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Refusing the Development NGO? Departure, Dismissal, and Misrecognition in Angolan Development Interventions

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Abstract

Nongovernmental organizations working in international development increasingly follow a neoliberalized management model, hiring professional employees to conduct the work of social transformation under a bureaucratic regime that sees the recruitment and retention of staff members as rational transactions between employer and employee. Such managerialist thinking holds that staff members represent bundles of skills and knowledge to be sorted and allocated according to the requirements of work, that they seek to exchange their labor for payment, and that they may justifiably be fired for misdeeds like misuse of materials, misrepresenting themselves, or poor work quality, as determined by the institution. I use the example of local staff members resigning and being fired from an international democratization intervention in postwar Angola to argue that some development professionals refuse to occupy such management-defined subject positions, asserting instead their independent moralities about the place of implementation staff in international development work. International development institutions misrecognize many such acts, however, leaving intact unequal relations of power within the very industry meant to combat such unequal relations on a global scale.

Keywords

Angola; refusal; international development; nongovernmental organizations; development workers

Development's Departures

During my 2008–2009 ethnographic study of the international democratization program that I call the Good Governance in Angola Program, or the GGAP, staff regularly spoke of former colleagues who had left the intervention.¹ Provincial field staff, for instance, recalled Helena's visits from the central office in Luanda with awe, recounting how she swayed the opinions of even the most recalcitrant municipal government officers with her authoritative explanations of decentralization and foundational public administration concepts. Helena's authority derived perhaps in part from her powerful physical presence, as she was an unusually large Angolan woman, but she was also devoutly religious, influential in her church community, and was rumored to have commanded troops during the civil war.² Other

¹This program name and all individual names are pseudonyms. The GGAP was implemented in Angola by a consortium of three large international NGOs, one American, one British, one Canadian, from 2007–2012. The program was funded by a western country's bilateral foreign aid agency, an international oil conglomerate, and at its beginning an international diamond mining firm. The GGAP's national headquarters was in Luanda and implementation sites were in five disparate provinces outside Luanda.

former colleagues were recalled perhaps less fondly but no less often as the program entered its second year, continuing the work these professionals had begun or, sometimes, had botched. Key actors like Helena, who had transferred out of the GGAP to conduct similar work elsewhere, came to serve as rhetorical figures for the program and its prospects. Memories of erstwhile colleagues triggered a kind of “nostalgia for the future” (Piot 2010) writ small as staff conjectured about what might have happened in the program had certain colleagues stayed on. These same former staff members served simultaneously as a type of collective scapegoat: blameworthy for certain of the GGAP’s difficulties precisely because they left the program bereft of their talents.

In its first 18 months, more than one-third of the GGAP’s 40 staff positions had already been vacated or remained unfilled. All of these fulltime, salaried positions, across the program’s central office and its five provincial field sites, could have been filled by Angolans. Most of these positions expressly should have been filled by Angolans, preferentially over international professionals. I investigated the history of vacant posts through formal interviews in Portuguese and English with current staff and what former staff I could locate, from programmatic documents haphazardly “archived” in the GGAP’s various offices, and during participant observation of program activities. I did not work for the GGAP in any formal capacity but lived with NGO staff or in NGO guesthouses for over a year, shadowing GGAP staff in its central Luanda office and those of its parent NGOs and accompanying them on their travels to provincial implementation sites for roughly eight months. I then moved to the Angolan Central Highlands to focus on two of the program’s field offices for the remaining months of my fieldwork. In this research, I came to understand that recruitment of Angolan staff was difficult at best and that, while most departures had been resignations, others were classed as involuntary: some staff members had been discharged from their posts under suspicion of wrongdoing or poor performance. Though the postwar democratization program had nearly USD 17 million for its first three years, to my knowledge it never enjoyed a week of full staffing. Examining these staffing difficulties and how they were differently perceived by those involved offers insight into international development as a “social field” in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1975:19) sense, “with its distribution of power and its monopolies, its struggles and strategies, interests and profits.”

Though many development scholars would be interested to compile pragmatic lessons from this case to improve future interventions, my interest in the GGAP is to critically analyze its interventionist and managerial logics to understand how development NGOs represent themselves and their actions, direct scholarly and critical understandings of themselves and, simultaneously, leave themselves vulnerable to competing interpretations, not least from within their own ranks. My inquiry is part of larger efforts to understand contemporary development intervention as a “category of practice” (Mosse 2013) and a social phenomenon that merits critical, holistic analysis well beyond considerations of whether or not its stated

²Angola’s civil war began in 1975 after several years of armed struggle for independence from Portugal and was resolved militarily, not by negotiation, in 2002. Though the details of the war are beyond the scope of this analysis the GGAP was one of the first development initiatives (rather than humanitarian relief interventions) undertaken by international NGOs and donors after the war and sited itself in provinces where the conflict had been particularly intense. Whether Helena commanded troops for UNITA, which lost the war, or for the MPLA, which won, was an occasional topic of out-of-earshot debate among certain GGAP staff members. No one believed she would have been fighting with the FPLA in the North, a party that lost ground over the course of the war. I never found a good opportunity to ask Helena directly about military service.

goals were met. My research focused on the GGAP's Angolan staff members, particularly its provincial implementation staff and their subjective experiences as international development workers in their own country. Staff like Helena or, below, like Gavino and Félix, are certainly privileged members of Angolan society—fully employed, relatively well educated, with good access to government and international agents. Within the social milieu of international development intervention, however, they are members of “the dominated fraction of the dominant class” (Bourdieu 2010 [1984])—they are technical or implementation staff rather than policy makers or managers, and local, rather than international, professionals. Different professionals, I found, negotiate this complex positioning differently, but often inadvertently support institutional (mis)readings of their actions.

Whether for its elite positions or its rank-and-file, the GGAP, like many neoliberalized bureaucracies, conceived of its staff members as a type of resource for its work: as essential human commodities for which it was in competition with other institutions. In terms of recruitment, the program considered itself deeply disadvantaged in attracting qualified Angolan staff as the state and private oil, diamond, and import/export industries offered higher salaries and often longer-term employment. When examining staff departures, the program was concerned almost entirely with resignations, seeing dismissals as individual failures rather than programmatic ones. Resignations were of course recognized as agentic, individual acts, but not as individual failures: the program considered itself implicated in resignations by way of its inability to compete—again, in terms of salary and contract duration—with other hiring institutions. By contrast, if there was institutional culpability for a dismissal it was only in having hired an inept or dishonest worker in the first instance rather than in any condition of the work or its management.

Below, I consider in depth how the GGAP officially presented itself as a victim of the wider labor market in which it competed for staff, and how it judged very differently the Angolan civil service which suffered from similar difficulties attracting and retaining skilled professionals. I then present two further cases of GGAP staff departures to contest the development industry's reading of staff mobility and, more generally, its conceptualization of workers. Angolan professionals in my analysis did not see themselves as “bundles of skills” for hire as in the neoliberal imagination (e.g., Gershon 2011) but as whole people, themselves growing, advancing, and worthy of investment. Many refused through one means or another to be treated poorly by international nongovernmental organizations—some judging this in an absolute sense and others in a more narrowly comparative sense, with respect to how their colleagues were treated differently than they. To understand the dialectic between development institutions and their individual agents, I propose to consider them “ideological apparatuses,” like the state or other powerful institutions, which in this case hail, or interpellate, not only their subjects (as we might consider their intended beneficiaries) but their agents (as rank-and-file staff) as other kinds of subjects that can then seize, or create, opportunity either to subjectify themselves to the institution or to reject or otherwise revise that subjection (Althusser 1971). I am interested in how staff or would-be-staff may variously reject or revise subjectification in international development and when and how their actions are institutionally acknowledged.

In specific regard to the GGAP's difficulty attracting and retaining staff it seems clear that qualified professionals "abstained," in a sense, from joining the ranks of the international NGOs, by not applying at all for positions or by turning them down when offered (Weiss 2016). Those who joined but then resigned are perhaps the clearest examples of rejections of the subject positions on offer in these international NGOs, though these came about for different reasons depending upon the person. I suggest here that even some dismissals should be analytically understood as resignations by infraction, the result of "a limit having been reached" (McGranahan 2016:320). Some firings, I propose, may result from workers' agentic refusal to behave in the prescribed manner, or to conceal certain behavior, rather than from any inherent ineptitude or moral failing. Such events are refusals, though they are not recognized as such by development NGOs. In the case of Angola, which in the postwar (post-2002) period saw a decline in the number of international NGOs operating in the country, rather than an increase, refusals to staff development institutions may be effective indeed.

Classification, Risk, and Narrative in International Development Logic

Classification of development workers follows the same process of "dynamic nominalism" that Ian Hacking describes in *Making Up People* (1986:234), in which there are

...two vectors. One is the vector of labeling from above, from a community of experts who create a "reality" that some people make their own. Different from this is the vector of the autonomous behavior of the person so labeled, which presses from below, creating a reality every expert must face.

Development's experts are already well documented as creating realities for their work that justify technical intervention into the lives and social structures of poor communities and countries (e.g., Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 2002). In this literature, development's experts have been shown to be especially motivated to label recipient and beneficiary communities (e.g., Pigg 1992; 1996) and to clearly demarcate the social divide between interveners and those who are intervened upon (Li 2007). Part of this classification includes determining what kinds of risks are run, and by what party, in any intervention attempt. The risks considered most important are those run by the donors and the experts—the interventionists—rather than by the recipients. There are acknowledged opportunity costs for interventionists, for instance, such that the selection of sites in which to engage and the methods by which to do so are taken very seriously: organizations must be able to demonstrate success or their future prospects will be damaged. On the whole, such opportunity costs are not recognized for recipient communities; the idea that a local community becoming a site for intervention may "crowd out" other, possibly better programs, is not commonly recognized nor discussed in contemporary development logic. Within the interventionist body politic there are also other acknowledged opportunity costs: international staff and to a lesser extent managerial staff are presumed to sacrifice other opportunities to work in development generally and on particular projects specifically, though national staff and especially implementation staff are not, nor are any community beneficiaries or "volunteers" acknowledged to be forfeiting other opportunity to work in any particular development intervention (see also Phillips 2013).

Like other bureaucracies, development institutions also categorize their workers alongside their work, ostensibly seeking to pair the skills and knowledge necessary for the work with the characteristics of those tasked to carry it out. The realms of work and of staff are therefore conceptually co-constitutive, assessed in tandem and simultaneously as there are high stakes in making these classifications correctly: development NGOs cannot afford to promise the impossible, lest they lose credibility, yet they must manifest ambition and drive to be competitive for donor funding. Organizations both determine what work is possible with respect to the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the available staff pool and selectively recruit workers thought to hold the specific skills and knowledge needed to address necessary tasks. The two sets of classifications must match up in the determination of which workers are best placed in which positions, determinations that should simultaneously make the most of workers' capacities and address the demands of the work as fully and efficiently as possible. Selecting and using staff well is of the utmost importance, though such judgements are made within the particular logics of development thinking, as I describe here.

Finally, bringing an intervention about is thought to take two distinct levels of work—administration or management, and implementation or field work. In terms of field work, the everyday delivery of services to, or other direct interaction with, development program beneficiaries, most interventions adopt only “a narrow repertoire of approaches” (Watkins and Swidler 2013:197) no matter how disparate their end goals. Whether their interventionist goals are improved sexual health, agricultural productivity, literacy, conservation, entrepreneurship, or like the GGAP, “good governance” (e.g., Andrews 2013; Grindle 1997), development organizations pursue these disparate goals with “participatory methods” and heavy doses of training, now called “capacity building” (Green 2003; Smith 2003; Ubels, et al. 2010). Administration for any development program then includes the management of field staff, communications between the program and its donors, coordination with government officials, and the collection and analysis of data, including financial data, to track and evaluate its implementation work. The GGAP's designers saw Angola as at the precipice of decentralizing not just fiduciary but also political power after its long civil war and they intended the program to link a democratic ethos to local governments' bureaucratic processes. Implementation work for the GGAP was therefore itself split into two arms within each field office, one focused on work with local communities and ordinary citizens as one class of beneficiaries and another arm working directly with local municipal governments and their officials as a second class of beneficiaries. Implementation teams operated out of five provincial field offices, targeting one specific municipality within each selected province, while the GGAP's central management team worked out of its Luanda office (see Figure 1).

Development institutions consider the skills of administration and management more valuable than those necessary for implementation. This differential likely reflects the “persistence of older racial orders organized through socially entrenched divisions of labor” (Thomas and Clarke 2013:310), despite the fact that international NGOs increasingly seek to “harmonize” or “decolonize” their staffing hierarchies. Administrative and management tasks are largely coded as western, naturally accessible to westerners and accessible to others via western education or training. Implementation tasks are still coded as “local” as they

almost always require fluency in indigenous languages and facility with local systems of thought and social organization. In today's increasingly "harmonized" international NGOs it is no longer presumed that only international staff would have the skills to lead or to manage, though with more "national staff" in positions of administrative authority it is now, paradoxically, commonplace to presume that most anyone competent to manage is also and already competent in the lesser tasks of implementation. Here the twinned realm of assessing professionals' competencies feeds into and reinforces the task-domain classification of knowledge and skills. National staff members in management positions are presumed to have come up through the ranks of the field staff, even though many individuals may have never before worked in implementation. Increasingly, implementation tasks are delegated to local "volunteers" or "community workers" instead of professional staff, sources of labor thought more "sustainable" for development and more palatable to beneficiaries (e.g., Brown and Prince 2016; Maes 2012).

These institutional categories of administration and implementation, international and local, employed and voluntary, structure the responsibilities assigned to different people and staff positions within development NGOs. They also structure the rights accorded to different people and staff positions. For instance, in the GGAP and its parent NGOs, most managers held rights to use these organizations' vehicles after hours and on the weekends while implementation staff did not (see Figure 2). Vehicle use for private purpose was not guaranteed except to those at the very top of the organizational hierarchy—a country director or program chief, for example—but such use was never an option for the majority of staff even if vehicles were available. International staff automatically enjoyed this and other privileges including housing and utilities subsidies, for instance, or tuition support for their children to attend international or private schools.³ No Angolan staff member at any rank received these extra benefits. Such differential privileges were justified in the GGAP's parent NGOs, as elsewhere in the industry, through a process by which work tasks were first identified as necessary to the program and then classified as unlikely to be within the capacity of the local Angolan pool of job candidates. These NGOs then declared certain positions "international" and advertised them accordingly, setting aside the extra resources thought necessary to attract and maintain international staff members, anticipating them to be professionals from the global north rather than from other developing countries (though see Benton 2016). International staff—again, commonly presumed to be natives of developed countries—are seen as forfeiting other opportunities when they come to work in a developing country and, especially in a "hardship post" such as Angola, are thought to require certain incentives to tolerate the inconveniences of life abroad. International staff are therefore compensated not only according to what they might make as a salary "at home" but in extra ways for these presumed forfeitures and hardships.

Angolan staff, like "local staff" throughout the international development industry, are not institutionally recognized as forfeiting other opportunity in order to work in an international NGO, nor to incur any hardship in doing so. In the case of the GGAP, however, the majority of provincial field staff members did incur hardship in moving to their posts, and were often

³The official policy includes a requirement that international staff pay a monthly fee to use program vehicles for private matters—this was not routinely enforced, if ever, during my observations.

separated from family. They may not have been separated in every instance by an international boundary but certainly in this post-war context, they were often separated by days of arduous travel. Many of the Angolan staff did also forfeit other opportunity to work in these international NGOs, but did so without being accorded any of the compensatory privileges that international staff received for ostensibly that reason. Despite institutional logics justifying differential treatment between international and local staff, or between management and implementation staff, such differential treatment is experienced as social inequality within the development industry. A matter of widespread, common knowledge among development professionals, these inequalities are among the “working misunderstandings” of the industry (Watkins and Swidler 2013) and are often actively “unknown” lest the very foundations of the endeavor be challenged (Geissler 2013; Redfield 2013a).

As development NGOs classify their work and their staff, the manner in which tasks and staff members come together or come apart are also classified, named, and judged. There are differences between those staff members, for instance, who “were approached” by the GGAP to join its ranks from elsewhere within the consortium’s implementing NGOs, and those who applied “from the street” to join the program. My concern here remains how departures from the program, rather than entrances, were seen. As Mary Douglas reminds us, writing about Hacking’s dynamic nominalism: “the interaction that Hacking describes goes round, from people making institutions to institutions making classifications, to classifications entailing actions, to actions calling for names, and to people and other living creatures responding to the naming, positively and negatively” (Douglas 1986:101–2). Implementation staff responded to their naming, or their treatment more generally, in various positive and negative ways as Douglas predicts, including by leaving again.

People Seek Opportunity

Beginning in 2007, the Good Governance in Angola Program was the flagship political development program of one western country’s bilateral aid to Angola in the postwar period. The democratization intervention sought to prepare municipal-level governments and communities in five selected provinces for decentralization: the transfer of funds and decision-making power from the central Angolan government to municipal level governments.⁴ As part of international efforts to support Angolan decentralization, the GGAP saw potential for its Chicala Cholohanga site in Huambo Province to be among the program’s most successful, in part because of its close proximity to the provincial capital of Huambo City.

Chicala Cholohanga’s nearness to provincial government offices presented, first, strong potential for positive relationships with politically and materially influential partner and peer institutions, and in contrast to field sites that were themselves the provincial capital cities (Cabinda, Chitato), without the risk of the program being wholly coopted by these peers.

⁴At its beginning the GGAP was implemented in Cabinda City (Cabinda Province), Chitato (Lunda Norte Province), Chicala Cholohanga (Huambo Province), Andulo (Bié Province), and Cuito Cuanavale (Cuando Cubango Province). At its renewal for a second phase one international NGO withdrew from the consortium and the Lunda Norte intervention site was closed, though these changes were unanticipated during my fieldwork.

The British NGO held primary responsibility for this GGAP site, having maintained a large field office in Huambo City and a smaller one in Chicala Cholohanga during the civil war and, in both places, implementing successful humanitarian interventions for many years. The GGAP anticipated making full use of this local infrastructural history and reputation. Moreover, proximity to Huambo City meant a larger pool of candidates to staff the Chicala Cholohanga office as well as a more enticing place to which to relocate any staff members hired from elsewhere in Angola. Huambo City was, in fact, where the families of nearly the whole of the Bié Province staff lived despite being an entire day's drive away—most GGAP staffers working in Andulo, in Bié Province, stayed there during the work week and commuted home to Huambo City for weekends, often traversing straight through Chicala Cholohanga on the way (see Peters 2016). At only a 45-minute drive from Huambo City, most of Chicala Cholohanga's local government employees also lived there and commuted to the municipal offices each day; the GGAP held no objection to their implementation staff doing the same and for a period of time even offered municipal officers *boléias* (rides, lifts) in NGO vehicles to facilitate their commutes.

Despite these anticipated advantages, the GGAP experienced difficulties filling its posts in Chicala Cholohanga just as it did in its other field offices and even its central office in Luanda. Just after the GGAP's first external review—at the mid-point of its first phase—I interviewed Gavino, a founding staff member of the program and head of the Chicala Cholohanga office, about the program and its future.⁵ After nine years working in the British NGO, Gavino was departing to take a post in Huambo's provincial administration. A further two staff members from the Chicala Cholohanga office had either recently resigned or given notice, leaving just two staff members to do the work that had once occupied five people in this implementation office. Gavino explained that, in his own case, he had an abiding interest in pursuing a master's degree, preferably in public health, and that he understood there to be strong potential for the state to sponsor his studies as a government official and to guarantee him a placement upon completion of his degree. He saw no such avenue for improvement or advancement in the British NGO and felt, moreover, that he must act immediately to fulfill his desires lest he age out of eligibility for such support from the state.

Gavino did not necessarily intend his departure from the British NGO to be a permanent farewell to the development industry; he looked forward to working with international NGOs in the future as an advisor or consultant, but on independently negotiated contracts rather than as a staff member. Gavino and I did not specifically discuss status differences between international and national staff members, though when I asked about being an Angolan in an international organization he stated that he “never thought [he] was working for a foreigner” but rather for the “national good” (*o bem nacional*):

It's a question of partnership [not nationality/foreignness]. To leave the NGO for the state now—my contribution is the same—I am always contributing to my country, to develop the country, so there is not a big difference [between working in an NGO vs working in the state]. The only difference is this personal reality that I

⁵This interview was held in Portuguese in Huambo City on 22 December 2008. Translation is my own.

need to attend to [the desire for graduate-level training]. If I had such opportunity inside the NGO there would be no reason to leave.

Gavino held broad approval of the work that humanitarian and development organizations generally were doing in Angola and admired the GGAP's goals in particular, but was clear about his frustrations with how the program had been managed. In relation to his desire for further training, however, he emphasized that "as pessoas buscam portas:" literally, the phrase means that "people look for doors," but Gavino was speaking metaphorically about how all people seek opportunity, and will seek it elsewhere if they do not find it where they currently are ("se não encontram portas na casa onde estão, vão procurar outras portas noutras lugares").

We had been discussing the widespread difficulty many international NGOs in Angola had attracting and maintaining personnel. Gavino spoke at length that the issue "was not just salary:" "salary is important, but it does not fix everything" ("salário é bom, mas não resolve tudo"). He pointed out two further aspects that, in his view, created staffing difficulties for international NGOs in Angola. The first was that these organizations were "treating staff the same way they had treated them during emergency work, during the war," a reference first to the short-term contracts (usually 1-to-3-years in duration but never longer than the specific intervention program) that were the only available terms of work in these organizations. He saw these project-specific contracts not only as less desirable than the "permanent" or "fixed" positions available in the state but also as a symptom of international NGOs not keeping up with the changing context—not updating their structures and procedures to match the new, development-oriented demands of the national situation. He understood short-term contracts during emergency work to have matched the conditions of the work—hopefully any emergency is short-lived—and considered that, as organizations sought to contribute to Angolan development over the long-term in the postwar, the structures of staff positions should match this desired institutional goal. Second, Gavino sought in this comment to compare the autonomy that, in his opinion, implementation staff should have in development work though, not necessarily in emergency humanitarian aid. In emergency service delivery, field staff are, and in his opinion should be, told precisely what to do by managers, including when and how to do it, with only very narrow avenues to innovate or adjust their methods. In a development program, by contrast, field staff should be innovating, responding to context, and should have the professional freedoms they need to work effectively with disparate communities and problems.

Gavino summed up his critique by referencing the central organizational concern of "sustainability:" "We speak often of sustainability, but the manner in which NGOs work does not guarantee the sustainability of employees' lives" (Nós falamos muito em sustentabilidade, mas a maneira de trabalhar das ONGs não garante a sustentabilidade da vida dos funcionários"). His own goal in leaving the GGAP and the British NGO was to solicit institutional support toward investing in his own skills and knowledge, then, to occupy a permanent position where the work would be "regular, without so much pressure" from imposed project timelines and uncompromising procedures, negotiating on his own terms his relationship to any interested organizations. In such a manner, his own livelihood

and his family's resource base would be secure, and he could make his own unique contribution to Angolan development.

International NGOs think about sustainability very differently—they do not, of course, intend to support local staff, or any staff, indefinitely. Moreover, project design does not usually allow for methodological innovation by the field staff—programs are designed at higher levels in an organization, and field staff simply carry them out, whether in humanitarian services or in development. “Sustainability,” for these institutions, means that the process or results of an intervention—some new or improved set of practices or behaviors that have been imparted to beneficiary populations—stands a good chance of being replicated, perhaps indefinitely, by beneficiaries without the formal attentions of the NGO. After almost a decade of working in the British NGO, I have no doubts Gavino understood this, but he turned the phrase to critique the institution's conception of its staff as only instrumental means to its ends rather than themselves worthy, on their own merit, of investment and sustained support.

Some Are Not Serious

In contrapuntal example to Gavino's case, consider that of another national staff member, Félix, who was fired from the GGAP's Bié Province field office, in Andulo, for misusing programmatic resources. Félix had been caught using an office vehicle on his personal time, without asking permission to do so. He was dismissed and immediately hired by the Andulo municipal administration as a local government officer. He therefore continued to work closely with the GGAP, though instead of being a development NGO worker he was a member of the program's beneficiary class of local government officials. In my first inquiries about his case, I was told that Félix “had not been serious” in his work—that he did not separate the professional from the personal—and this was why he had been fired. The statements were ambiguous, as though his lack of seriousness was what had got him caught, not what got him fired. More than a year after the event, discussions of Félix's case among the GGAP staff, both national and expatriate, centered around three incontrovertible facts.

First, Félix certainly must have known he was breaking the rules by using the GGAP's vehicle after hours and on the weekends without seeking formal permission to do so (which almost certainly would have been denied), and he was rumored to have done so on many occasions. Some colleagues wondered aloud why he would take such a risk, marveling at how brazen it had been to abscond, and on more than one occasion no less, with programmatic property as large and eye-catching as a Toyota Land Cruiser marked with programmatic, organizational, and donor logos. Discussions on this topic were smoothed, perhaps even made possible, by the fact that Félix had found an excellent position immediately—some insisted to me that “he missed not one day of work” (*não faltou nem um dia do serviço*), the transition had been so rapid. This was the second fact of his case commonly under discussion—his obvious employability. GGAP staffers suggested that a valuable, capable worker had been lost from the program, and some questioned the logics and benefits of the decision.

Though less often voiced, and certainly never around Luanda-based managers, the last incontrovertible fact discussed by Félix's former colleagues was that his actions had been violations of rules to which only the implementation staff (all of them "local" staff members) was held. Managerial staff in the Luanda or regional offices, a mix of national and expatriate staff members, were as a matter of course entrusted with program vehicles for personal use. Though the GGAP had no expatriates on its implementation staff during my fieldwork, other programs implemented by the GGAP's parent NGOs did, and these implementation staff members also had rights to NGO vehicles for personal use. These discussions among Félix's former colleagues raise the possibility that his dismissal had been overdetermined by institutional policies—his actions were only an infraction because of his classification as a local implementation staff member, not because they were absolutely wrong. In the face of his colleagues' certainties that he had been aware of the likely repercussions of his actions, I suggest that national staff members of international NGOs dismissed from their posts under these or similar circumstances may have effectively *resigned by infraction*. Blatant infraction in Félix's case may have been a type of "refusal to occupy the category being foisted upon" him (Ortner 2006:54, citing Pathak and Rajan 1989)—a "refusal of subjectification" into a category of second-class staff.⁶

On the whole, management staff – national and expat alike – made sense of Félix's case as individual decision-making; regrettably poor decision-making but nonetheless knowledgeable, and therefore culpable, wrongdoing. Implementation staff, however, saw in his case evidence of international development's internal double standards—its dual system of rights and responsibilities. An expatriate staff member in any position would almost certainly not have been fired for the actions that justified Félix's dismissal. Neither, most likely, would an Angolan working in management or some higher-level administrative position. The use of a program vehicle for personal errands was at once a clear abuse for national implementation staff and a clear privilege for expatriate and administrative staff. Félix's relationship to the institutions of international development could be seen as a type of "resistance trap:" a paradoxical situation in which to refuse to obey the rules set by the institution in fact reinforces its power, allowing the institution "to control the terms of engagement" (Weiss 2016:355). Perhaps, though, in that Félix very effectively removed a capable staff member from the program, his actions were more like a revenge against the program; a refusal "to consent to these conditions, to the interpretation that this was fair," in the face of inequitable privileges among what were supposed to be colleagues (Simpson 2016:330).

The incident of Félix's firing—but those too of Gavino's and others' resignations—raises questions about agency and intention within inequitable power relations. I contend that both Gavino and Félix, and certainly Helena and others, all understood the administrative logics of the GGAP and its parent NGOs but did not agree that they were sensible. Their different responses, however, can be variously interpreted by the program and by development institutions more broadly. Helena resigned from the GGAP to protest institutional logic that rewarded a young British woman's nationality and education over her own decades of local

⁶For further discussion of national staff members being treated as though inferior to international staff members in international aid organizations see also Coles 2007 and Redfield 2013.

experience with triple her salary (see Peters 2013). Her departure was seen as a structural fault—expatriate staff required the salary they required, and local staff were capped where they were capped, and this understandably, but unavoidably, caused such grievances once in a while. Gavino resigned from the GGAP to “seek opportunity” elsewhere that he thought—if it were available in the GGAP or the larger British NGO—would in fact benefit not just individual staff members but the larger organization and the development endeavor as a whole. His departure too was considered a loss to the program, but one inflicted on it by the strengths of competing institutions.

Félix did not openly resign from the GGAP but he perhaps also “sought opportunity” where he thought it should have been and where it certainly was, for others. He, after all, lived nearly a day’s drive from his family and faced all the same difficulties of living in a “hardship post” that any expatriate or managerial staff member did, though without the same level of institutional support to do so. The GGAP’s classification of his actions as mistakes that merit dismissal is an instance of institutions “channel[ing] our perceptions into forms compatible with the relations they authorize” (Douglas 1986:92). Staff fired for cause did not factor into the GGAP’s worrying about recruitment and retention—Félix was considered someone that the program was better off without. Development organizations channel perceptions in various ways, of course, and “authorize” both interpersonal relations among professionals within an institution as well as inter-institutional relations, offering opinions and analysis of how other institutions should see themselves and the relations they authorize.

While I will never know if Félix intended to “get himself fired,” his actions did predictably cause that effect, and in such a manner that any underlying inequalities that may have precipitated either rash or calculated actions, were obscured. The institution was justified in firing him as his actions were against policy—however unequally the policy treated the staff. An anthropology of development must ask how development workers’ actions, whatever their originating intention, may reproduce or restructure social relations in the larger world and within the endeavor itself. An anthropological analysis of development’s departures and dismissals can ask not only about action and intention, but more importantly about the institutional reactions—organizations’ classifications and perspectives—that also affected Félix’s dismissal, others’ resignations, and served afterward to obscure the nuances of these events from critical programmatic self-assessment. They may be the same classifications and perspectives that paint international NGOs in postwar Angola as “weak players” in the competition for skilled workers, themselves victimized, rather than complicit, in staff turnover and mobility.

NGOs are Weak Players but Government Lacks Strategy

Despite the best efforts of the GGAP and similar programs, decentralization remains elusive in Angola even a decade later. Local government officers are still appointed by the central authorities: there are no local elections, only parliamentary and, for the first time in 2017, presidential contests. Local governments still receive both their budgets and their mandates directly from Luanda rather than from local tax revenue and citizen deliberation.

The GGAP's final evaluation, a 58-page report prepared by a pair of external consultants as the program was closing down in 2012, presents the institutional interpretation of the events and practices that composed the intervention. This document, like the car use policy and others the GGAP as a program produced, should not be read merely as "representations" of institutional meaning but understood to be materially "constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, and even the organizations themselves" (Hull 2012:253). Documents such as the evaluation and the car use policy help construct subjects and socialities within the development industry. This evaluation was written by development professionals familiar with the NGOs making up the GGAP consortium and the Angolan context more broadly. The vast majority of information in the evaluation came directly from the program's own monitoring and evaluation procedures, complemented by the evaluators' interviews with GGAP managers and government officials with knowledge of the program. The document also went through a review and revision process in which the evaluators presented preliminary conclusions to GGAP administrators and donors, making final revisions based on their feedback. The evaluation report thus provides insight into how the GGAP specifically, and perhaps development more broadly, views itself as composed of strengths and weaknesses, as holding a context-specific social position, and as an agent of change.

On the whole, evaluators deemed the program fairly successful, noting at the heart of the document in a section titled "Program Evaluation" (pg. 25):

It is important to stress that the program has produced an impressive number of outputs for a relatively short period of time and taking into account the difficult conditions of staffing, infrastructure and sometimes lack of cooperation from the municipal administrations (mainly from recent appointees), which per se justifies its positive assessment."

The "difficult conditions of staffing" here references government staffing and turnover among the contacts the GGAP relied upon in each targeted municipal administration. The evaluation explains that (pg. 26)

...changes in the management of the municipalities have implied some delays in the progress of activities and demanded an extra effort of the program to explain its dynamics to the new appointee and build confidence for the partnership that underpins a sound implementation of any development or governance program."

The mobility of government staff into and out of municipal offices, that is, made the GGAP's work slower as the program found itself iteratively repeating the same training in the same offices because the individuals receiving instruction kept leaving their posts, replaced by new officials who needed the training afresh. Such concerns were noted as implementation challenges, but also led naturally into a discussion of "sustainability of achievement," wherein evaluators forecast what long-term effect the GGAP could expect to have on its targeted municipalities.

On this point of sustainability, evaluators worried that "the limited attractiveness of the municipal administration's salaries in comparison to other sectors, such as health or education, is provoking a high mobility of staff to other areas" (pg. 28) and was therefore a

“hindrance to sustainability” of the GGAP’s accomplishments—at this point the GGAP was ending, after all, and evaluators had little hope that its instruction would remain in the municipal offices it had targeted. The report goes on, stating that (pg. 29, emphasis added):

retaining qualified staff is a widespread problem in Angola, even inside the public sector, which is competitive enough to attract professionals from NGOs and even from the private sector, something unlikely in other countries. *The program suffered from this competition and it often had to recruit new staff for the national and local offices...* Moreover, mobility across the public sector is usual, caused by the existence of a differentiated and somewhat opaque salary scheme. The evaluation team was told that in some cases municipal administrations are used as entry points for better remunerated jobs in other sectors of the public service, such as education and health. In this regard, it can be said that a lack of a human resources strategy ... that can create the necessary incentives for staff recruitment and maintenance is one of the reasons for the current state of affairs. ... this is a problem to be solved through proper public service regulations...

Angola is unusual in southern Africa in that working for (certain sections of) the government is seen as more promising, prestigious, and lucrative than is working in private companies or in civil society organizations, even international ones. Working for the government, as discussed for Gavino’s departure from the GGAP, is commonly conceived of as “permanent” and wholly preferable to the shorter-term contracts available through international organizations, though no one considers any particular post “permanent”—only one’s affiliation with the state, once entered, is permanent. Government staff are both frequently reassigned by offices and institutions and themselves seek out different positions within the broader state structures.

Despite, then, the attractiveness of a government job generally, the GGAP’s focal units—municipal governments—were at the bottom of the Angolan state’s professional hierarchy. Those who enter municipal government offices and gain administrative experience routinely move “up” to positions in other public entities, as noted in the evaluation: the ministries of health, education, social support and social reinsertion, and others, often offer more competitive salaries and, most importantly, better opportunities for advancement than do municipal government jobs, which are under the purview of the ministry of territorial administration, covering only municipal administrations—most of them rural—and the periodic national electoral process.⁷ Noting all this in its consideration of whether or not its work would have lasting impact, the GGAP’s final evaluation espoused civil service reform—specifically the design of whole-sector human resources regulations that would make government service both transparent and fair across Angola’s disparate ministries and agencies.

While the GGAP’s evaluators worried about the mobility of the municipal administration staff the program had tutored, another section of the final evaluation, “Governance and

⁷Municipal government employees, in Angola’s centralized system, are staff members in the Ministry of Territorial Administration, the central government agency responsible for local-level government. In similar fashion, local-level health workers are employees of the Ministry of Health, local teachers of the Ministry of Education, and so on.

Management Arrangements,” addressed the program’s internal problems of staff retention and “working conditions” as another significant weakness the program had suffered, asserting again the program’s disadvantaged position in the local market for staff (pg. 33):

Finally, on the working conditions, generally the program faced recurrent problems of understaffing, which at some point affected also the central office. However, it was at the local office where the problem was more acute; the working conditions, mainly lack of communications in the Cuito Cuanavale office, were critical but often basic. During the course of the project the management had to deal with lack of staff in some key positions, even at the central level. However, these difficulties do not seem to have influenced the output of the program, which suggests that the management had the necessary ability to manage the resources available. Currently NGOs face fierce competition from the private sector and the government to keep their qualified professionals. In the very competitive Angolan labor market for qualified professionals, NGOs are becoming a weak player. Nonetheless, the management of the program was able to find the necessary personnel to lead the program at its end.

A central part of the GGAP’s institutional “story stock,” this narrative that the program’s staffing problems were caused by its national context and the competitiveness of the local market for professionals is in striking contrast to the report’s conclusions about the causes of very similar problems in the municipal administrations, which were explained by those institutions’ own lack of strategic, supportive, and transparent management (on institutional narratives and identity, see Linde 2009). The evaluation carries no recommendation to the international NGOs for addressing their own staffing and management missteps throughout this program or for future interventions, but closes with such concerns for the Angolan civil service, noting (pg. 38):

The [GGAP’s] experience of dealing with state institutions at local and central level shows that individuals are very important in the process [of decentralization]; if they change, the process can be affected.

Misrecognition, Agency, and Refusal in Development

In the “serious game” (Ortner 1999) of international development work, local staff, expatriate staff, managers and field workers are at once pursuing a shared project of social improvement and their own, intersecting personal projects. Félix and the GGAP’s other local implementation staff enjoyed positions of relative privilege in Angolan society as well educated, fully employed professionals. Within their employing organizations, however, they carried almost no influence whatsoever over the GGAP’s formal decisions and strategies or its self-assessments—these were the province of administrators and donors. These institutionalized hierarchies grated on some professionals, who focused their grievances on the overt inequalities between administration and field staff or between expatriate and local staff. Others objected more holistically to the broad patterns of organizational perspective on, and lack of investment in, employees. In the face of institutional disadvantage and such differences of professional opinion about how staff should be treated, then, some, like Helena, resigned or transferred in overt protest. Some, like Félix, effectively if not

purposefully resigned in protest of inequitable treatment but, importantly, in a manner that exculpated these NGOs because such action could be read as mistake instead of as protest. Departures like Gavino's, who was open about how he thought NGOs should see and treat staff, meanwhile, were read in the mode of NGO-as-victim: organizational losses to "more competitive" peer institutions. Throughout, the management staff of the GGAP and its parent NGOs were effectively blameless—in their official rendering, vacant positions were either unfilled because other institutions could offer things that they were prohibited from offering or because individual workers misbehaved, never because management itself had created inequitable or opaque structures that created divisions among staff, driving workers away.

The GGAP was able to recognize, however, exactly this set of institutionalized relations in the Angolan civil service. The program argued explicitly that "individuals are very important in the process" of decentralization, intending this lesson to be imparted to the Angolan government as an argument for clear and fair staffing regulations to benefit the larger endeavor of that institution. How could such a lesson not be equally obvious for the program and its parent NGOs as well—that "individuals are very important in the process" of intervening for decentralization? On this question of recognition—of institutions recognizing persons, persons recognizing themselves, institutions recognizing that persons recognize institutions and themselves—Althusser argues that ideology both drives and is driven by acts of *misrecognition* (Althusser 1971:182).

Misrecognition—as political an act as ever there was—imposes and achieves ignorance of power relations as a necessary facet of their reproduction and maintenance. That the GGAP misrecognized the intent, agency, and effect of different staff departures is unquestionable. That individual staff members departed in ways that allowed or even invited such misrecognition poses, I think, an ethnographic challenge to otherwise "easy" answers about resistance, power, and inequality (Simpson 2016).

This case study provides insight into how inequality is doubly masked by institutional perspectives—organizations assign culpability to individual action rather than institutional policy and, further, gloss only certain acts, such as formal complaints and overt resignations, as valid protest. Development NGOs "hail," name, and categorize not only their intended beneficiaries, but their partners, peers, and staff members. Helena, Gavino, and Félix had each been hired for their skills and experience, ostensibly as competent professionals, but were then inserted into a bureaucratic structure that valued their skills and experiences to a lesser extent than those of upper administration staff and especially expatriate staff. Whether prompted by differential salary, poor opportunity for advancement, or the grating difference of access to institutional and material privileges enjoyed by "colleagues," each of these professionals—and many others as evidenced by the program's vacancy rate—made decisions in the context of development NGOs' bureaucratic structures. Whether through express purpose or implicit acquiescence, they left these NGOs behind, refusing their roles.

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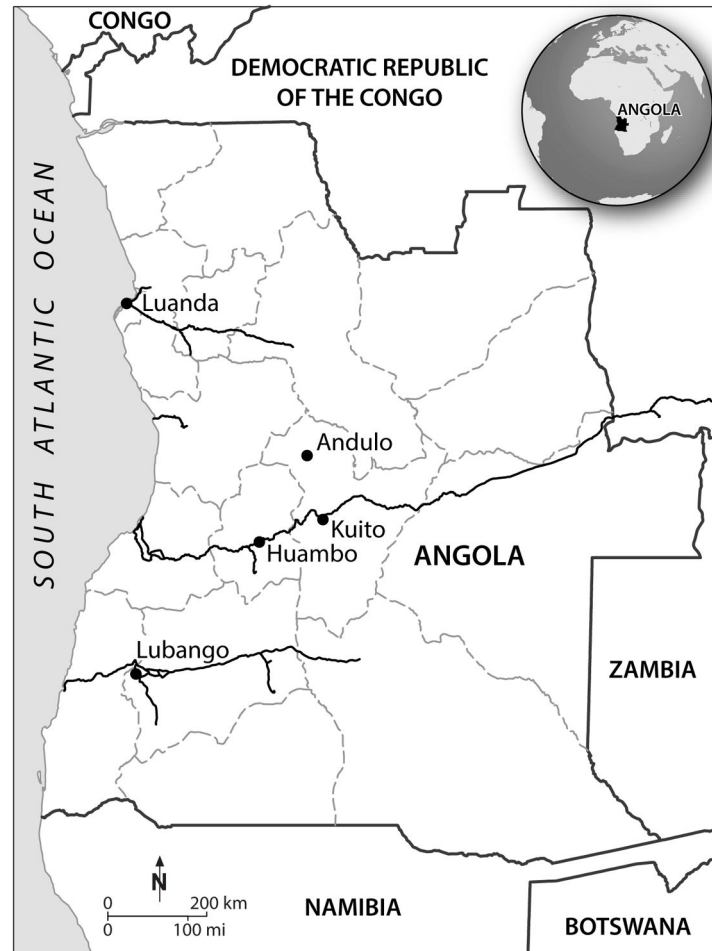


Figure 1.
Map of Angola with the Good Governance in Angola Program's office locations noted.

Revised policy on vehicle use in [American NGO]-Angola

The following is the revised vehicle use policy for the personal use of vehicles by vehicle-designated staff members. Please read and contact me with any questions.

[The American NGO] allows the use of the organization's vehicles by certain staff members for personal purposes (permita uso das viaturas a certo pessoal para usos pessoais). However, [the American NGO] does not have different vehicles for these uses and so all of the organization's vehicles have to be used for official purposes first and for personal purposes only secondarily.

The following points are our six directives.

1. [The American NGO] furnishes vehicle access to all staff members for official use. This access could be to a vehicle and a driver or only to a vehicle without a driver and depends upon: the security of the staff member and the vehicle; if the staff member is an approved driver or not; the needs of the office. Decisions will be agreed upon by the staff member and the transportation administrator but the transportation administrator is the final authority.
2. International staff members and national project managers receive vehicle-designation as routine procedure if they have a driver's license and are approved by the transportation administrator.
3. International staff members and national project managers will have access to vehicles for personal use, outside of work hours, as frequently as is possible. They should expect

that routine maintenance [of vehicles] demands that they use the standby driver once in a while, or when official needs demand the use of the vehicle.

4. All international staff members must pay USD 50 per month for the use of a vehicle.
5. All staff members with vehicle-designation are obligated to obey the requirements as set out in each office. Among others these are to drive responsibly, maintain the vehicle logbooks at each trip, park in secure locations, and maintain the cleanliness of the vehicle.
6. Vehicle-designation is based on needs and security. In Luanda these decisions are taken by the transportation administrator and are approved by the Assistant Country Director-Program Support. Each sub-office has its own system to designate vehicles. This system must be written and distributed to all drivers.

Spouses and partners of international staff members will have access to a vehicle outside of working hours, but if they wish to drive they must hold an Angolan driver's license. If this is not the case, the couple can organize their transportation between themselves and should only depend on an NGO driver on exceptional occasions. Also, because of the security situation in Luanda, the American NGO will provide transportation to school and back for children. This is a temporary solution and will be revisited each December.

Figure 2.
The American NGO's Vehicle Use Policy. Translated from the Portuguese by the author.