice. I do so by analyzing the meso-level work of all nine national facilitators of

the Producer Organization Project[2] (POP), an international development project working in nine countries in the Global South to support producer organizations.[3] My interest in these actors started when one facilitator, charged with describing their role to a room full of colleagues, spoke to a slide containing only a picture of a one-man-band. The facilitator subsequently reflected that "*I was like a one-man band; someone who has to grab several instruments at once and make them sound in harmony*" (Facilitator F-1-13).

Using this reflection as an entry point, I firstly locate the facilitators at the meso-level (or messy-middle) of POP before analyzing how they navigate their role and the implications this has for project practice. This analysis makes four key contributions. Firstly, by using novel combinations of meso-level actor literatures (brokers and translators, street level bureaucracy, policy entrepreneurs, and institutional bricolage) I show that meso-level actors defy rigid classifications and exhibit characteristics of many types of meso-level work. In doing so, I encourage other studies to avoid common and singular understandings that occlude key aspects of meso-level work. Secondly, as the POP facilitators can be classified as national development experts (NDEs)[4], on which there is a paucity of current studies (Kamruzzaman, 2017; Sundberg, 2020), this article offers a valuable empirical case on how NDEs work on and influence development projects. Thirdly, analyzing a novel NDE case study provides insight into key gaps and questions in the four meso-level literatures used in this article. Finally, I highlight the importance of analyzing meso-level practice to understanding and influencing how development projects move from intentions to social effects. In doing so, I initiate discussions on the importance and implications of better understanding meso-level practice, how this could be instituted into development projects by practitioners, and the outcomes this may generate.

Understanding work in the messy-middle

Understanding work at the messy-middle requires development projects to be viewed as "social arenas made up of different social actors and intersecting ideologies, relationships, interests and resources" (Evans & Lambert, 2008, p. 469). Within these social arenas, meso-level actors sit at the interfaces of well-documented and often conflicting pressures, which they play a key role in negotiating. These pressures, though spatially and temporally specific, can be reductively characterized as top-down pressures and expectations of tangible 'results' from donors and managing institutions (Banks *et al*., 2015, 2020), lateral pressures from pre-existing partner priorities (e.g. government targets or pre-existing projects), and bottom-up pressures from recipients who have locally specific and socially-embedded needs (Cleaver, 2012). How meso-level actors relate to and balance these pressures is key to defining project practice and has implications for epistemic and procedural justice as different worldviews, knowledges, and definitions of success battle for recognition. As meso-level actors' negotiation of these pressures is mediated by their own knowledges, worldviews, and motivations (Haapala & White, 2018), gaining insight into their lifeworld[5] is critical to understanding how they shape project decision-making, practice, and outcomes.

Several literatures have analyzed meso-level work in development projects and in wider contexts, producing a variety of labels to describe such work. This article draws on literatures that conceptualize meso-

[2] Producer Organization Project (POP) is a pseudonym used to allow the anonymisation of the project and thus interlocutors that provided the empirical material used in this article.

[3] Producer organizations (POs) are defined here as "people-centred organizations owned, controlled, and run by and for their members to realise their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations" (International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) 2020).

[4] National Development Experts are defined as a heterogeneous group of individuals working at the national level who are "employed … to formulate, implement and assess development policies, programmes and projects in their country of residence" (Kamruzzaman, 2017). They are typically nationals of the country in which they work, which is an important aspect of their positionality. Whilst several debates exist on the nature of expertise in development such as who is considered an expert and by whom, entering these discussions is beyond the scope of this article. Rather than problematising their expertise, I seek to show how the facilitators' position as NDEs influences their work at the meso-level of POP.

[5] "Lifeworlds are 'lived-in' and largely 'taken-for-granted' social worlds centring on particular individuals" (Long, 2001, p. 241). Here, the term is used to express the need to go beyond simply individuals' work as facilitators to explore historically contingent experiences and values.

level actors as brokers and translators, street-level bureaucrats, policy entrepreneurs, and institutional bricoleurs. The definitions, contributions to this article, and key gaps from each literature are highlighted in Table 1.

Key term for meso-level actors	Key texts	Key definitions	Contribution to this article's understanding of meso-level practice	Relevant questions and gaps in literatures (all link to meso-level action at the NDE level)
Brokers and translators	(Mosse & Lewis, 2006; Hönke & Müller, 2018)	**Brokers "**stand guard over the critical junctures or synapses of relationships which connect the local system to the larger whole" (Wolf, 1956, p. 97) and engage in **translation**, which is the "mutual enrolment and the interlocking of interests that produces project realities" (Mosse and Lewis, 2006, p. 13).	This literature is central to promoting an understanding of development projects as social arenas and highlights meso-level actors as central to producing reality, rather than just translating between existing realities (seen in definition of translation).	Lack of insight on the role of NDEs' roles as brokers and translators of development projects (Kamruzzaman, 2017).
Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs)	(Lipsky, 2010; Funder & Marani, 2015)	**Street-level bureaucrats** implement public policy at ground level. They have inherent discretion, function as policy co-makers, and show creativity in fulfilling their tasks (Hupe *et al*., 2015)	SLB literature emphasises the importance of understanding the everyday realities of individuals working at the implementation gap between policy and practice.	Going beyond the 'street' (the end of the implementation chain), the location of which is often blurred, to explore SLBs working nationally (Hupe *et al*., 2015).
Policy entrepreneurs	(Kingdon, 2013; Arnold, 2015)	**Policy entrepreneurs** are high level officials that creatively "recombine intellectual, political, and organizational resources into new products and actions for government" (Oliver & Paul-Shaheen, 1997, p. 744).	Provides insights into the capitals (intellectual, social, and political) that are utilised by those working at the meso-level, specifically those with higher level/power positions (Arnold, 2015).	Policy entrepreneurship literature has a 'street level blind spot' regarding entrepreneurship 'on the ground' (Arnold, 2015). Additionally, key questions remain about what motivates policy entrepreneurs to act entrepreneurially.

Institutional bricoleurs	(Cleaver, 2012; de Koning and Cleaver, 2012)	**Institutional bricoleurs** use their repertoire of resources and situated agency to blend, in conscious and unconscious ways, introduced bureaucratic projects with existing socially-embedded institutions (Cleaver, 2012).	Details how meso-level actors have multiple rationalities shaped by their identity and provides a mechanism for understanding the introduction of development interventions to a given location (Cleaver, 2012).	Two key bricolage questions relate to 'management' and are thus suited to exploration with NDEs. (i) How to understand effecting positive change through bricolage? (ii) To what extent can bricolage be managed to get desirable outcomes? (Cleaver, 2012).

Table 1: Key literatures informing the conceptualization of meso-level actors presented in this article. Source: Author.

Utilizing multiple literatures to explore NDE's meso-level practice

Whilst current studies have typically focused on applying one of the literatures listed in Table 1, this article builds on notable exceptions by Arnold (2015), Funder & Marani (2015), Haapala & White (2018), and Funder & Mweemba (2019), to use the literatures in combination. Current exceptions highlight how labels given in the literature are not mutually exclusive. Rather, meso-level actors may variously need to deploy aspects of brokers, translators, street-level-bureaucrats, policy entrepreneurs, and bricoleurs. I suggest this is particularly pertinent for NDEs, who often hold dual positions as both project 'designers' and 'implementers.' For example, relative to project management actors, NDEs are often viewed as the 'implementers', working 'on the ground' to adapt international theories of change to diverse national contexts. In this sense, they are like the street-level bureaucrat or institutional bricoleur, working to implement generic policy from above in socially-embedded environments. However, relative to in-country project 'recipients', NDEs are high-level 'designers', with control over decision making and enforcement of standards and procedures. Here, NDEs are more akin to policy entrepreneurs. Additionally, as NDEs often work at critical interfaces between other actors whom they must enroll on the project, they act as brokers and translators.

I use these literatures in combination to explore the current gap on meso-level work by NDEs. This gap has emerged due to much meso-level research having been conducted at the local level, for instance with conservation officers or other local state actors (Funder & Marani, 2015; Haapala & White, 2018; Kairu *et al.*, 2018; Funder & Mweemba, 2019). Whilst such local actors undoubtedly play an important role in implementing and shaping projects 'on the ground', they typically have little formal responsibility and agency in designing interventions, which is often done at the national level. However, international and national level studies on the design and implementation of projects such as REDD+ (Pasgaard, 2015; Benjaminsen, 2017; den Besten *et al.*, 2019) have predominantly assessed the role of global discourses and the work of governmental departments or 'ex-pat' international development practitioners. As such, understandings of NDEs, who bring their own experiences, personalities, values, and intersectional identities to their role, has often been overlooked (Kamruzzaman, 2017).

There are theoretical and practical motivations for assessing meso-level work by NDEs. Theoretically, understanding NDE work can highlight their "challenges, struggles, liberties, satisfactions and disappointments, elation and frustration, politics, confessions and agency [which] need to be part of mainstream development scholarship" (Kamruzzaman, 2017, p.57). As highlighted in Table 1, such understandings can fill gaps in existing meso-level actor literatures and add to work in political ecology one on development practitioners, which, as noted in the introduction to this Special Issue by Staddon, Clement & Basnett, is currently lacking. Practically, development project reliance on NDEs increased during COVID-19 limitations on travel;

decolonization movements leading to a shift from using Global North consultants towards NDEs who are more embedded in the knowledges, histories, and realities of 'recipient' countries; and the climate crisis making air travel of Global North consultants increasingly difficult to justify. The increasing prevalence of NDEs in development projects creates a mandate to better understand their position and work at the meso-level and how this influences the social effects projects generate for recipients.

Commonalities from across meso-level actor literatures

As the four literatures used here all conceptualize policy, project, or institutional arenas as socially constructed, there are several commonalities in how they understand meso-level practice. Four of these commonalities have guided my analysis of facilitators' work at the messy-middle.

Meso-level actors' identities influence their work. Aspects of individual identity such as gender, caste, or job title expose meso-level actors to social-, cultural-, and economic-power structures that shape their practices and interactions with other actors and thus the way they work (Haapala & White, 2018; Goodman, 2019; Warne Peters & Mulligan, 2019). In addition to structural factors, individual personal and professional experiences, relationships, networks, values, and attitudes shape meso-level actor's project practice and thus influence outcomes (Funder & Marani, 2015; Kørnøv *et al*., 2015; Maier & Winkel, 2017). This influence of identity highlights the importance of going beyond facilitators' formal role to explore lifeworld factors.

Meso-level actors do not just implement projects, they *create* them. Meso-level actors have often been framed as 'implementers' of policies and projects designed far-away in international development agency offices or national departments. However, this article adopts a constructivist approach to highlight how meso-level actors create 'actually existing' project realities through their daily choices and their work to bring diverse interests and actors together through translation (Mosse & Lewis, 2006; Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Hönke & Müller, 2018). This is particularly prominent for NDEs who often have formal design responsibility. As meso-level actors often do this work in resource constrained environments (Lipsky, 2010; Arnold, 2015; Kørnøv *et al*., 2015), creativity and entrepreneurialism are commonly seen as a necessity in their work to create project realities (Arnold, 2015; Funder & Marani, 2015).

Meso-level actors have situated agency. Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration has been influential in conceptualizing meso-level actors' agency, which is viewed as constrained by, but also capable of challenging, structural factors such as organizational, institutional, local, and national norms; terms of employment; and various other disciplining elements of policies or projects (Brasil & Capella, 2017; den Besten *et al*., 2019; Funder & Mweemba, 2019; Warne Peters & Mulligan, 2019). In addition to structural factors, meso-level actor agency is also constrained by material (e.g. resource availability and geographical proximity to project activities) and social (various accountabilities) factors (Kairu *et al.*, 2018). Meso-level actors utilize their situated agency to shape how projects interact with social realities, making critical decisions regarding how standards and procedures are applied, rules are enforced, and projects are adjusted to fit national, local, and organizational contexts (Warne Peters & Mulligan, 2019). Facilitators' NDE position means they may have more formally ascribed agency than the local actors explored in the existing literature.

Meso-level actors work in (in)formal and (un)conscious ways. Informality is a guiding concept in the theorization of meso-level practice, with informal interactions, decisions, and practices perceived to create opportunities for the innovation, autonomy, discretion, and negotiation that are necessary when working with diverse actors and typically less available in more formalized environs (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Hodder, 2016; Haapala & White, 2018; Funder & Mweemba, 2019). Despite the importance of informality, formal structures and practices remain essential as they often provide legitimacy to meso-level actors, granting agency for informal activities (Funder & Marani, 2015). In addition to working formally and informally, meso-level actors are also described as influencing projects both consciously and unconsciously. Conscious meso-level work is often described as 'tactical' or 'strategic' decision-making to 'get the job done' (Olwig, 2013; Funder & Marani, 2015). However, several scholars argue that meso-level actors also work in unconscious ways (Mosse, 2004; Cleaver, 2012; Olwig, 2013; Hupe *et al*., 2015). Drawing on ideas of habitus developed by Bourdieu, these scholars suggest that meso-level development actors unconsciously blend travelling

development rationalities (international) with more place-based rationalities (personal, organizational, national, and local) in their area of work as a matter of habit (Olwig, 2013) and thus also influence projects in unconscious ways. The (in)formal and (un)conscious nature of meso-level works means that ethnographic methods of participant observation are invaluable in assessing meso-level practice.

2. Methods

Introducing POP and its facilitators

At the time of writing, the POP operates in nine countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The POP aims to improve POs' capacity to deliver benefits to their smallholder members across four key areas: engagement with governance and policy; business activities; climate change mitigation, adaptation, and resilience; and the provision of social services. They do this through the provision of trainings designed based on PO experiences, PO exchange visits, and financial support for collective action activities.

The POP operates using a theory of change that is designed and reported on by the international management team (MT), which is formed of individuals from four large international organizations who specialize in research and practice in environment and development. Despite having an international theory of change that is applied across all countries, POP emphasizes the importance of responding to context, with steering committee and MT members expressing a normative and instrumental desire to be led by bottom-up PO demands.[6] As such, in each country an individual national facilitator is responsible for bringing all national actors together (Figure 1) to design and implement the POP theory of change in a manner tailored to the national context and the POs they work with. The facilitator, with approval from the MT, creates individual contractual agreements between each PO and the POP that are used to fund activities that fit specific PO aims and compliment the POP theory of change. Consequently, the POP is shaped very differently in each country. These differences reflect the diversity of value chains, ecosystems, organizational structures, and organizational needs of the partner POs. Differences also occur in the existing national government policies and goals of the countries it works in, and the varied influences of individual facilitators.

Data collection

As the work of POP facilitators could not be captured at a single site, data collection relied on multi-sited ethnographic methods (Marcus, 1995) to capture how facilitators work in multiple social worlds (Nadai & Maeder, 2005). I undertook participant observation at the annual five-day in-person meeting of all POP management team and facilitators in 2018, 2019, and 2020 (online).[7] I also conducted participant observation in Ghana, the site of my broader work on POP, to understand the in-country work of the facilitator with National Advisory Council (NAC) and PO actors (three months between June 2019 and March 2020). Importantly, participant observation allowed engagement with the formal and informal aspects of the facilitator role. This meant not only attending the formal meetings and activities, but also engaging with facilitators in informal spaces such as during corridor and mealtime conversations, long car journeys, and informally chatting about POP progress.

Semi-structured interviews (some in person, some over video call) (Longhurst, 2016) were conducted with all nine POP facilitators. The interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 2 hours in length and were conducted in English, French, or Spanish, according to facilitator preference.[8] Interviews were structured around four broad themes: i) Facilitator's professional background, why they wanted the job, and how they got it; ii) How

[6] As evidenced by data collected through interviews and participant observation that have informed my wider work on POP.

[7] Meeting topics include reflecting on the challenges individuals and POP have faced and the solutions that have been found; identifying shared learnings; reporting and reflecting on results; and planning for the year ahead.

[8] For the interviews in French and Spanish, interpreters well versed in development projects and the aims of this article were hired to facilitate the interviews and transcribe them in both the original language for facilitator approval and into English for analysis.

facilitators perceived and experienced their role; iii) How facilitators adapted the POP theory of change to fit their national context; and iv) What facilitators would change about the POP and their role in it if they could. In addition to talking with and observing facilitators, I also interviewed MT, NAC, and PO leaders. One topic pursued in these interviews was experiences of working with and through a facilitator.

It is critical to note that the empirical material presented here, as with all ethnographic research, is partial. Whilst I attempt to capture and reflect on the formal and the informal, and the conscious and the unconscious, there are inevitably aspects of the facilitators' roles that I was not able to capture, or they were unwilling to share (Warne Peters & Mulligan, 2019). My positionality along the insider-outsider continuum (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) meant I engaged more with some actors than others and thus developed closer relationships with some facilitators. The closeness of these relationships, and more instrumentally the amount of time I spent with each actor, undoubtedly shaped the details interviewees shared with me about their roles and my ability to interpret them. I have continuously reflected on this positionality whilst writing this article and acknowledge the work presented is a partial representation of facilitators' lived experiences. However, when considered in conversation with the existing literature on meso-level actors, I believe the data presented here can contribute to the theory and practice of NDE's meso-level work on development projects.

The University of Edinburgh granted full ethical approval of this work and consent was negotiated with individual facilitators on an ongoing basis that included discussions on anonymity, the use of direct quotes, and the chance to comment on a prior version of this article.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts and ethnographic notes were labelled according to themes that emerged in partnership with reading of the literature. Due to the dynamic nature of facilitators' work and the diverse contexts in which they work, these themes remained open ended and reflexive to new responses from facilitators and other POP actors. As the responses were collected from facilitators' work across such diverse contexts, the analysis reflects the general trends seen across all nine facilitators, with the necessary contextual details given to situate each quote. To maintain anonymity, as per the agreement reached with the interviewees and POP management, the names of projects, individuals, and organizations have been excluded from this article. Codes are given for each quote for internal identification. The role of the individual I am quoting is given.

3. Results and discussion

Locating facilitators in the messy-middle

Facilitators described how they sit at the interfaces between key actors (numbered) and are responsible for translating between project elements that travel up and down the implementation chain (arrows) (Figure 1). Each interface between facilitators and other actor groups offers an opportunity for facilitators to influence POP practice, but also creates multiple accountabilities.

At the first interface, facilitators are accountable to the MT, by whom they are charged with nationalizing the theory of change and meeting the POP's internationally applied standards and procedures. Facilitators also report diverse PO activities to the MT, showing how they complement the theory of change. At the second interface, facilitators work with the NAC to ensure that POP maps onto other national projects, policies, and priorities. The facilitator is expected to find synergies between the interests of NAC organizations, PO interests, and the POP theory of change and work to collaboratively design and implement strategies at these confluences. At the third interface, facilitators work to select the participating POs and design their individual activities as part of POP. Facilitators continue to manage the relationship between POs and POP, both formally through contractual agreements and informally through day-to-day interactions. At the fourth interface, I suggest, based on evidence from the literature and my analysis, that aspects of the facilitators' intersectional identities mediate their actions, and the way they feel accountabilities, at interfaces one, two, and three, and their relationships with the factors reported by each arrow.

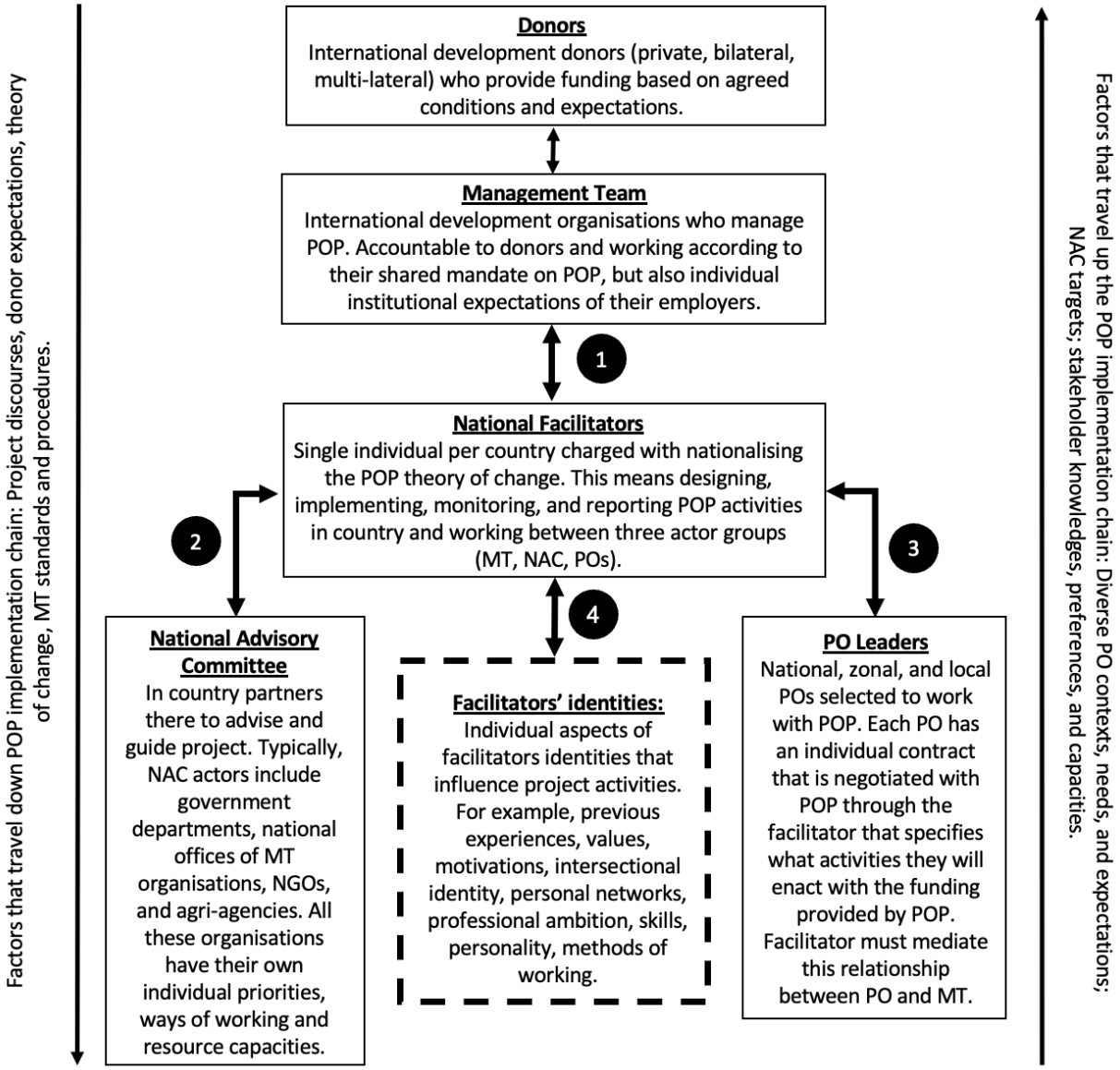

Figure 1: Conceptual implementation chain of POP. Facilitators are positioned between the three key actor groups responsible for the design, implementation, and reporting of POP. Aspects of their identities' mediate facilitators' relationships and work with these actors. Source: Author.

Facilitators showed self-awareness of their meso-level positioning by describing their role using metaphors such as a 'bridge', which links to traditional understandings of the broker, who connects two or more otherwise disparate entities (Watkins & Swidler, 2013; Koster & van Leynseele, 2018). Similarly, the notion of the 'one-man-band' links to ideas of the bricoleur, who has diverse resources to call upon (Cleaver, 2012), and of translators, who bring disparate elements together to create harmony, or coherence (Mosse, 2013). More literal self-conceptualizations as translators were seen when describing working between diverse actors:

> *Sometimes you have to speak in different languages. I make the politician listen to what he wants to hear in political terms, or the financier in more technical, regional, or global terms. Already the operational (PO) level in a much simpler language, so that they understand you. But if you have the ability to find those intermediate points, those points where everyone wins something, it is possible to play.* Facilitator (F-1-27)

Facilitators' explicit self-identification as meso-level actors contradicts Bierschenk *et al.'s* (2002, p. 20) assertion that the "development broker does not (cannot) recognize himself [sic] as such, nor is he [sic] recognized as such by other people." Rather, it supports suggestions that brokerage is becoming an explicit and accepted mode of project governance that is actively recognized by the individuals involved (Hönke & Müller, 2018), further justifying exploration of how meso-level work influences project outcomes.

Normative and personal-professional motivations underpin facilitators' work

Having located the messy-middle of POP (Figure 1) and shown facilitators' awareness of their role in it, in this Section I analyze their motivations for taking up this position, how they navigate it, and the impacts it has on project outcomes.

Conscious self-perception of being meso-level actors was linked to unanimous agreement amongst facilitators that facilitating is different to leading. This was identified as an important distinction by both facilitators and members of the MT:

> *The facilitation word itself in the heading of the terms of reference is very different [from organizational norms] […] The word is not to lead.* Facilitator (F-4-17)

> *I like this word, facilitator, they are not the program manager, the activities are done by the POs and the facilitator reads the two, makes sure there is an enabling environment in the MT national office and also from the government to allow […] the POs who do the activities.* Management team member (MT-4-17)

This importance attached to not leading, but to facilitating, was often normative and historically contingent. For some facilitators, it emerged from exposure to arguments from critical development studies that problematize the work of experts and traditional modes of 'top-down' development. This critique was particularly evident amongst the Latin American facilitators, perhaps owing to the fact they were schooled in a region with a long history of critical development ideas (such as alternatives to development put forward in Buen Vivir (Acosta, 2012)) and scholarship (for example works by Paulo Freire and more recently Arturo Escobar). For other facilitators, the importance of facilitating rather than leading emerged from negative professional experiences of externally led development interventions such as NGO-led projects.

> *[I am] putting in a lot of sacrifice, because I see something in POP […] NGOs have been too long in Africa and we have made no progress; in any case, why would an external person give local people what they need.* Facilitator (F-7-255)

These historically contingent motivations confirm that 'no project is an island' (Engwall, 2003) and that development projects are always understood through the lens of past experiences (Lewis, 2009). Negative framings of 'top-down' practice and a subsequent desire to do things differently contributed to clear normative motivations for facilitators' work on the POP, which most framed in interviews as more bottom-up in its approach (by directly financing POs and being responsive to PO needs) than other development projects they had worked on. Facilitators' normative desires for PO voices to be heard influenced the ways they worked on POP, motivating them to translate diverse PO activities to be coherent with the needs of donor, MT and NAC actors, which they were observed to achieve through the strategic use of institutional bricolage.

Despite this normative commitment to PO-led working, facilitators stressed its challenges, acknowledging that externally-led projects are often easier to work on.

> *So, it is better to leave him/her the capacity, rather than just buy the input [...] But that is the easiest thing, if one were to think that it is the easiest for everyone, it is to have a list of what they need, it is given to them […] many projects are actually like that […] it is actually the easiest, but that does not necessarily generate capacity in organizations*. Facilitator (F-2-9)

Consequently, facilitators suggested that working in a PO-led way necessitates sacrifices in time, salary, stress, and emotional investment that could be alleviated by taking short-term consultancy roles. They suggested they would not be prepared to make these sacrifices if they did not believe in what they were doing. This supports findings from the brokerage literature on the importance of normative commitment for meso-level actors (Bierschenk *et al*., 2002) and adds weight to Maier & Winkel's (2017) assertion that meso-level actors are more inclined to implement interventions that they agree with.

In addition to altruistic/normative motivations, Haapala & White (2018) suggest meso-level actors are also incentivized by opportunities. In this regard, facilitators expressed the potential for gaining professional capital from successful project outcomes, which they saw as more likely when activities were PO-led. Inversely, potential reputational damage incurred by project failure provided further personal and professional motivation for working in a PO-led manner. Reputational damage is an inherent risk for meso-level actors who often rely on social capital and networks of relationships (Brasil & Capella, 2017) and is particularly pertinent in the international development sector, which is characterized by fixed-term contracts and tight-knit professional networks. Consequently, we see that professional futures as well as professional histories motivate how facilitators fulfil their roles.

> *My reputation is my cocoa*.[9] *For me personally, I don't want to be associated with failed projects and I don't know if you remember, I made a promise to [my manager] to say give [me] […] the room to try my strategies. […] They have really done well, they have given me that room to do what I can do and I am happy, really getting good results coming up.* Facilitator (F-7-235)

Facilitator motivations give insight to unanswered questions from the policy entrepreneur literature on what motivates meso-level actors (Arnold, 2015). Facilitators' normative and personal-professional motivations, which are contingent on professional histories and futures, incentivize them to use their meso-level position to ensure POP is PO-led. To do this, facilitators allow (and actively create) room for maneuver in which they can try their own strategies and ensure that POs actively lead POP activities. In this sense, facilitator motivations influence the procedural-justice of POP practices. Taking time to understand and work with the motivations of meso-level actors is therefore essential in understanding how to incorporate PO-led activities and recognizing and influencing how project intentions become social effects.

[9] Denoting that it is the source of the facilitators livelihood in the same way cocoa is for so many farmers in Ghana.

Facilitators create room for maneuver within existing structures

Working creatively to increase the available room for maneuver is a strategy commonly observed by brokers (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Koster & van Leynseele, 2018) and street level bureaucrats (Hupe, Hill & Buffat, 2015), to whom discretion and agency are fundamental (Funder & Marani, 2015). In POP, facilitators' requests for agency and room for maneuver often needed support from MT members. The MT often gave this support as they recognized the need to adapt the POP theory of change to diverse country contexts and that the facilitators, as NDEs with greater knowledge of the country contexts, were better placed to institute this adaptation (MT interviews). However, like facilitators, MT members are constrained by the institutional structures within which they work on POP. Therefore, the agency given to facilitators is situated. Constraining structures include facilitators' terms of employment, the activities and procedures defined by the funding contracts agreed with each PO, the financial procedures of the MT institutions that dictate what funds can and cannot be used for, and the way in which donor requirements mandate that POP spending and reporting must be distributed across the four theory of change outcomes. Despite these structural constraints, facilitators utilize a range of strategies to create additional room for maneuver for both themselves and POs in material and immaterial ways.

Materially, some facilitators created room for maneuver by using their own private vehicles, which were not under the same institutional regulations as employer owned vehicles (i.e. did not have to be booked, approved, chauffeured etc.; participant observation notes *F-7I*). The use of private vehicles gave facilitators the material freedom to travel and implement the POP in a responsive manner and helped disentangle them from any organizational bureaucracy regarding vehicle bookings. Immaterially, other facilitators used working norms of reciprocity in NAC organizations to attain their room for maneuver, assisting with other NAC projects with a view to benefiting from organizational support and discretion when implementing the POP (*interview F-1-24*).

In addition to creating their own room for maneuver, the facilitators' motivation for POP to be PO-led meant they aimed to create room for POs to flexibly implement POP activities by *"shielding them (POs) from [POP] bureaucracy"* (interview F-7-226). Facilitators achieved this by being "strategically vague" in their writing of the contractual agreements between POP and POs to allow for diverse locally-embedded interpretations of agreed activities to be acceptable under the contract. This represents bricolage as alteration, where institutions, in this case formal contracts, are tweaked to ensure a better fit with local priorities (de Koning, 2011). Similar strategies were reported amongst forest officers in Kenya, who overlooked aspects of protocol to facilitate the operation of Community Forest Associations (Kairu *et al.*, 2018). These efforts can be labelled as 'un-disciplining': the intentional shielding of project recipients from disciplining tools such as contracts that are misaligned with local realities (Warne Peters & Mulligan, 2019, p. 375). Facilitators saw these practices as essential in 'getting things done', with one facilitator stating, "*If we went by procedure, we wouldn't have one single contract this year*" (facilitator F-7-237). Again, this highlights how normative and instrumental motivations underpin meso-level practice and the importance of meso-level actor informal maneuvering in ensuring PO-led activities.

Facilitators' NDE positions were essential to the un-disciplining strategies described above as they meant they possessed both knowledge of PO contexts and legitimacy and agency within POP (where part of their job description is to write the contracts). Such strategies would not have been possible for either MT actors, who lack the understanding of PO contexts, or PO actors, who often lack the capacity or formal responsibility for contract design. This highlights how NDEs are often uniquely positioned to engage in meso-level work and create room for maneuver necessary to balance donor requirements with the normative imperative for PO needs to dictate POP activities. Despite facilitators instigating the creation of room for maneuver, all strategies ultimately had to be signed off by the MT actors supervising each facilitator; this institutionalized power relation could not be escaped. As such, trusting relationships between MTs and facilitators were essential in allowing facilitator's room for maneuver, and thus PO-led activities. This is indicative of the wider importance of relationships to meso-level work expressed across the literature (Diallo & Thuillier, 2005; Warne Peters & Mulligan, 2019; Sundberg, 2020).

Relationships are key to navigating the messy-middle

The cultivation of good relationships is key to meso-level actors entrenching their ideas into practice (Arnold, 2015). This was supported by findings in POP, where MT actors suggested that "*once I know I can trust the person [facilitator] then I can accept their arguments [on POP decisions]*" (interview MT-3- 20). This corroborates findings from Diallo & Thuillier (2005) regarding the importance of international project managers trusting NDEs for successful project operation. POs also needed to trust facilitators to represent their needs in the contractual agreements and to continue to permit flexible working. In this regard, facilitators had to convince POs, who often have a logic of practice associated with rigid projects and donor demands, "*that the changes [to contractually agreed activities based on dynamic PO contexts] […] are going to be something that POP will have to work with*" (facilitator F-7-15). This trust is two-way; facilitators also had to trust MT actors not to change the agreements on operational procedures, and the POs to whom they grant flexibility to work in line with POP.

Facilitators' position between high-capacity MT institutions and low-capacity POs, where there are large power and capacity imbalances, can create challenges for relationship building (Warne Peters & Mulligan, 2019). Facilitators suggested that overcoming these imbalances, whilst challenging, was key to building trusting relationships and successful working.

> When you approach the [producer] organization or the [producer] organization approaches you, just thinking about the MT organization makes them feel at a different level and you have to build a relationship of trust […] So you have to first get them to see you as an equal, and then they trust you so that you can build their proposals. Facilitator (F-1-26)

As trusting relationships take time to build (Stern and Coleman, 2015), facilitators and MT actors agree that there is a need for more funding models like POP, that allow individual relationships to emerge over an extended period. For instance, POP has supported several POs for over 5 years, with the same MT and facilitator in place for the duration. Facilitators suggested that long-term relationship building allows them to recognize, understand, and work with the plural and nuanced knowledges, identities, and motivations of POs and ensure they are incorporated into POP activities. As such, long-term funding models that encourage the formation of trusting relationships may have positive epistemic justice implications.

> *I had good rapport going on with POs because each PO is different in its nature and brings on different specialties, knowledge of their local context, the passion and loving. There are different flavors and layers in POP partners.* Facilitator (F-4-10)

Facilitators' position as NDEs is key to this relationship building. Sundberg (2020, p. 566) suggests that NDEs are likely to have "vast social and kin-based networks in the aid recipient country; be fluent in vernacular language(s), cultural codes, and social norms; [and] be professionally well traversed in the domestic development landscape." Observations and interviews with facilitators corroborate this assertion and are elaborated below. Additionally, being an NDE based in-country allows facilitators to have more face-to-face time with the NAC and PO actors than may be possible for internationally based workers and the MT. One facilitator highlighted that first-hand relationships and experiences of PO actions are key to their role.

> *Seeing various projects, seeing what I am now reviewing on paper, that is, I have been in the field, reviewing, talking to people how they are implementing their projects. […] I have to have a clear idea that indeed what they are pointing to in the report or report has happened or is happening on the ground.* Facilitator (F-1-14)

The long-term relationships needed to work at the messy-middle, in combination with normative and personal-professional motivations to engage with the POP, lead facilitators to be emotionally invested in POP. This emotional investment is clear when things go wrong in project implementation. Upon a breaking of partnership with one PO, a facilitator reflected that:

> *Emotionally I am very angry, personally I am angry with them and to what they have done; they have betrayed my trust and the way I felt we had those strong relationships*. Facilitator (F-7-24)

The emotional nature of facilitators' work on POP was further highlighted by participant observation, which saw facilitators going above and beyond in terms of time devoted to POP work and the passion with which they discussed their in-country achievements and challenges at the annual POP meeting (participant observation, annual POP meetings 2018-2020). The way positive and negative emotions are entangled with and influence POP practice echoes suggestions from Wright, who states that emotions are "inherently bound up with the way development functions in all its messiness" (2012, p.1113).

In addition to emotional consequences for facilitators, relational work also has material implications for POP practice. Several facilitators suggested that good relations with MT country offices were key to smooth project administration. Contrastingly, in countries where facilitators described inheriting challenging relationships between MT and NAC actors shaped by pre-POP experiences, administrative procedures were often characterized as frustrating and inefficient. In these instances, facilitators worked on relationship building by communicating POP achievements and the potential benefits these could have for NAC actor programs. One facilitator expressed that taking time to understand the motivations (the desired results) of other actors was essential in unblocking the chain, getting all actors to buy in, and thus in allowing POP to operate smoothly. This is an example of translation where facilitators create coherence between diverse actor interests to mobilize effective working relationships as also observed by Watkins & Swidler (2013) in the context of the AIDS related industry in Africa.

Much of this relational and emotional work, which is clearly so important to POP and all development work (Wright, 2012), is not formally reported. Rather, it occurs in informal spaces: over WhatsApp messages, over tea during field trips, over coffee breaks between sessions at the annual POP meeting, over informal weekly video call catch-ups (from participant observation). As they typically occur informally, the way in which emotions and relationship building influence project practices and social effects is often occluded from assessment and thus not learnt from. This highlights the value of proliferating studies of meso-level actors and more importantly of instituting reflection on their work into project practices as is discussed below.

Informal social relationships underpin formally reported POP activities. This supports Hodder's (2016, p. 125) suggestion that "'Informality' (social relationships) is the material from which the formal organization (with its processes and rules) is shaped, and by which it is sustained." In the case of POP, facilitators strategically create and maintain spaces of informality to aid POP implementation. Similarly, to environmental officers in Kenya (Funder & Marani, 2015), several facilitators sought to "*form a small core team for implementation who are regularly communicating*" (interview F-7-259). Facilitators typically selected individuals who were already in their personal-professional networks or that they had a particularly strong rapport with, and that they felt had the necessary capacity, motivation, and experience to be trusted to effectively implement agreed upon activities. These individuals functioned as sub-national meso-level actors who were envisaged as "conduits" (interview F-5-259) to other actor groups who were key to POP success. This further suggests that brokerage is being instituted as a mode of project governance in POP (Hönke & Müller, 2018).

> *They [the sub-team] see the community context and put it in a way that technical people [MT and NAC actors] will understand and take the technical information and put it in a way that the community will understand.* Facilitator (F-7-259)

Working through these small groups allowed the facilitators to streamline the number of actors with whom they had to communicate, making day-to-day communication easier. Whilst these small groups typically started informally, over time, repeated informal interactions meant the groups often became formalized in the project documentation as an official part of the implementation structure. This highlights the dynamic and fuzzy boundary that exists between the formal and the informal (Hodder, 2016). Despite the potential for recognizing the importance of and therefore formalizing the informal, caution must be taken to avoid the loss of spaces for creativity, discretion, and relative anonymity allowed by informal spaces that create essential room for maneuver.

Like their motivations, many of the important relationships for facilitators were historically contingent. For instance, several government agencies and POs had interacted with facilitators on previous projects. Facilitators tended to reach out to these actors informally when planning the implementation of POP. This utilization of networks as pre-existing resources constitutes 'network bricolage' (Baker *et al*., 2003), which has been highlighted as a key strategy of NDEs (Kamruzzaman, 2017; Sundberg, 2020).

> *It [facilitator work] is a lot of human skills and connections and seeing with who to connect and try to convince and so on; it is a lot of networking. You are a spider in the network. You have to build that up, learn to extend your network. It is really important, this role as the facilitator.* POP management team member (MT-3-25)

Despite the procedural advantages, facilitators' embeddedness in and utilization of networks can create challenges. From a normative perspective, working through personal networks may lead to an aggregation of resources within a close group of organizations and individuals who have established working relations, which links to concerns about patronage (Brass, 2012). At the organizational level, formal POP structures that mandate competitive tendering and calls for proposal are ostensibly in place to deal with these concerns; however, their success is hard to gauge. Further challenges arise at the individual level for facilitators, whose wide-ranging networks and structural position at the meso-level can create challenges of expectation and accountability. For example, one facilitator reflected how old NGO contacts expressed frustration at their exclusion from POP activities, which by design bypassed them in favor of working directly with POs. In some cases, these NGOs were intentionally obstructive, acting as gatekeepers to POP partnership with POs. This highlights that whilst working within networks can be helpful (as shown by White & Haapala, 2019), it can also create challenges when meso-level actors contravene network norms. Facilitators' embeddedness in such diverse networks and position as NDEs affords them partial membership to many stakeholder groups, which had a key influence on their POP work.

Facilitators negotiate and utilize their multiple identities

Facilitators reflected that their positioning between, and partial membership of, several stakeholder groups was strategically useful in implementing their role. Facilitators used identity and forum shopping (Benda-Beckmann, 1981) to exploit diverse and overlapping standards, procedures, and institutions.

> *Sitting between two big organizations is more convenient for me to implement POP work than if I was only MT organization staff […] when I worked for an NGO, when we implemented work in the field it is more difficult, but here within POP, I am both MT organization and PO, so [it is] a little bit easier for me to implement activities*. Facilitator (F-3-14)

> *The arrangement that gives the facilitator a bit of leeway to be able to work across national, regional and HQ offices of MT organization [… this] creates a kind of very suitable triangle, which is a nice triangle where you are standing in the middle as a facilitator. You have all these three support mechanisms impacting on you, so if there is one support mechanism that is frustrating, you have two others that may kind of undo the other.* Facilitator (F-7-241)

These quotes support the assertion of Bierschenk *et al*. (2002) that the presence of multiple structures of authority allows meso-level actors to find additional room for maneuver. Multi-group membership allowed facilitators to access and engage a variety of actors in a way that may not be possible for someone more concretely associated with a singular position in the POP implementation chain. Whilst facilitators' plurality of positions had benefits (access to various legitimacies, resources, and networks), they also created challenges as facilitators became accountable to each of their positions. At times, this meant the facilitators had to negotiate conflicting priorities, administrative systems, and notions of success. This circumstance echoes existing claims in the literature that negotiating multiple accountabilities is a primary challenge of meso-level work (Kairu *et al.*, 2018): "*[I am] caught between POP interests, contractual rules, and MT national office standards.*" Facilitator (F-7)

In addition to mobilizing their professional positions, facilitators also often referred to their personal identities and backgrounds as farmers, or being raised in farming families, as something that they used to attain legitimacy and build rapport with POs. This is something that would be almost impossible for a foreign development practitioner, further highlighting the importance of NDE positionality for meso-level work (Kamruzzaman, 2017; Sundberg, 2020) and thus the necessity of case studies such as this one. The way facilitators bridged PO and MT actors was critical to project success as the MT has very limited influence/relational engagement with the POs. This supports claims from Hönke & Müller (2018) regarding the importance of brokerage in areas of limited reach (statehood).

Whilst the conscious and strategic ways in which facilitators deployed aspects of their identities were easiest to capture, the literature suggests that there would undoubtedly have been instances where multiple aspects of the facilitator's identity influenced their work in less conscious ways. For instance, it is likely that facilitators' social class and gender and the subsequent relations of power in which this entangles them influence the way in which they work on POP. Whilst there was not a suggestion of this by the facilitators interviewed here (perhaps because they have not experienced it or did not wish to share it), examples of this do exist in the literature. For instance, Haapala & White (2018) reported that both gender and caste influenced how meso-level actors were able to work on water reform projects in Nepal and the degree to which they were subjected to the taboos they were trying to change. Additionally, Shrestha *et al*. (2019) highlight how, in the context of water governance in India, gendered hierarchies and social dynamics can inhibit women's engagement with informal relationship building, something highlighted throughout this article as key to meso-level work. It is also possible that the conscious utilizations of identity described above have only become apparent to facilitators following questioning on the matter. For example, one facilitator reflected that "*since we started discussing your research I kind of have been putting my eye on some things I do with the POs and their representatives and how I seem to be influencing activities*" (interview F-7-299). This highlights the importance of encouraging reflection amongst meso-level actors in order to better understand how they are shaping project outcomes.

The notions that facilitators have different identities and accountabilities strongly echoes the conceptualization of the 'multiple hats' that Cleaver (2012) suggests development actors possess. Whilst Cleaver primarily engages with how intersectional identities unconsciously influence actor behavior, several facilitators made it clear that they were consciously aware of and exploiting their position at the meso-level to implement the POP as they wished. Negotiating these multiple positions and identities and working across diverse institutional realms meant that facilitators actively or consciously worked to blend aspects of various institutions into POP activities. This bringing together of disparate institutional elements to create something new is an example of institutional bricolage (Cleaver, 2012).

Facilitators strategically work through institutional bricolage

Facilitators' normative and instrumental motivations for ensuring POP is PO-led (see above) underpinned awareness and encouragement of PO appropriation of POP ideas and practices to fit their socially embedded needs. Facilitator thinking appears to align with Cleaver's (2012) key theses on development through institutional bricolage, which is a key strategy for facilitators.

> *We have to let them appropriate this approach in terms of how to plan activities, how to implement them and how to monitor them*. Facilitator (F-8-3)

POs enjoyed this bricolage approach and saw it as a point of difference in POP, which they viewed as fitting around their existing activities, rather than simply introducing new ideas.

> *POP allowed us to carry on doing what we are doing and created more awareness*. PO secretariat member from Ghana (S-1-160)

Facilitators' NDE position allowed them to promote working through institutional bricolage in POP. As NDEs, facilitators are unique in that they have knowledge of both PO and MT institutions, meaning they can effectively articulate project activities to fit with existing PO knowledges and priorities and with the theory of change that the MT report to donors.

Facilitators also utilized bricolage in their work with NAC actors, where they aimed to blend POP with existing NAC targets, such as REDD+ activities. This use of bricolage was instrumentally motivated, as facilitators believed it could generate additional interest from NAC actors and mobilize additional resources. In many instances, this was necessitated by the relatively small size of POP in-country budgets, echoing findings from the literature that bricolage often occurs in resource-constrained environments (Funder & Marani, 2015).

> *We are not talking about a dance of millions of dollars; we are talking about sufficient but limited resources to achieve concrete results […] and that requires you to have a lot of creativity*. Facilitator (F-1-6)

Facilitators and MT both hoped that by first blending POP with existing government initiatives or larger in-country projects, they would then in turn be able to influence government interventions towards their way of working:

> *[The] NAC actor is developing a big Global Environment Facility program and this program is coming and has adopted some of the POP intentions or desires included in that. This will bring resources to the POP*. Facilitator (F-5-159)

This could be labelled as 'bricolage as alteration' (adaptation or re-shaping of institutions to fit a specific context) (de Koning, 2011), where both the POP and larger project partners adapt in order to complement each other. However, unlike in most examples reported in the literature, this bricolage does not occur between bureaucratic and socially embedded institutions (Cleaver, 2012), but rather between two bureaucratic institutions. Facilitators' use of bricolage allows POP to influence the way larger development projects (such as the Global Environment Facility project mentioned above) work. Whilst requiring further and more nuanced analysis that is beyond the scope of this article, this suggests that through practices of bricolage and translation, NDEs as meso-level actors can influence larger development initiatives, in this instance to adopt PO-led ways of working with potentially positive implications for procedural justice.

Whilst facilitators utilize institutional bricolage to institute what they see as positive change (PO ideas leading POP and being integrated into NAC projects), the strategic use of bricolage is not without risks. By relying on actors such as POs and NACs to appropriate or alter POP activities to make them suitable, there is a risk that POP reproduces problematic structures associated with elite capture, poor delivery of outcomes, and poor representation of diverse PO members. To avoid these negative outcomes, facilitators use formal and informal management tools to try and avoid 'too much bricolage' (Haapala & White, 2018). Formally, bricolage is managed by funding contracts, which provide concrete and contractually binding boundaries to the

possibilities for institutional bricolage and the extent to which POs can modify POP activities.[10] More informally, facilitators rely on extended field visits and long-term trusting relationships with key actors to ensure that PO activities remain within the possible room for maneuver or 'institutional corridor' (Sehring, 2009) which the facilitator has created. The way in which facilitators manage institutional bricolage through both formal contractual agreements and extended personal-professional relationships offers some insight into Cleaver's (2012) question of how bricolage can be managed to avoid unintended outcomes. As, in this case, the management of institutional bricolage requires both the agency to use disciplining project elements and social legitimacy to build informal relations with in-country actors, NDEs appear uniquely positioned to manage institutional bricolage, which may be challenging for meso-level actors not in an NDE position.

Despite formal and informal management processes being in place to avoid too much bricolage, in some instances unintended outcomes still occurred. For instance, it emerged that one grant between a PO and POP was being managed by a non-member-based-NGO who had a previous relationship with the PO. This relationship was incompatible with POP's way of working. Once the incongruity with POP became clear, the PO was removed from participation. In this case, we see institutional bricolage as articulation (de Koning, 2011), where POP, in accordance with its defined theory of change and procedural norms, actively rejects POs' institutional adjustment of its ideas, which involved working through an NGO. This highlights how, even when formal and informal checks are in place, working through bricolage is uncertain. Openly reflecting on the use of institutional bricolage by meso-level actors through further academic interrogation and more active reflection by practitioners may help avoid unintended outcomes such as the one described above. How these risks can be managed and whether greater managerialism could or should be in place is a question for further research.

Implications for project practice

I have shown that how facilitators navigate the messy-middle has direct implications for project practices and outcomes. Their normative and personal-professional motivations encourage them to support POP's strong emphasis on working in a PO-led manner. These motivations lead to them creating room for maneuver for both themselves and, more importantly, for POs to incorporate dynamic and locally embedded needs and activities into what could otherwise be constraining bureaucratic contracts.

Facilitators' creation of this room for maneuver is underpinned by long-term relationship-building that their NDE position makes them uniquely capable of, by granting them social legitimacy and bureaucratic agency with PO and POP MT actors respectively. Despite the many benefits, at times, the social networks which facilitators are embedded in as NDEs, and the various identities associated with them, created conflicting accountabilities which inhibited their meso-level work on POP. To overcome these challenges, the facilitators utilize strategic institutional bricolage to combine and create coherence between locally-embedded PO needs, and bureaucratic POP institutions. The influence of facilitators on POP practice complements Warne Peters & Mulligan's (2019, p. 371) assertion that "policies refract the social worlds from which they issue." Whilst this article specifically assesses facilitators, the social worlds of actors from the MT, NAC, and POs also influence POP practice. In addition to shaping POP practice, facilitators' social worlds are undoubtedly re-shaped by their work (Warne Peters & Mulligan, 2019). Whilst working on POP, facilitators describe learning from their experiences and adding to the repertoire of resources and strategies (discovered during participant observation), which they will take into their next roles and use to shape their subsequent professional practice.

The way facilitators and their informal maneuvering at the meso-level is essential in delivering on the PO-led intentions of POP highlights how meso-level work can have positive implications for the procedural justice of development projects. In POP, this arises from facilitators' work to smooth the interfaces, and manage the power relations, between otherwise disconnected actors to ensure alignment behind PO-led activities. The open and supportive project environment created by the MT, which may not be present on all projects, was essential in POP facilitators performing this role. Making the work of meso-level actors' part of development scholarship and practice, as I have begun to do here, is critical to allowing other project actors to engage with

[10] This is not to say that POs cannot get around this by reporting what POP actors want to hear. As highlighted in this article, formal reporting does not always reflect informal practice.

their challenges and ways of working, and thus to the creation of such supportive environments. Whilst POP is broadly supportive of the facilitators' meso-level work, few of the actions and strategies highlighted above are ever formally documented or reflected on. Besides one session at the annual POP meeting (which all actors stated was essential), facilitators suggested that they have little formally allocated time for reflection on the effect they as individuals have on project practice. This corroborates Eyben's (2014) wider critique of the inadequate provision for reflection in the international development sector.

> *We haven't documented how we have internalized the approach [theory of change] itself in what we have been doing.* Facilitator (F-4-28)

> *I can't always explain what worked and why.* Facilitator (F-7-239)

I have argued that working in a 'black box' with few reflections on day-to-day workings and strategies affords facilitators room to maneuver, allowing them to deploy informality and discretion in response to the changing needs of the diversity of stakeholder demands and contexts between which they work. However, it also creates challenges for project practice. Working from within a 'black box' can also reduce accountability and limit the possibilities for learning from POP experiences and reflection on how individuals and their values and motivations are shaping project practice, both of which are essential for reflective adjustments (Ika, 2015). Weighing up the pros and cons means any effort to institutionalize reflection on meso-level practice will likely have to strike a balance on how to 'partially' open the black box in which facilitators work.

In this regard, I suggest the concept of critical reflection offers a fruitful avenue of inquiry. Critical reflection facilitates an understanding of different perspectives and recognition that history, power, and relationships influence how we act in the world (Eyben, 2014). Consequently, it is well placed to further reveal and learn from the historically and socially contingent ways in which meso-level actors influence project practice. In doing so, project actors will be encouraged to reflect on and adjust their practices to work towards delivering outcomes that are in line with their intentions for POP to be PO-led. Additionally, better understandings of facilitators' meso-level work will enable the MT to better support them in their work and promote more effective information and experience sharing between facilitators at the annual POP meeting. Whilst improving understandings, critical reflection sessions would not have to be formally documented or have a prescribed 'outcome.' Therefore, they may be able to partially open the black box whilst maintaining the room for maneuver and discretion that I have shown as essential to facilitators' meso-level work of adapting POP to diverse country and PO contexts.

4. Conclusion

Bringing together a novel combination of four literatures has enabled analysis of how facilitators work as brokers, translators, street-level bureaucrats, policy entrepreneurs, and institutional bricoleurs to navigate their meso-level position and shape project practice. Despite fulfilling their roles in subtly different ways, reflecting their varied identities, experiences, contexts, and cultures, common strategies were observed across POP facilitators. Street-level bureaucrat and broker and translator literature was helpful in interpreting how facilitators worked in material or immaterial ways to create room for maneuver to ensure POP could be adapted to the diverse geographies and organizations seen across the nine POP countries. All facilitators utilized existing personal and professional networks, relational skills, and varying aspects of their identity to institute Producer Organization (PO)-led POP activities. Institutional bricolage and policy entrepreneurship literatures were helpful in revealing how facilitators designed and translated PO-led activities to fit Management Team (MT) and National Advisory Council (NAC) priorities through processes of conscious institutional bricolage. As each of the literatures was helpful in interpreting these strategies, such a holistic understanding of facilitators' work and influence on POP would not have been possible using a single framework. I suggest that further studies on meso-level work also bring multiple literatures into conversation, drawing on them as the empirical context requires.

Theoretically, analyzing the meso-level work of POP facilitators has provided the called-for empirical insight into NDEs work on development projects (Kamruzzaman, 2017; Sundberg, 2020). The national development expert (NDE) context has also helped fill gaps in existing meso-level actor literatures (Table 1). In response to Arnold's (2015) question of what motivates policy entrepreneurialism, I show that normative and personal-professional motivations encourage creative meso-level practice and PO-led working. Additionally, by observing meso-level practice at the NDE level, where individuals often have formal agency for project management and decision-making, I posit that institutional bricolage can be managed both formally through disciplining project elements such as contracts and informally through the building of trusting and transparent relationships. Further work should look to build upon this initial finding to explore the limits of these management strategies more thoroughly, to create a more concrete empirical basis from which to answer Cleaver's (2012) key questions on the extent to which positive outcomes can be achieved through managed institutional bricolage.

Practically, my findings highlight how NDEs' work at the meso-level has significant implications for how development projects are created and the social effects that they generate. NDEs are also shown as critical in shaping how project recipients interface with development projects, and consequently the extent to which their ideas and preferences are integrated. Therefore, improving understandings of NDEs' lifeworlds and how this influences their work at the meso-level is central to political-ecological inquiry into how development projects weigh up different epistemic and procedural pressures to establish practices that restructure local lives. Within the academy, this means further work that combines meso-level actor literatures and generates further NDE case studies. Within practitioner communities, I suggest the introduction of critical reflection as a mechanism for partially opening the black box within which meso-level actors work. Using these two methods for improved understanding will allow NDEs' practice at the meso-level to be critiqued and learnt from, whilst maintaining the room for maneuver and discretion that are essential to their work.

References

Acosta, A. (2012). The *buen vivir* – an opportunity to imagine another world. In Heinrich Böll Foundation (Ed.) *Inside a champion. An analysis of the Brazilian development model*. (pp. 192–210). Heinrich Böll Foundation. Retrieved July 11, 2023, from https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/Inside_A_Champion_Democracy.pdf#page=194

Arnold, G. (2015). Street-level policy entrepreneurship. *Public Management Review*, 17(3), 307–327. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2013.806577

Baker, T., Miner, A. S., & Eesley, D.T. (2003). Improvising firms: Bricolage, account giving and improvisational competencies in the founding process. *Research Policy*, 32(2 SPEC.), 255–276. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0048-7333(02)00099-9

Banks, N., Hulme, D., & Edwards, M. (2015). NGOs, states, and donors revisited: Still too close for comfort? *World Development*, 66, 707–718. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2014.09.028.

Banks, N., Schulpen, L., & Brockington, D. (2020). New sectoral perspectives on international NGOs: Scale, dynamics and influences. *Development in Practice*, 30(6), 695–705. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2020.1801595

Benda-Beckmann, K. von (1981). Forum shopping and shopping forums: Dispute processing in a minangkabau village in west Sumatra. *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, 13(19), 117–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/07329113.1981.10756260

Benjaminsen, G. (2017). The bricolage of REDD+ in Zanzibar: From global environmental policy framework to community forest management. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 11(3), 506–525. https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2017.1357103

den Besten, J. W., Arts, B., & Behagel, J. (2019). Spiders in the web: Understanding the evolution of REDD+ in Southwest Ghana. *Forests*, 10(2), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.3390/f10020117

Bierschenk, T., Chauveau, J., & Olivier de Sardan, J.-P. (2002). *Local development brokers in Africa: The rise of a new social category*. Department of Anthropology and African Studies. Johannes Gutenberg Univ. Mainz. Working Papers.

Bierschenk, T., & Olivier de Sardan, J.-P. (2014). Ethnographies of public services in Africa: An emerging research paradigm. In Bierschenk, T. & Olivier de Sardan, J.-P. (Eds.) *States at work: Dynamics of African bureaucracies*. (pp. 35-65). Brill.

Brasil, F. G., & Capella, A. C. N. (2017). Translating ideas into action: Brazilian studies of the role of the policy entrepreneur in the public policy process. *Policy and Society*, 36(4), 504–522. https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2017.1374691

Brass, J. N. (2012). Why do NGOs go where they go? Evidence from Kenya. *World Development*, 40(2), 387–401. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2011.07.017

Cleaver, F. (2012). *Development through bricolage: Rethinking institutions for natural resource management*. Routledge.

Cleaver, F., & de Koning, J. (2015). Furthering critical institutionalism. *International Journal of the Commons*, 9(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.18352/ijc.605

Corbin Dwyer, S., & Buckle, J.L. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 160940691878817. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918788176

Diallo, A., & Thuillier, D. (2005). The success of international development projects, trust and communication: An African perspective. *International Journal of Project Management*, 23(3), 237–252. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2004.10.002

Engwall, M. (2003). No project is an island: Linking projects to history and context. *Research Policy*, 789–808. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0048-7333(02)00088-4

Evans, C., & Lambert, H. (2008). Implementing community interventions for HIV prevention: Insights from project ethnography. *Social Science and Medicine*, 66, 467–478. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2007.08.030

Eyben, R. (2014). *International aid and the making of a better world*. Routledge.

Funder, M., & Marani, M. (2015). Local bureaucrats as bricoleurs. The everyday implementation practices of county environment officers in rural Kenya. *International Journal of the Commons*, 9(1), 87–106. https://doi.org/10.18352/ijc.526

Funder, M., & Mweemba, C. E. (2019). Interface bureaucrats and the everyday remaking of climate interventions: Evidence from climate change adaptation in Zambia. *Global Environmental Change*, 55(November 2018), 130–138. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2019.02.007

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Polity Press.

Goodman, R. (2019). Unstable solutions: Making development seem to work for everyone in Uttarakhand, India. *Critical Policy Studies*, 13(4), 396–413. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2019.1610469

Haapala, J., & White, P. (2018). Development through bricoleurs: Portraying local personnel's role in implementation of water resources development in rural Nepal. *Water Alternatives*, 11(3), 979–998. https://www.water-alternatives.org/index.php/alldoc/articles/vol11/v11issue3/473-a11-3-26/file

Hodder, R. (2016). Global South and North: Why informality matters. *New Global Studies*, 10(2), 113–131. https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2015-0020

Hönke, J., & Müller, M. M. (2018). Brokerage, intermediation, translation. In Draude, A. Börzel, T. & Risse, T. (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of governance and limited statehood*. (pp. 333–352). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198797203.013.16

Hupe, P., Hill, M., & Buffat, A. (Eds.) (2015). *Understanding street-level bureaucracy*. Policy Press.

Ika, L. A. (2015). Opening the black box of project management: Does World Bank project supervision influence project impact? *International Journal of Project Management*, 33(5), 1111–1123. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2015.01.005

Kairu, A., Upton, C., Huxham, M., Kotut, K., Mbeche, R., & Kairo, J. (2018). From shiny shoes to muddy reality: Understanding how meso-state actors negotiate the implementation gap in participatory forest management. *Society and Natural Resources*, 31(1), 74–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2017.1382628

Kamruzzaman, P. (2017). Understanding the role of national development experts in development ethnography. *Development Policy Review*, 35(1), 39–63. https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12200

Kingdon, J. (2013). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies. Updated edition, with an epilogue on health care*. Pearson Education.

de Koning, J. (2011). *Reshaping institutions: Bricolage processes in smallholder forestry in the Amazon.* PhD Thesis, Wageningen University. https://edepot.wur.nl/160232

de Koning, J., & Cleaver, F. (2012). Institutional bricolage in community forestry: An agenda for future research. In Bas, A., van Bommel, S. Ros-Tonen, M. & Verschoor, G. (Eds.) *Forest-people interfaces: Understanding community forestry and biocultural diversity*. (pp. 277-290). Wageningen Academic Publishers.

Kørnøv, L., Zhang, J., & Christensen, P. (2015). The influence of street level bureaucracy on the implementation of strategic environmental assessment. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 58(4), 598–615. https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2013.873711

Koster, M., & van Leynseele, Y. (2018). Brokers as assemblers: Studying development through the lens of brokerage. *Ethnos*, 83(5), 803–813. https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2017.1362451

Lewis, D. (2009). International development and the 'perpetual present': Anthropological approaches to the re-historicization of policy. *European Journal of Development Research*, 21(1), 32–46. https://doi.org/10.1057/ejdr.2008.7

Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Long, N. (2001). *Development sociology: Actor perspectives*. Routledge.

Longhurst, R. (2016). Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In Clifford, N., French, S. & Valentine, G. (Eds.) *Key methods in geography*. (pp. 143-156). Sage.

Maier, C., & Winkel, G. (2017). Implementing nature conservation through integrated forest management: A street-level bureaucracy perspective on the German public forest sector. *Forest Policy and Economics*, 82, 14–29. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2016.12.015.

Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 95–117. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523

Mosse, D. (2004). Is good policy unimplementable? Reflections on the ethnography of aid policy and practice. *Development and Change*, 35(4), 639–671. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0012-155X.2004.00374.x

Mosse, D. (2013). The anthropology of international development. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42, 227–246. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155553

Mosse, D., & Lewis, D. (2006). *Development brokers and translators: The ethnography of aid and aid agencies*. Kumarian Press.

Nadai, E., & Maeder, C. (2005). Fuzzy fields. Multi-sited ethnography in sociological research. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(3). https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.3.22

Oliver, T. R., & Paul-Shaheen, P. (1997). Translating ideas into actions: Entrepreneurial leadership in state health care reforms. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 22(3), 721–788. https://doi.org/10.1215/03616878-22-3-721

Olwig, M. F. (2013). Beyond translation: Reconceptualizing the role of local practitioners and the development 'interface.' *European Journal of Development Research*, 25(3), 428–444. https://doi.org/10.1057/ejdr.2013.9

Pasgaard, M. (2015). Lost in translation? How project actors shape REDD+ policy and outcomes in Cambodia. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 56(1), 111–127. https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12082

Roberts, J. (2020). Political ecology. In Stein, F. (Ed.) *Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. https://doi.org/10.29164/20polieco.

Sehring, J. (2009). Path dependencies and institutional bricolage in post-Soviet water governance. *Water Alternatives*, 2(1), 61–81. https://www.water-alternatives.org/index.php/alldoc/articles/vol2/v2issue1/36-a2-1-5/file

Shrestha, G., Joshi, D. & Clément, F. (2019). Masculinities and hydropower in India: A feminist political ecology perspective. *International Journal of the Commons*, 13(1), 130. https://doi.org/10.18352/ijc.920

Stern, M. J., & Coleman, K. J. (2015). The multidimensionality of trust: Applications in collaborative natural resource management. *Society and Natural Resources*, 28(2), 117–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2014.945062

Sundberg, M. (2020). Building trust, gaining truth: The relational work of national staff in foreign aid agencies. *Current Anthropology*, 61(5), 563–582. https://doi.org/10.1086/711234.

Warne Peters, R., & Mulligan, J. M. (2019). Introduction to a symposium on development implementation: Discipline, deception, and the relational work of development. *Critical Policy Studies*, 13(4), 370–378. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2019.1657923

Watkins, S. C., & Swidler, A. (2013). Working misunderstandings: Donors, brokers, and villagers in Africa's AIDS industry. *Population and Development Review*, 38(SUPPL.1), 197–218. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2013.00560.x

White, P., & Haapala, J. (2019). Technical advisors as brokers: Translating gender equality and human rights policies and values into practice in the water sector in Nepal. *European Journal of Development Research*, 31(3), 643–662. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-018-0173-0

Wolf, E. (1956). Aspects of group relations in a complex society: Mexico. *American Anthropologist*, 58(6), 1065–1078. https://www.jstor.org/stable/666294

Wright, S. (2012). Emotional geographies of development. *Third World Quarterly*, 33(6), 1113–1127. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2012.681500