Assembling international development: Accountability and the disarticulation of a social movement

Daniel E. Martinez [a, *], David J. Cooper [b]

[a] HEC Paris, Department of Accounting and Management Control, 1 rue de la Liberation, 78350, Jouy-en-Josas, France
[b] School of Business, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, T6G 2R6, Canada

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how international development funding and accountability requirements are implicated in the so-called disarticulation of a social movement. Based on field studies in Guatemala and El Salvador, we show and explain the way accountability requirements, which encompass management and accounting, legal, and financial technologies, constitute the field of international development through the regulation of heterogeneous social movement organizations. We highlight how accountability enables a form of governance that makes possible the emergence of entities (with specific attributes), while restricting others. Our analysis has implications for governmentality studies that have examined the interrelation of assemblages by analyzing how these interrelations are operationalized at the field level through the Deleuze-and-Guattari-inspired processes of territorialization, coding, and overcoding.

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I left the country soon after my brother was disappeared by the military.[1] That was in 1980 and government repression had escalated, forcing a number of us involved in the movement to cross the border into Mexico as political refugees. There, I started to work with other exiled activists to aid communities caught in the middle of the war.

We sent our first funding proposal to an organization in Holland with close ties to the church. The proposal included a description of the problems, the objectives we expected to achieve, the activities to carry out, and an explanation of how it would be evaluated. It also included a budget, which was quite general, not very specific, like these days. For example, a line item would be for food and we would write that $10,000 worth of food was needed, same for clothes and medicine. Of course, we had to justify the expenses with receipts, whenever we could get them. The budget was a page long. In total the proposal was five pages and it took no more than 15 days for the funds to be deposited into a bank account that one of the priests opened in his

name for us to use. This is nothing like our current proposals, which are much longer and denser with technical and financial information. The agencies also knew we could not provide the most detailed and transparent paperwork because we were facing a humanitarian crisis. We were refugees and did not have the documentation to start an NGO or open a bank account. What we did have was the support of a few priests and the support of international NGOs with offices in Mexico.

The precarious situation in which we worked meant that it was of fundamental importance that we established relationships based on mutual trust, that there be a commonality in values and principles. We were all engaged in the same movement, locally and internationally, to promote social change. The personnel in the aid agencies and international NGOs that we worked with showed a political commitment to the cause and they provided financial support for that cause. They knew that their administrative requirements could not always be met because of the war. When representatives from international organizations were able to visit and monitor a project, they would observe the conditions of the communities in which we worked and the lack of administrative infrastructure. The monitors did not count in great detail the amount of bags of corn purchased or see whether everything was there. It was not the overarching preoccupation and they would not hassle us too much about the receipts: That they were missing, not in the proper format or order, that the signature was not legible, and so

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on. There was more understanding, more flexibility.

This understanding is also reflected in the way financial transactions were managed. The money had to be wire-transferred by international donors into our bank accounts. At first we used banks in Mexico, but we ran into some trouble with the accounts. We needed our accounts in US dollars and the Mexican government did not allow that at the time. The banks in our home country were too risky because the military was auditing internationally funded accounts. The best option at the time was to open accounts in Panama because their banks operated in dollars and were less regulated. But that meant that one of us would have to go and collect those funds once we got confirmation that the funds were transferred.

On a few occasions I had to take that dreadful trip. It meant taking the bus to Panama to retrieve the funds, we are talking tens of thousands of dollars in cash, and make my way back to Mexico on another bus. That also meant that we had dollars in our safe that needed to be converted into Mexican pesos and then into Guatemalan quetzals. We could not depend on banks for this either; that meant someone had to take cash to the border and exchange it at black market rates. It was unreasonable to expect a receipt from a black market transaction. But funders knew. They noticed that we did not use the official exchange rate in our financial reports. We also worked a lot with cash, which meant that we seldom provided bank statements.

So here again is the element of trust. When I was given the order to take those trips to Panama it meant that they trusted my political commitment; the same way they trusted the person responsible for the exchange rate; the same way that international funders trusted our organization with the funds it provided; and that we trusted that they would not give intelligence to the military or anyone that could put us and the communities in danger. The funders trusted that every dollar would be used to the best of our abilities to improve the situation of the communities. It would not make sense to risk our lives, to build a reputation based on our commitment to the struggle, and then throw all that away by embezzling a few dollars or by not doing the best project we could with the conditions we were working in. If something were to go awry with the funds, well, it was more than an administrative penalty, it was a political one.

1. Introduction

Antonio[2] provides an account of the accountability relations between non-formalized grassroots organizations and European and North American international funders during the war.[3] It highlights how "solidarity," "trust," "a commonality in values and principles," and a sense that they "were all engaged in the same movement" [4] underpinned funding and accountability relations between grassroots organizations and their funders.

To be clear, Antonio's account is not the portrayal of a golden era.

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[2] This is a composite character based on interviews with three NGO workers' experiences with international development and the social movement since the war. This composite character provides an ethnographic account that protects the identity of specific interviewees and helps to make the case more vivid (for similar approaches see Rottenburg (2009) and Dugdale (1999)).

[3] Both countries were engulfed in an internal armed struggle that pitted their military-led governments against various left-wing guerrilla organizations. This is developed in section 3.

[4] Referring to the social movement in the singular was a common way for interviewees to refer to the historical social movement—a way of characterizing a social movement with origins in the war. Currently, there are various social movements (e.g., campesino, labour, feminist movements) and we are not suggesting that they are acting as a singular entity. Like our interviewees, we reserve the singular use to refer to the historical social movement that is at the centre of our study.

It indicates how an organization avoided capture by governments (which often meant torture, disappearance, or death) and how it operated in adverse conditions. Antonio provides us, rather, with a particular experience of a social movement and highlights three important features. First, its components: International NGOs and funding agencies, non-formalized grassroots organizations, refugees, and priests—each with its own mode of political intervention. Second, the relations between the social movement and funding agencies, characterized by lenient legal and accounting requirements and the use of an underground economy to avoid banks and the military. Finally, Antonio articulates a unifying political aspiration, a "commonality in values and principles," that kept the disparate components of the movement together. This aspiration is not restricted to the past, though, as it permeates organizations operating in the increasingly technical and professionalized world of international development. It is a "politics of affirmation" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 6) that informs their critique of international development and the articulation of alternative modes of accountability and political intervention.

Antonio's narrative offers a starting point to examine how grassroots organizations and the broader social movement that they were "all engaged in" have been altered. Our study was initially prompted by interviewees' concern over the changes they experienced since the war. As a Guatemalan community organizer noted: "International development has been able to do what the military was not able to do during the war: Disarticulate the social movement." Another interviewee active in organizing communities during the war, and now an NGO project coordinator, similarly noted: "There are grassroots organizations, movements that have been disarticulated due to economic influence, due to money. But above all, because they have become NGOized." These, like other accounts (see also Morales López & Bá Tiul, 2009; Morales López, 2010; Roy, 2004; Alvarez, 1999, 2009), sensitize us to the powerful effects of international development's accountability requirements on social movements.

The study of this so-called disarticulation was also motivated by our understanding of how accountability requirements enable the formation of a governable field by regulating its component parts, their relations, and political aspirations. Previous studies indicate that accounting and accountability technologies are implicated in bringing a governable field into being (Miller & O'Leary, 1987; Miller, 1990; Preston, 2006; Rahaman, Neu, & Everett, 2010). Less has been written on how this bringing into being limits and regulates other entities. This prompted us to study not only how "complexes" of rationales and practices mesh together, intersect, and are constitutive of one another (Miller, 1990), but also the processes through which one complex gives way to another.

We address these understandings through a field study conducted in Guatemala and El Salvador; each one engulfed in its own internal war until left-wing guerrillas and the state signed peace accords in the 1990s. The accords marked the beginning of a reconstruction process: The formation of state institutions through which grassroots organizations and guerrillas could carry out their political programme as political parties, labour unions, and NGOs. International development work became one way through which these actors could intervene in the process of reconstruction. We argue that accountability requirements, which encompass management and accounting, legal, and financial technologies, played an important role in the formation and continued maintenance of international development as a space for social movement organizations to intervene but to also be intervened and constituted as proper developmental actors.

Studying how social movement organizations became components of this field of development intervention, though, also exposed us to how bringing something into being has