



Conservation and development 2.0: Intensifications and disjunctures in the politics of online ‘do-good’ platforms



Bram Büscher*

Sociology of Development and Change, Wageningen University, The Netherlands

Department of Geography, Environmental Management & Energy Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 June 2015

Received in revised form 23 April 2016

Accepted 1 May 2016

Available online 10 May 2016

Keywords:

Conservation
Online activism
New media
Web 2.0
Development
Nature 2.0

ABSTRACT

An increasing amount of interactive ‘2.0’ crowdsourcing platforms raise awareness and funds for conservation and development projects worldwide. By enabling two-way online collaboration and communication, these ‘conservation and development 2.0’ platforms hoped to provide new impetus and popular legitimacy for conservation and development initiatives in the face of budget cuts and general criticism of the ‘formal’ aid sector after the financial crisis. This paper presents the case of the flagship ‘elephant corridor’ project on the Dutch *pifworld.com* platform to investigate whether and how the ‘2.0’ element has changed conservation and development in line with these expectations. The paper describes and analyses online and offline dynamics of the project and shows that while online excitement about the project remained high, the concomitant conservation and development promises and imaginations ill related to offline local realities. This rather ‘traditional’ conservation and development disjuncture, however, needs to be understood against the system peculiarities of the politics of online ‘do-good’ 2.0 platforms. The paper concludes that as these peculiarities are significantly intensifying and changing conservation and development dynamics, they do not elude familiar (1.0) disjunctures and might even obscure these further from sight.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Conservation and development dynamics, interventions and politics have rapidly become entangled with the rise of online ‘web 2.0’ technologies. These ‘co-creative’ technologies have enabled a transformation from mere (‘1.0’) consumption of online information to two-way or ‘2.0’ communication over the web, whereby information is simultaneously produced, consumed and circulated or ‘shared’ (Barassi and Treré, 2012). Following these trends, we see a parallel rise of ‘conservation and development 2.0’: online platforms or organizations that make use of 2.0 technologies to raise funds and awareness for conservation and development projects, issues and interventions. By enabling two-way online collaboration and communication, ‘conservation and development 2.0’ platforms hoped to provide new impetus and popular legitimacy for conservation and development initiatives during and after the financial crisis of 2007–2008, in the face of budget cuts and a more general decrease in (popular) legitimacy for

(formal) aid sectors in many donor countries (see Bergeijk et al., 2011).¹ Moreover, new online media were also believed to democratize conservation and development by allowing everyone to become part of discussions and change processes, and so radically transform relations among and between aid givers and recipients. In this way, ‘conservation and development 2.0’ would also challenge much political ecology and development studies literature that has shown that policy and practice, or rhetoric and reality in conservation and development habitually sit at odds with each other and that these are often given in by stark aid hierarchies between givers and recipients (see Quarles van Ufford, 1988; Lewis et al., 2003; Mosse, 2004, 2005; Li, 2007; Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010; DeMotts and Hoon, 2012; Milne and Adams, 2012; Büscher, 2013; Fletcher, 2013; Kepe, 2014).

The question that I want to address in this article is whether and how the ‘2.0’ element has been able to change more ‘traditional’ conservation and development initiatives and dynamics in the ways hoped for by its proponents. I will do so by presenting the case of the ‘elephant corridor project’ on the Dutch Pifworld platform, which

* Address: de Leeuwenborch, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 KN Wageningen, The Netherlands.

E-mail address: bram.buscher@wur.nl

¹ In the paper, conservation and development are both seen as part of the broader ‘aid sector’ or, more in tune with the language of online platforms, ways of ‘doing good’.

entailed the crowdsourcing of €430,000 for the establishment of an elephant conservation and migration corridor from Chobe National Park in Botswana via the Caprivi Strip in Namibia to the Kafue flats in Zambia.² The elephant corridor project and the broader Pifworld platform are part of the ‘conservation and development 2.0’ trend as they enable two-way communication and aim to establish co-creative ‘communities’ that actively pursue conservation and development objectives. While giving their support to the project on the Pifworld website, online givers – called ‘players’ – could leave comments behind, chat with and support other players and further share and like comments or other things happening on the site. This enabled players to co-construct ideas and imaginations of elephants and conservation landscapes in southern Africa and so construct natures that were partly but not entirely of their own making (see also Luke, 2001). The elephant corridor project was therefore also a ‘nature 2.0’ initiative as defined in the introduction to this special issue: a new online form and manifestation of what political ecologists refer to as ‘second nature’: “a nature that is *humanly* produced (through conceptualization as well as activity) and that therefore partakes, but without being entirely, of the human” (Biersack, 2006: 14; cf. Büscher, 2016).

The analysis of the ‘elephant corridor’ case, however, shows that while online excitement about the project remained high, the conservation and development promises and imaginations ill related to offline local realities. Moreover, the article shows that the contradictions around the elephant corridor project had little to no influence on how the Pifworld platform and various ‘players’ continued to jubilantly portray the project online. These, of course, are rather ‘traditional’ conservation and development disjunctures and hierarchies, in line with the above-mentioned literature and especially Mosse’s (2004: 663) conclusion that contradictions and tensions in ‘the field’ often do not influence policies, practices and discourses in donor contexts.

It would, however, be wrong to conclude from this that nothing has changed when it comes to conservation and development 2.0. These rather familiar disjunctures, I argue, should be understood against the system peculiarities of online ‘do-good’ 2.0 platforms. Crucial, therefore, is to start the paper by introducing and theorizing the system peculiarities of online ‘do-good’ platforms within broader contexts of conservation and development. This is the aim of the next two sections. After subsequently presenting the elephant corridor case, the paper will conclude by emphasizing two points: first, that while the 2.0 ‘system peculiarities’ are significantly intensifying and changing conservation and development dynamics this does not mean that they elude more ‘traditional’ (1.0) disjunctures; and second, that the intensifications brought by the politics of online conservation and development 2.0 platforms might obscure these disjunctures further from sight.

2. Online ‘do-good’ 2.0 platforms

Around 2008–2009, many online 2.0 platforms and initiatives oriented towards developmental or environmental causes emerged and started competing with established nongovernmental organizations.³ In this section, I focus on several prominent platforms orig-

inally listed on the ‘Online Pioneers for Good’ site, which sought to connect and promote “online front runners in creating a better world”.⁴ While very diverse, what united these platforms was their innovative use of new interactive web 2.0 tools to pursue development cooperation, environmental conservation or general social giving objectives. Moreover, many of them marketed themselves as being different from ‘traditional’ non-2.0 conservation and development organizations. The 1% Club, for example, refers to this trend as ‘international cooperation 2.0’. Organized around the idea that if we all spend 1% of our money, time and energy to doing good things the world would be a better place, one of its directors argues:

“Through the website you can choose yourself which projects you want to support, so you know exactly where your 1% is going. The website combines Web 2.0 elements with the rise of people and organisations who want to contribute to development cooperation, and is therefore really in itself a form of International Cooperation 2.0”.⁵

In an interview, the director of another platform, Wiser Earth, also reflected on the difference the 2.0 dimension makes:

“The importance of technology is that if you are in Africa, or in slums, you can still be connected. There they use it as well and get in touch with other likeminded people and share best practices and so further their cause much faster. This is all to prevent double work – there is now an amazing wealth of info that is community driven, and everything is open source”.⁶

And as a final example, a staff member of the Givengain platform, which promotes itself as a ‘social movement connecting activists and causes’,⁷ describes what changed when conservation and development “went into the ‘2.0 mindset’:

“What I also see is an incessant (positive) need for the global community to connect, and the more we are connected, the better we can solve our problems – the more we can get to the right information to make the right decisions. Our platform is not yet used in the optimal way by all users, but you need access, tools, time, and understanding to make that happen, just like all tools. So that is exciting – I think we are living in an interesting stage in a development as human beings, thanks to these online tools now available”.⁸

In sum, these new 2.0 platforms believed (and some still do) that they could radically change conservation and development dynamics by using co-creative, interactive web 2.0 technologies to facilitate global connection and communities and so democratize and more efficiently solve conservation and development issues. This feeling was also very strong at the start of the main case-study platform for this paper, the Pifworld platform. Like the other organizations, Pifworld is an online platform that enables online citizen or ‘netizens’ to ‘do good’ through interactive online media tools. It was founded around 2007–2008 by a former investment banker who was tired of investing in “all the things wrong for the world, coal, oil, etc.” and so he “quit his job, found investors, and started pifworld”.⁹ In the beginning, the idea behind Pifworld revolved around ‘playing it forward’ (PIF), which was explained as follows:

⁴ www.onlinepioneers.org, accessed 12 December 2012. This website has long been shut down, but evidence of its existence can still be found online, for example on <https://smallchange.org/blog/post/small-change-fund-featured-on-online-pioneers-for-good/>, accessed 20 January 2016. The online pioneers website was the entry-point for much of this research and why I contacted the organizations presented in this section.

⁵ <http://www.1percentclub.nl/about>, accessed: 17 August 2012.

⁶ Interview director Wiser Earth, 4 April 2013, San Francisco, USA.

⁷ <https://www.givengain.com/>, accessed 21 January 2016.

⁸ Interview Givengain staff member, 20 December 2013, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

⁹ Interview Pifworld executive, 6 June 2012, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

² Since 2010 I have followed Pifworld and the elephant corridor project online, regularly making print screens, and taking down notes as to the development of the website and the project. My methodology came close to, but was no ‘netnography’, but rather a multi-sited ethnography that included both online and offline components. Hence, I also did interviews with people behind the organization and went to the site of the elephant corridor between Botswana and Zambia four times to conduct local interviews and do participatory observation. In the reference to websites online, I have noted the original dates when I downloaded printscreens so as to show the development of the project and the Pifworld website over time. Some of these links, therefore, are no longer active.

³ See <http://www.socialbrite.org/cause-organizations/> for a good overview, accessed 24 January 2015. See also Igoe, 2013.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5073422>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5073422>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)