



# Whose hearts and minds? A gift perspective on the US military's aid projects in Eastern Africa



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## ABSTRACT

Today, the US military is frequently involved in the field of reconstruction and development. In Eastern Africa, personnel of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa has carried out hundreds of small projects, ranging from veterinary support, medical clinics for local populations to the construction and repair of schools and health centres. Although these civil affairs operations constitute only a small part of the wider US military activity on the continent, they play a significant role in the US military's post-counterinsurgency emphasis on stability operations. However, critical scholarship has paid little attention to this type of military practice, let alone the dynamics of giving and taking for the targeted beneficiaries.

This article draws conceptually on perspectives of the *gift* and empirically on visits to project sites in Uganda and Kenya that received assistance by US civil affairs teams in order to explore how recipients engage the gift-bearing donor. By understanding aid projects as social relations that are characterized by hierarchy and efforts of reciprocity, gift perspectives help us to make tensions and contradictions in these encounters visible. While the relationship is one of inequality, these interventions are mediated. Local brokers have a significant role in negotiating and translating priorities of the civil affairs teams on the one hand and the needs of local recipients on the other.

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Deep in the vast thorny savannah grasslands and low lying rocky hills of North-Eastern Uganda, right on the foot of a dormant volcano, a small team of U.S. Army soldiers of the 490th Civil Affairs Battalion – Charlie Company – are partnering with locals to bring development to a volatile region (US Embassy, 2012).

When a handshake goes beyond the elbow, we know it has turned to another thing (Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*).

## 1. Introduction

Today, the US military is frequently involved in the field of reconstruction and development. For example, under the umbrella of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HoA) US military personnel have carried out hundreds of small projects in East African countries (including Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya and Uganda). Managed by the US military's civil affairs teams, these projects mainly target the repair, extension or construction of

health and education facilities, as well as the provision of medical and veterinary aid. Compared to the scope and costs of other US military activities in Africa, including large military-to-military trainings and manoeuvres, secret operations, and logistics investments (Turse, 2015), these activities are a relatively small but important element of the US military's post-counterinsurgency crisis prevention strategy. Such humanitarian and development activities are likely to increase within its stability operations. More recently, Western military doctrine has articulated the need to be more attentive to emerging but not fully-formed threats. Such threats are currently evolving in regions considered to be deficient in both 'development' and 'security' (MOD, 2009; US Department of the Army, 2008). From a military perspective, the concept of *stability* (or *stabilization*) operations takes counterinsurgency thinking to another level: it extends and normalizes military engagement in the fields of development and governance, even in peacetime contexts (for a critical discussions see Bachmann, 2014; Collinson, Elhawary, & Muggah, 2010; Mac Ginty, 2012; Morrissey, 2015; Taw, 2012).

Although the topic of aid and reconstruction as part of military practice has received significant critical attention (see for example Ankersen, 2007; Chomsky, 1999; Egnell, 2009; Fassin & Pandolfi,

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2010; Franke, Guttieri, & Civic, 2014; Ingram, 2011; Pugh, 2001) empirical studies of the US military's engagements with local populations – outside of war situations – are sparse. The little that is publically documented about the US civil affairs projects in Africa often comes from within the military establishment itself or from scholars close to it (Farrell & Lee, 2015; Lee & Farrell, 2011; Losey, 2011; Piombo, 2010, 2014; for an excellent independent study see; Bradbury & Kleinman, 2010). For others, the US military's activities in the field of development are of primarily symbolic value, diverting scrutiny from more coercive operations elsewhere on the continent (Keenan, 2009; Turse, 2015; Usiskin, 2016). While certainly relevant, such a perspective seems to be glossing too easily over empirical nuance and complexity, seeing the US military's development projects simply as top-down projections of Western power.

Instead, this article asks a series of critical questions: how is a specific type of military practice, namely development engagement by US civil affairs teams in non-war contexts in Eastern Africa perceived *in situ* by the recipients? How is this unusual encounter negotiated, who negotiates, and what kind of relationship emerges? The US military's aid engagement with rural populations in Eastern Africa can be described in Tsing's words as a “zone of awkward engagement:” an arrangement based on difference and characterized by instability (Tsing, 2005, p. xi). On the one hand, civil affairs pursue strategic-military objectives as part of a stability framework, and on the other hand, the projects aim to address immediate socio-economic needs of marginalized populations. The US military's civil affairs projects mobilize and affect the actors involved in different ways. Civil affairs operations draw local populations into encounters with foreign militaries and their strategic agendas. At the same time, these projects bring material benefits to areas where funding by the government and other sources is limited. Studying the expectations and experiences of those who directly encounter the US civil affairs teams, provides a useful supplement to macro-level critiques of counterinsurgency and stabilization. It is through studying specific contexts where we can recognize the contradictions that characterize the US military's ‘aid’ missions.

The projects visited are situated in northern Uganda (Gulu, Kitgum, Pader and Lira districts) as well as northern coastal Kenya (Lamu County). Both regions have been subject to extended engagement by US civil affairs teams with dozens of projects implemented in Uganda and more than two hundred across northern Kenya. Furthermore, in both countries civil affairs teams have had a longer-term presence. Data was collected during one month of fieldwork during April and May 2013 at 17 different project sites. I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with head teachers, leading staff at health clinics and representatives of community-based organizations, all of whom engaged directly with civil affairs teams. The projects visited in Uganda were mainly school and hospital renovations carried out after the end of hostilities in the north of the country as part of post-conflict reconstruction missions. Projects initiated by the US military in the Lamu region of Kenya are much more visible as rotating civil affairs teams have been based in the region for more than a decade. The main activity in this area has been the repair or extension of primary and secondary schools (e.g. extension of buildings, roof replacements, construction of water catchment systems). In general, information about these projects is sparse. In order to identify projects and their scope, I relied heavily on official news reports on the CJTF-HoA website (<https://www.hoa.africom.mil/stories>) as well as on previous studies (see Bradbury & Kleinman, 2010). Further projects were identified during the fieldwork. Selection of the projects in Kenya was made on the basis of accessibility and security. Given the incursion into Somalia by Kenyan forces in 2011 as well as

intrusions by the extremist al-Shabaab group into northern and north-eastern Kenya (Branch, 2011), it proved impossible to visit project sites too close to the Somali border. I instead concentrated on projects in the Southern parts of Lamu County.

Civil affairs projects take place under conditions of asymmetry where for strategic reasons a foreign military transfers a resource to an actor in need. In order to study the dynamics and tensions that this form of military practice generates, I will build on the literature on the gift (Bourdieu, 1990; Derrida, 1992; Mauss, 1990), and in particular on studies that analyse foreign aid as a gift relationship (for example Hattori, 2001; Korf, 2007; Korf, Habullah, Hollenbach, & Klem, 2010; Mawdsley, 2012; Stirrat & Henkel, 1997). The value of the gift literature is that it emphasizes the subtleties of emergent social relations rather than questions of aid effectiveness or unintended consequences. Furthermore, theories regarding the gift also bring into focus dynamics of reciprocity, or expectations of ‘returning’ the gift within development aid. While much of the scholarship on aid-as-gift portrays the emerging hierarchical relations as between a generous agential donor and grateful passive recipient, I intend to unpack this view by understanding the relationship as mediated by different actors. Head teachers and health staff at the project sites have a significant brokerage function as they become entangled in a web of expectations and obligations both from communities and the civil affairs teams. Having acquired expertise on international assistance, intermediaries are not only expected to act as spokespersons for the community vis-à-vis the US military but also to constantly seek external assistance to their respective organizations. Portraying them merely as passive recipients who are subjected to a Western security agenda would not do justice to the social function they enact. Focusing on local intermediaries allows gaining a deeper understanding of how the relationship between beneficiaries and the US military is performed. The interviews focused on frequency and types of visits, on the procedure of projects, on long-term interactions and on reflections about the interviewees' own position. Following Emily Yeh's work, I use the gift perspective in this article as a heuristic rather than an ontological category. Hence, I did not inquire explicitly into my interlocutors' notions of the gift. Rather, ideas of interaction, obligation and reciprocity helped to capture how the aid relationship is experienced and negotiated between militaries, local brokers and communities (Yeh, 2013, p. 17).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the next part, I will briefly historically situate US civil affairs practices and will provide a short overview on the scope of activity of civil affairs teams in East Africa. Thereafter, I will introduce the key arguments of the scholarship on the gift in relation to development aid, before turning – in the empirical section of the paper – to the question of how intermediaries in northern Uganda and coastal Kenya negotiate the emergent social relationship with the US military.

## 2. Situating civil affairs

Engagement in construction, reconstruction, delivery of economic support and governing functions in foreign territories by the US military has a long history. For example, during the US Army's counterinsurgency on the Philippines 1899–1902, US military ranks held wide-ranging power over social, cultural, economic and military action and engaged in road construction and education (Filiberti, 1988, pp. 51–55). US Major Parker is reported to have said that running schools has “tranquilized the country ‘more than a thousand men’” (quoted in Deady, 2005, p. 60). It was however not until World War II, when the first field manual on “civil affairs” was published, that this type of military practice became formalized (Hicks & Wormuth, 2009, pp. 1–3; Ziemke, 1972, p. 131). Civil affairs were extensively used during the Korean War and the war in

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