

SUBCONTRACTING ETHICS:  
MEDIATING THE COMMODIFICATION OF  
'LOCAL KNOWLEDGE' IN CRISIS AND CONFLICT

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*Introduction*

In his recent contribution to the *Forum for Development Studies*, David Mosse writes that, in his decades of experience conducting anthropological research for the Department for International Development, participatory techniques used to elicit 'local knowledge and local choices for local control' were the methodologies most valued by beneficiary communities (Mosse 2014: 516). Mosse's emphasis on the importance of local knowledge production and local participation in development decision-making echoes almost exactly the language adopted by nearly every major donor, non-governmental organization (NGO) and aid implementation agency working in 'big D' development today (Hart 2001: 650).<sup>2</sup>

The drive toward community-informed or community-driven development in part reflects the impact of anthropology's sustained critique of the development industry. In fervently advocating the inclusion of local ways of knowing, however, we have obfuscated the 'fragmentation of ethical views' within our own discipline (Meskell and Pels 2005: 2), while simultaneously and often unconsciously instrumentalising and objectifying 'local knowledge' to the detriment of 'local knowledge producers' – the local people implicated in the neo-liberal economy of international development by virtue of their geographical, economic, or otherwise marginalized status vis-à-vis so-called

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<sup>2</sup> Whereas 'development' (little d) generally refers to broad processes of change, particularly under capitalism, 'Development' (big D) refers to specific, intentional interventions led by international actors with the aim of achieving 'progress', generally within a largely Western, neo-liberal framework (Chant and McIlwaine 2009).

‘developed’ states. As more international anthropologists are brought in at the highest levels to advise on complex interventions, local researchers subcontracted to collect or produce ‘on-the-ground’ data are often constrained by pricing and delivery timelines, while scant attention is paid to building their skills or offering them psychological or risk-reduction support.

When, as is increasingly happening, development actors become involved in war-torn countries or ‘fragile and conflict-affected states’ (FCAS), an unwillingness within the discipline of anthropology to lead on the articulation of a coherent code of ethics ignores our obligations to the production and producers of ‘local knowledge’. Ethical considerations that are central to anthropology – representation of subjects, researcher–subject relationships, the complexities of consent, etc. – are subsumed by the concerns of the procurement departments of major aid donors like the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These departments, and their bureaucratic contracting protocols, are insufficiently able to account for the complexities of anthropological research.

In the following pages, we will trace the origins of this particular blind spot in anthropology before outlining three trends that are shaping the production and consumption of localized knowledge as a means of exploring the ethical quagmire of development aid research today: (1) the rising popularity of evidence-based programming; (2) the near-universal push toward adherence to value for money (VfM) principles; and (3) the increasing reliance on ‘remote management’ as a means of transferring rather than confronting risk.<sup>3</sup> We will argue that these three trends contribute to an aid economy that simultaneously fetishizes local knowledge and subcontracts risk down to its most precarious producers – local researchers.

We conclude that, if anthropologists are to continue to advocate better understandings of local dynamics and greater respect for local values and epistemologies, then they must, as Meskell and Pels suggest, be prepared to ‘facilitate the negotiation of expertise within as well as outside of the profession’ (Meskell and Pels 2005: 3). Having

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<sup>3</sup> Remote management is an approach that removes non-local staff from immediate physical danger whilst retaining international and/or national staff hierarchies within program management structures (Collinson et al. 2013).

contributed to the growing demand for local ‘ways of knowing’ (Harris 2007: 153) within the development industry, anthropologists must be prepared to engage with the system and advocate on behalf of those who produce it.

### ***Subcontracting Ethics***

#### *Two Anthropologies*

It is important to understand why there exists little theoretically-engaged ethical guidance for anthropologists involved in ‘big D’ development. In part, the lack of clarity is a symptom of the enduring science/morality dichotomy (Meskell and Pels 2005), one with deep roots within the discipline best illustrated by the very public and conceptually muddy ‘intellectual joust’ between D’Andrade and Scheper-Hughes in the mid-1990s (see Fassin 2008: 333).

As anthropology cast itself as a discipline of counter-hegemonic inquiry in the post-structuralist period (Sahlins 1996: 16), a lively debate over the ‘situatedness and partiality of all claims to knowledge’ gathered steam (Marcus 1998: 198). At the same time, however, the 1990s also saw a peak in what had been two decades of uprisings of marginalized indigenous peoples in South America, as well as the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa (Nash 2007). Inspired by this critical moment in history, Scheper-Hughes called for a ‘militant’ anthropology, arguing that anthropologists must be at once ‘anthropologists, comrades, and companheiras’ (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 420). Those who have embraced this perspective, whether wholly or in part, go by many labels, most frequently ‘engaged’, ‘activist’ and ‘applied’. Though most move between these mantles situationally, all share an expressed desire to be politically and morally involved in the lives of their subjects – an aim Scheper-Hughes argues is what it means for anthropology to be ‘ethically grounded’ (ibid.: 410). D’Andrade, on the other hand, fought the move toward what he termed ‘moral models in anthropology’ and called for anthropological objectivity, bemoaning what he believed to be growing support for the idea that ‘the moral agenda of anthropology should take priority over the scientific agenda’ (D’Andrade 1995: 408), despite, he argued, moral models being themselves ethnocentric. For D’Andrade, anthropology’s claim to moral authority rested on ‘knowing *empirical* truths about the world’ (ibid.).

Interestingly, as Fredrik Barth pointed out, both D'Andrade and Scheper-Hughes attacked relativism, although for opposite reasons (Barth 2005). The debate, then, was not so much a disagreement over the degree to which anthropology was or was not an inherently moral undertaking; rather, the feud hinged on a fundamental disagreement over when the anthropologist should engage in 'creative ethical work' (Robbins 2012).<sup>4</sup> Entangled as these two anthropologies are, dialogue between them is often poor except for moments of existential panic, such as those wrought by infelicitous flirtations with *actual* militant anthropology.<sup>5</sup> The result has been a gradual cordoning off of theoretical anthropology from the pragmatic concerns of development, which has in turn impoverished both the theoretical and methodological strengths of anything we might call 'development anthropology'.

### ***Development Anthropology and the Anthropology of Development***

Many anthropologists, the present authors included, do not believe that 'development anthropology' constitutes its own discrete sub-discipline, or more importantly, that it *should*; these remain, after all, fairly porous and arbitrary groupings. However, the various monikers adopted under the mantle of 'engaged anthropology' can be helpful in distinguishing certain relational characteristics that are brought to bear on the positionality of anthropologists within what we might call various 'knowledge ecosystems':

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<sup>4</sup> Robbins uses this phrase in a discussion of Faubion and Zignion's various attempts to distinguish between unreflexive and reflexive moral reasoning in times of ethical change or crisis. 'Creative ethical work' is that by which a subject seeks to draw together discrete elements of moral code to create a new means of behaving ethically in new or otherwise previously unencountered situations.

<sup>5</sup> The use of anthropologists in the US military, for instance, has been [condemned by the American Anthropological Association](#) (AAA). Human Terrain Systems (HTS), as they are often known, claim to use anthropological knowledge to mitigate civilian and troop casualties in active conflict.

*Anthropology of Development (critical)*

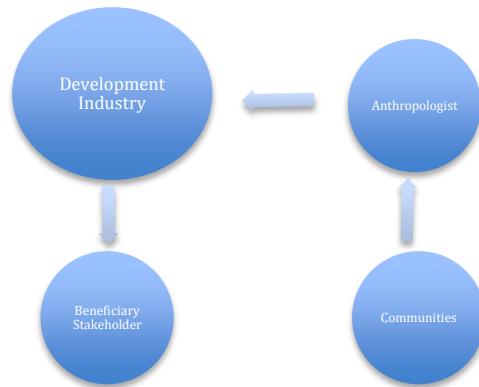


Figure 1. The (Critical) Anthropology of Development

The ‘anthropology of development’ seeks to examine the assumptions and practices that are core to the development industry. It has thus far been characterized by post-structuralist criticism, namely the linking of ‘big D’ Development with neoliberal agendas and Euro-American socio-cultural dominance. Within this model, the anthropologist understands herself as an external objective voice. Criticisms of specific interventions, such as the IMF-led restructuring of numerous African economies, are generally derived from insights gleaned through extended fieldwork with so-called ‘beneficiaries’. ‘Local knowledge’ in this model is presented as what is produced by and/or channelled through anthropologists. It is therefore not structurally incorporated within the development industry, but rather externally located and portrayed as post-action ‘objective’ critique.

Within this model, the anthropologist’s ethical responsibility is conceived of in nebulous terms and translates into a desire to uncover the forces of coercion and sources of inequality within the development system as a whole. Anthropologists may or may not understand themselves as having an ethical responsibility to individual communities, even when those communities have contributed to the development of the empirical claims presented.

*Activist Anthropology*

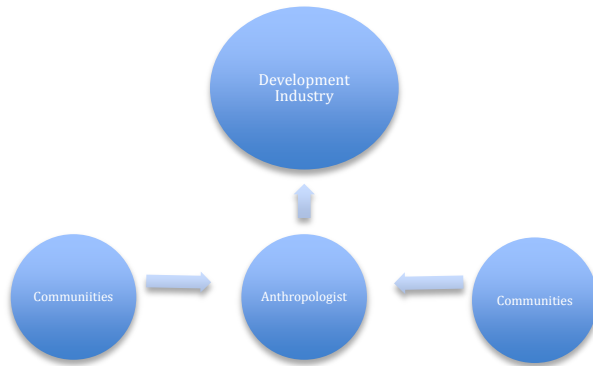


Figure 2. Activist Anthropology

Activist anthropology, by comparison, tends to position the anthropologist as a comrade-in-arms with beneficiary stakeholders. ‘Local knowledge’ is co-produced but made visible by virtue of the anthropologist’s willingness to engage with the development industry or, as the case may be, the government, military or corporate sector. The anthropologist’s ethical concern lies firmly with the beneficiary stakeholders. This, for instance, represents the anthropologist’s idealized positionality in Scheper Hughes’s meaning.

*Development Anthropology*

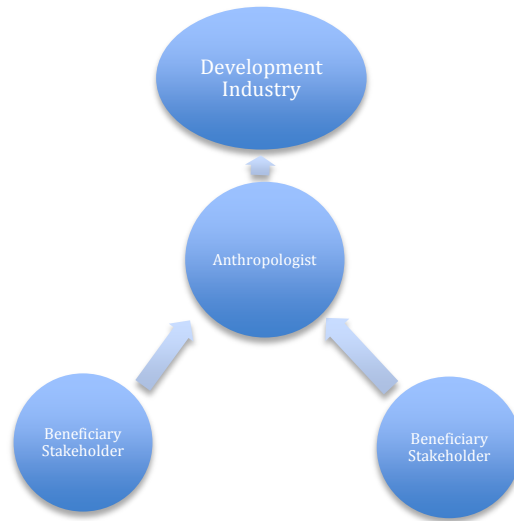


Figure 3. Development Anthropology

Development anthropology is a hybrid of these two forms. Anthropologists collect ‘local knowledge’ from beneficiary stakeholders in order to strengthen their empirical evaluation of specific development interventions. Anthropologists are expected to produce ‘local knowledge’ of specific interest to a predefined aid intervention, often with the aid of local research assistants. Within this arrangement, anthropologists ‘serve as cultural intermediaries or “brokers” between the worlds of development and community; collecting the local knowledge and point of view; placing local communities and projects in larger contexts of political economy; and viewing culture holistically’ (Wulff and Fiske 1987: 10). Where the ethical responsibility lies here is somewhat more ambiguous. While it remains the case that anthropologists feel a sense of moral duty toward the communities they study, they are *contractually obliged* to adhere to the ethical codes laid down by whichever development body hires them. Although in some cases these codes are well defined, rarely are they based on a deep theoretical engagement or designed with the particular concerns of anthropology in mind.

### *Commoditizing ‘Local Knowledge’*

In this section, we explore three trends that bring to the fore the precarious position of development anthropology when considered through an ethically engaged lens that assumes multiple and at times conflicting moral responsibilities.

### *Evidence-Based Programming*

Over the course of the last decade, big ‘D’ Development has been characterized by a surge in large-scale interventions in crisis and conflict contexts, or Fragile and Conflict Affected States (FCAS), which the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates will be home to over sixty percent of the world’s poor by 2030 (OECD 2015: 1). The growing emphasis today on ‘evidence-based programming’ by major aid donors is in part a response to the poor record of interventions around the world, notably in the Middle East and Africa.

Previous failures have been widely blamed on the lack of a solid understanding of the complex realities on the ground. The UK’s Department for International Development (DfID) appointed its first Chief Scientific Advisor in 2004 in response to a damning report by the parliamentary Science and Technology Select Committee, which said that DfID’s lack of attention to evidence and attention to developing country inputs made a mockery of its claim that it follows a demand-led approach (House of Commons 2012). Similar moves on the part of other major bi- and multilateral agencies have fuelled a renewed commitment by donors to research (DfID Research Strategy 2008-2013). Beyond the rhetoric, the elevation of the evidence-based agenda is backed by funds. Spending on research by DfID’s Research and Evidence Division (RED), tasked with generating knowledge and its uptake into policy, grew almost 150 percent from £125 million in 2008-09 to £320 million in 2014-15 (National Audit Office 2011: 46). Overall, the UK agency allocated at least £1.2 billion for research, evaluation and personnel development from 2011 to 2015 with the explicit aim of ‘improving’ the impact of interventions (ICAI 2014: 1).

The drive toward evidence-based programming is at least in part a response to academic and activist criticisms of perceived failures to tailor aid effectively to complex local dynamics and calling for greater and better inclusion of ‘local knowledge’. It



demands an answer to who is best placed to provide this contextual input. External researchers, some of whom are anthropologists, lay claim to professional qualification and impartiality, but few would deny that local actors hold legitimacy as an indispensable repository of knowledge about the local context. The Independent Research Forum argued in its February 2014 brief that engaging local researchers in what it calls ‘bottom-up participatory learning’ is essential to realising the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (Independent Research Forum 2015). The importance of moving from effective donorship to effective partnership has been highlighted time and again in high-profile summits such as the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action and the Busan 2011 Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (OECD-DAC 2005). Although major donors hold partnership up as the standard, it is rarely achieved in practice. Despite the professed desirability of local knowledge, a host of factors conspire to put local researchers and local research consultancies at a disadvantage compared to external actors. Anthropologists and other social scientists continue to act as intercultural go-betweens tasked with transforming impossibly complex social dynamics into data points for decision-makers.

The kinds of development projects that are generally accompanied by significant research budgets are large, multi-year programs delivered by consortiums, which are encouraged, if not required, to include local partners. However, these partners are often partners in name only – they don’t deliver substantive elements of the program but rather are subcontracted by larger international firms within the consortium, many of whom are for-profit entities.<sup>6</sup> Cost structures and the use of national employees differ widely across contracts and firms, but stark disparities in pay scales between international and local staff is a common thread. Despite being hired primarily for their greater knowledge of the local context, local partners are often tasked with completing the ‘lowest value’ work, their work being devalued both in terms of overall cost and cost in comparison to degree of effort, discomfort or risk. It is common practice for surveys to be designed and analysed by an international consultant or consultancy, but for the data to be collected by a local consultancy or a collection of enumerators and presented to the donor by the

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<sup>6</sup> Interviews with members of DfID’s RED team and veteran development-sector consultants in August 2015 in London, UK.

heads of consortium. Although it is often precisely for their local relationship that international implementers win bids, local consultancies and local researchers are rarely placed in a position to contribute additional value beyond the fact of their simply *being* local.

The dual salary scale and its effect on the ways in which ‘local knowledge’ is both produced and consumed is not only a normative problem but one that may have a knock-on effect on the quality of results achieved during development or humanitarian interventions. Research in the field of international human resource management suggests that peer-to-peer relationships and skills training are often undermined by the feelings of superiority, guilt, demotivation or distrust it may engender (McWha et al. 2011: 29-40, 2011: 29-40; Dudley 2003). Studies suggest that funding for research in low-income countries does not necessarily lead to a more highly skilled talent pool if it is unaccompanied by capacity-building efforts (OECD-DAC 2008).

To some critics of the development paradigm, the very idea of ‘local knowledge’ may be seen as the invention of well-intentioned anthropologists, development workers, colonialists and various western ‘others’ or observers (Said 1978: 1-4; Ellen, commentary on Sillitoe, 1998: 238). Those most able to move comfortably between various forms of knowing are placed in positions of authority and expected to synthesise complex local knowledge into targeted sound bites (Mosse 2005). As a result, strategic decisions that are meant to be informed by ‘local knowledge’ are rarely taken in the company of local researchers or communities, but rather elevate foreign anthropologists or international researchers to the role of community or ‘cultural’ spokespersons. The multiple layers of subcontracting, as shown in Figure 4, exacerbate the gulf in the field between donors and locals hired to deliver contracts, whether for research or program activities. Britain’s Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) has described DfID’s relationship with its local suppliers as ‘too arm’s length’, saying it ‘limited their early involvement in shaping programs’ and their ability to ‘foster genuinely productive relationships’ (ICAI 2010: 10). As such, local researchers have few potential routes by which to contribute to programming, despite often being sought out precisely for their insight into the local context. Anecdotal evidence and research highlight how rare it is for agencies to draw on this indigenous knowledge in any systematic way (Eyben et al. 2015: 10). Despite lofty

principles, locals are more often service providers than partners.



Figure 4. Simplified version of a standard research contracting process. Adapted from Balt et al. (2015: 11).

### *Value for Money*

The growing pot of money for research brings challenges alongside opportunities. The goals set out in the ‘terms of reference’ of tenders for development projects are often undercut by the rigid and demanding procurement process in an increasingly competitive and commercialised aid market (Bilzen 2015). DfID spent nine per cent of its aid through private-sector partners in 2011-12 (ICAI 2010: 31). It has been increasing its use of commercial contractors since then, according to the OECD’s 2014 peer review (OECD 2014: 21), particularly in conflict settings, where staffing is difficult.

Under scrutiny to ensure that taxpayer’s money is well-spent, major international donors such as DfID prioritise value for money (VfM). They seek quality guarantees that are often best met by tried and tested consulting firms, which restricts the space for new

entrants and smaller players, particularly national organisations or loose associations of local consultants. In the scramble for funding, bids to win contracts for development projects often come from known applicants who understand and can tailor their proposals to the donor's agenda. A dozen companies maintain a hold on the majority of contracts, with a tail of smaller niche consultancies bringing up the rear (ICAI 2010: 4). Although UK aid has been fully untied since 2001, the vast majority of contracts – 90 per cent of centrally managed ones – are awarded to British suppliers (OECD: 21). DfID own data show that only one of the top twenty firms managing the largest budget projects in 2014 was based in a developing country. Fragile and conflict affected states, by their very definition, are almost entirely absent.

With the increased emphasis on value for money, and by association predictable results, DfID is also looking for firms that offer cheaper services, that is, giving more weight to pricing in tender criteria. Coming under this pressure, some contractors complained to ICAI they were no longer able to put their best staff forward for jobs (ICAI 2010: 17). Cost-cutting measures can have serious repercussions down the procurement chain by undercutting margins for subcontractors, which are often local consulting firms and researchers.

The political imperatives to meet spending targets, keep costs low and achieve short-term results also shrink the space for untested, innovative approaches. The standard method requires a DfID program team to draft a business case, based on a 'theory of change', describing how the policy intervention will achieve the desired goals. It is typically drawn from a mix of evidence and assumptions that are hard pressed to capture complex political and fluid dynamics. Some recent studies suggest these models may stifle opportunities for more iterative, bottom-up learning (Booth and Unsworth 2015: 9).

Value for money has been translated, often literally, as 'technically capable, lowest cost'. Similarly, moves to limit opportunities for corruption and cronyism have been applied to these forms of contract, leading to the maxim that researchers should profit as little as possible. The result has often been a codification of 'rates' based on biographical data, which is heavily weighted in favour of previous salary. As a result, local researchers are often locked into below-market compensation, despite the overall importance of the knowledge, experience and data they provide in shaping and implementing policies.

Furthermore, the OECD's 2014 peer review warned that DfID's focus on value for money risked undercutting its perceptiveness and ability to react to changing contexts (OECD 2014: 21).

As local researchers and consultancies come to be increasingly viewed as necessary but inefficient, the drive toward value for money seems to encourage procurement processes that limit profit and overheads so severely that most local researchers and consultants in conflict-affected environments struggle to provide for themselves and their families, let alone grow their business, develop new skills or bring on additional staff.

### *Remote Management*

In conflict settings, where contracting out aid delivery and research is a means of managing high levels of risk, private-sector actors often have a greater ability to source and hire local consultants where it would be too costly and risky to attract international staff for long-term assignments (ICAI 2013: 1). When a low capacity for basic services characterizes fragile states, one of the most often cited rationales for not turning to nationals has been the lack of capable individuals. Paradoxically, it is precisely in the most violent contexts that development and humanitarian actors rely increasingly on locals drawn from NGOs, universities and diaspora networks for situational understanding. As more international aid is delivered in areas where the security situation is perceived as too risky for expatriates, program implementation, analysis and data collection to track aid effectiveness falls primarily – or in some cases, entirely – on national and local actors (Collinson et al. 2013: 6-7). 'Remote management', or allowing aid agencies to continue assisting civilian populations while removing expatriate staff from danger, is no longer a stopgap measure but has become standard practice in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria and elsewhere (Rivas 2015: 8).

In such challenging environments, normative considerations linked to the production and consumption of 'local knowledge' are difficult to codify in contracts and often take a back seat to the drive for evidence-based programming and value for money. On the one hand, local actors gain leverage through their monopoly on access in contexts where expatriates withdraw into fortified compounds or from the country entirely, as in Syria. However, the balance of power in terms of decision-making and funding clearly remains

in the hands of international actors, who in turn place greater importance on monitoring and evaluation to prevent graft.

It is often assumed that locals who are known to their communities and familiar with local customs face lesser security threats and can help build acceptance in communities in which interventions are taking place. In many contexts, however, association with western aid agencies may put nationals in greater danger. Differences in ethnicity and in religious and social status within the country may also pose as great a security challenge to national staff as being a foreigner (Stoddard et al. 2014; Egeland et al. 2011: 36). In such situations, the misconception that nationals are less in need of security and peer support translates into a lesser duty of care by international organisations (Collinson et al. 2013: 28), thus raising complex ethical issues. Given power inequalities, this is particularly true when nationals are driven to take higher risks because they have few other alternative sources of earning their daily bread (ibid.: 14). A recent survey of nationals engaged in humanitarian work found that most national aid workers believed they were exposed to greater risks than their expatriate counterparts (Egeland et al. 2011: 31).

### ***Rapprochement***

Input from local researchers has the potential to offer much-needed contextual analysis in politically challenging and complex environments, as well as access to areas deemed no-go zones for internationals. However, their contracting involves a tangled set of trade-offs and challenges that threaten to undermine both ethical standards and the quality of the research on which sensitive programming is based.

Anthropologists have repeatedly advocated the importance of highly textured, culturally sensitive and locally derived insights produced through long-term engagement with communities – exactly the kind of research that is theoretically most valued by aid interventions. However, anthropologists have also long been wary of how our research is put to use; we should remain vigilant over how we engage with local systems and producers of knowledge. All anthropologists should be concerned with the ways in which our tools and insights may be appropriated. If our true reason for engaging in development in the first place is to critique the systems that have harmed populations, then this is clearly an issue we should pursue.

To do so, we need to rethink the focus of ‘research ethics’: it is clear that our ability to be ethical is not just a matter of our interactions with the populations we work with, nor even of our representations of those populations. To do so meaningfully, there must be a well-intentioned and sustained détente between engaged, activist or applied anthropologies and anthropologies of development to develop a clear criticism of the way the field of ethics is currently constructed. Lastly, it must be paired with a willingness to engage.

### *Conclusion*

A rapprochement between academic anthropologists, who are critical of international aid and development systems, and engaged anthropologists who work within these systems to improve or mitigate impact would serve to strengthen the anthropological critique of global aid. It would also help address anthropologists’ ethical obligations to both the communities with whom they work and the local producers of knowledge, which is often commoditised through procurement processes.

Anthropologists should prepare an ethical framework for the procurement and use of localised research, particularly in uncertain environments. Currently, ethical guidelines for procurement tend to focus on decreasing cronyism and corruption, while research ethics tend to emphasise the treatment of research subjects. There is little if any consideration for the systematic devaluation of ‘local knowledge producers’. The ad hoc systems developed under the guise of ‘duty of care’ often mask risk avoidance, rather than representing a proactive attempt to rectify an unbalanced and unfair system in favour of the researchers who risk their lives in precarious contexts.

In Fassin’s words, ‘avoiding moral issues may be seen as a moral position as well’ (Fassin 2008: 340). If anthropologists continue to call for increased attention to local forms of knowing, as well as for improved appreciation of the value of anthropological tools and analysis, then they must remain simultaneously engaged in understanding and striving to address the supply/demand quandary they have helped create.

As a comment on the positionality of the anthropologist, what we are suggesting is that there is no such thing as an un-engaged anthropology, though perhaps not for the reasons most often suggested. Rather, what we are arguing is that, in criticising the

development industry for its lack of consideration of local perspectives, knowledge, voices, etc., we have all contributed to the fetishisation and resultant commodification of exactly these things. In continuing to produce anthropology that attends to ‘local knowledge’, our work is just as likely to be appropriated by the development sector as it is to be consumed by fellow academics. Activist, engaged, applied or otherwise, we are each and every one of us liable for the local researchers, and their communities, from whom ‘local knowledge’ is dangerously extracted in the name of better aid or development delivery.

Given the importance we as anthropologists grant to elevating the voices of populations in which we work, we should advocate on behalf of local researchers. The opportunities this creates for sincere co-authorship demand careful reflection: how do we best do this in practice, particularly where the well-being of local researchers is at stake? Concretely, this means ensuring that local researchers are paid fairly and engaged in meaningful, high-level work and ensuring that local researchers are brought into strategy sessions with donors, both at the point of research design and after analysis. This is not just a question of ‘building capacity’, but rather one of truly ‘engaged accompaniment’.

The codification of ethics, discussed by Meskell and Pels (2005), as well as others in the present collection, is at once seemingly necessary and exceptionally challenging. As the so-called ‘ethical turn’ has made clear, ethics is not something static, nor is it universal or inherently ‘good’; rather, it is anchored in historical and cultural values. We need a theory of ethical engagement that transcends the bounds of our own fieldwork to inform the ways in which institutions, guided by our criticism, set about doing the very thing we’ve told them they *have* to do if they *want* to be ethical.

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