

Tidy concepts, messy lives: defining tensions in the domestic and overseas careers of UK non-governmental professionals

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Introduction

The identities of development professionals and activists can usefully be analysed in the context of the dominant policy ideas and models within which their expertise is constructed and given value and meaning. Recent ethnographic research has used the life-history method to understand the longer-term trajectories of people who cross between governmental and non-governmental careers and, more generally, to learn more about the motivations, working experiences and world views of activists and professionals (Lewis, 2008a; Lewis, 2008b).¹ In this chapter, I consider the experiences of a particular sub-set of individuals in the UK who have built careers within two distinctive domains within the broader non-governmental sector. One group has worked primarily in the UK domestic setting, where they have sought to tackle issues of poverty 'at home', while another has built international careers doing overseas work within so-called 'developing' country settings. Expertise and professionalism among these two groups of people has been differently constructed in relation to two main models or institutional maps, which are explored in this chapter. The first is the model of the three 'sectors' of institutional life (government, business and 'third' sector), which has become central to current global concerns with good governance. The second is the still-prevailing post-colonial separation of professional third sector work spaces in the UK into categories of 'domestic' and 'international development'.

The life history narratives collected take us further into what Apthorpe (this volume) has termed 'the virtual reality of aid-land', making possible a more detailed exploration of these two key issues in the world of ideas relating to professional non-governmental activities in the UK. There is a ubiquity to the 'three sector' model of state, market and civil society as a central framing device and organising principle of contemporary policy landscapes, yet this simple yet persuasive institutional idea tends to sit uneasily upon 'real' worlds of history and practice (Lewis 2006; 2008a and b). An important element of the identity and role of the development professional is the need continuously to mediate and 'broker' the relationship between disparate everyday work

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practices on the one hand, and the organising ideas of policy on the other, in the pursuit of stability, coherent meaning and order (Mosse, 2005; Mosse and Lewis, 2006). Yet this process of brokerage can simultaneously subvert and destabilise the three sector model, because the process depends upon - and makes apparent - many relationships and activities that operate across sector 'boundaries' - including the boundary separating government and non-government - and in so doing blurs and complicates policy assumptions about these boundaries.

The second issue analysed in this chapter is the stark and highly artificial division in the UK non-governmental sector between the 'domestic' and the 'international' as domains that constitute 'parallel worlds' of professional life (cf Lewis 1999). While this distinction is becoming increasingly untenable within the globalized world of development practice, where for example micro-finance approaches to tackling poverty developed in the 'third world' are applied to settings in the Europe and the North America, the distinction persists within the realm of professional practice. Both issues help illustrate the ways in which policy models tend to operate through a reliance on heroic ahistorical oversimplification.

Before turning to the life histories of these professionals, I will first discuss the background to the three sector model and the idea of a 'third sector' as one of its components, then briefly consider the rise of the ideology of 'nongovernmentalism', before introducing what I have termed the two 'parallel worlds' of domestic and international work in the UK third sector.

The three sector model

The concept of the third sector - which is often conflated and used interchangeably with familiar terms such as the 'voluntary sector', the 'non-profit sector', 'non-governmental sector' and 'civil society'² - has in the past two decades become a dominant organising idea within the frameworks that policy makers and activists now use to think about society, economy and policy. This third sector idea is important at two levels: first, as recognition of the importance of *organisational forms* that are seen as distinctive from state or business, represented by a wide range of third sector, non-profit, non-governmental or charitable actors; and, second, at the level of a three sector *model* - linking state, market and third sector - which increasingly informs the framing of policy in both Western and developing country contexts in support of good governance, and organisational pluralism in the delivery of social services, as prevailing policy discourses.

Ideas about the third sector have for example recently become politically important in the UK. As Kendall (2003: 1) writes

In 2003, the voluntary, third or non-profit sector occupies centre-stage in public policy discussions in the UK. Not since the late nineteenth century, when voluntary action was integral to contemporary concepts of citizenship, and the associated institutional infrastructure of charities and mutuals were the cause of considerable national pride, have organisations occupying the space between the market and the state commanded so much attention.

In March 2006, the UK government appointed a Minister for the Third Sector, Ed Miliband, who quickly set about extolling the virtues of the sector both as a key agent of social service delivery within what is now termed 'the mixed economy of welfare' and as a critical campaigning force within a democratic society.³ The economic importance of the sector is also now considerable. Kendall's data show that in 1995 almost 1.5 million full-time equivalent workers were employed in what he terms the broad non-profit sector, accounting for more than six percent of the economy as a whole, more than the 1.1 million employed in the National Health Service, the largest single employer in the UK. Turning his attention to the phenomenon of volunteering, Kendall (2003) shows that a total of 16 million persons volunteer in the UK committing hours equivalent to a further 1.7 million full-time employees.

These trends in the UK are part of a broader international phenomenon, with diverse roots in recent political and economic change. On the one hand, for example, organisations such as CIVICUS were born out of the rediscovery of the ideas of 'civil society' among anti-authoritarian activists in areas of Eastern Europe and Latin America during the 1980s, often influenced by Gramscian ideas about civil society and resistance. On the other hand, it was liberal thinking on civil society that informed the growth of the 'good governance' agenda of the World Bank and other international development agencies during the 1990s, and which envisaged new roles for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) alongside states and markets (Lewis 2002). The 'good governance' policy agenda rested on a key mobilising idea: that it was possible to create 'better' citizens through building of associations, and this required a policy model that assumed an interdependent and supportive relationship between market economy, state and civil society. Within this model, a 'virtuous circle' was asserted between all three institutional sectors such that a productive economy and a well-run government would sustain a vigorous civil society, a well-run government and a vigorous civil society would serve to sustain growth and a well-managed economy and a strong civil society would help to produce efficient government (Archer 1994).

It is first useful to unpack the proliferation of terms that characterise discussions of this 'third sector'. Each term can be seen to have a distinctive historical and contextual origin. For example, the term 'non-profit' organisation comes from the US, where organisations of this kind have long been contrasted with the dominant organising principle of the market and the profit-making business organisation, while non-governmental organisation (NGO) was first used in the context of the United Nations in 1945, when it was agreed in the UN Charter that selected non-state actors would be given observer status in UN assemblies and meetings. 'Voluntary' organisation, the term most frequently used in the UK, refers back to Christian notions of charity and volunteering, while the more recently fashionable 'civil society' emerged as a term rediscovered from political theory by activists. As a result, it makes more sense to take these terms as a group or 'set' rather than to debate the merits and characteristics of each, since all may be seen as manifestations of the broader phenomenon of 'non-governmentalism' (Lewis 2007). In this chapter I will use the term 'third sector' as a short-hand for this cluster of broadly similar ideas.

Najam (1999: 143) has noted the relatively small amount of scholarly research on the third sector, despite the recent surge of policy interest. He argues that 'our conceptual understanding of this terrain is even more scant than the terrain is expansive', and characterises what literature that does exist as predominantly 'descriptive' and 'parochial'. In a similar vein, Tvedt (1998: 3) suggests that research in the field lacks conceptual clarity and that 'definitions have tended to be normative and ideological or so broad as to make discussion and comparison difficult'. Nor have anthropologists paid much attention to the phenomenon of the 'third sector', either in terms of analysing its role as an increasingly ubiquitous organising idea within landscapes of 'neo-liberal institutionalism' (cf Mosse, this volume), or in considering its other main sense as a loose description of a diverse collection of organisations that exist in an institutional space between the state, the market and the household (Lewis 2006).

Indeed, the precise origins of the third sector term remain somewhat obscure. The US sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1973) is believed to have invented the term, but around the same time, apparently independently, the management specialist Theodore Levitt (1975) wrote *The Third Sector: New Tactics for a Responsive Society* in relation to social activism. Daniel Bell also refers to the third sector in his 1973 book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. Etzioni (1961) constructed a conceptual framework with three basic organisational forms, centred on his concept of organisational 'compliance'. The type of power relations required to achieve it could take one of three forms: *coercive*, which is the application or threat of physical sanctions (such as pain or restrictions on the freedom of movement); *remunerative*, based on control over material resources and rewards such as wages or benefits); and *normative*, based on the manipulation of symbolic rewards and deprivations, the use of the power of persuasion, and on appeals to shared values and idealism. Third sector organisations were highly diverse, but Etzioni suggested that they chiefly used degrees of normative power to achieve compliance. They built commitment of workers, volunteers and members and compensated them primarily through symbolic reward. This line of thinking led to the idea of a third sector as a loose category of organisations that are not government or for-profit businesses but which were held together by the 'glue' of value-driven action and commitment.

Ideas about the third sector did not remain confined to organisational and sociological theory, but were also taken up within various types of policy thinking during the 1980s. The 'discovery' of the third sector fed into several different areas of the changing policy landscape: as another potential delivery system for services, as an area of 'private' activity into which government could shift more of its responsibilities; and as a public arena or space within which individual citizens could be encouraged to organise social action. In the next section, I consider the broader political and institutional context in which policy ideas about the third sector have become prominent.

The rise of 'nongovernmentalism'

From the late 1980s, a set of ideas that I suggest can loosely be characterised as 'nongovernmentalism' emerged as a dominant and influential

ideology in the fields of public policy, including international development. This was manifest in a policy discourse that 'talked up' the roles of the third sector, NGOs and civil society. It was associated with the ascendancy of ideologies of neoliberalism that brought the discourse of privatisation, a disillusionment with states and state-led development, as well as a set of new more activist agendas of 'alternative development' (Lewis 2005).⁴ Neoliberalism was a return to the preoccupations of an earlier economic liberalism in the nineteenth century that privileged the market as 'the proper guiding instrument by which people should organise their economic lives' (MacEwan 1997: 4).

This market-oriented policy agenda brought market competition and theories of comparative advantage centre-stage, and it shifted ideas about government away from national planning and state provision of services towards markets and third sector actors. It envisaged a new 'enabling' role in which the role of government was to secure the conditions in which markets could operate more fully across a range of areas of social and economic life. For example, within international development, an influential World Bank volume edited by Paul and Israel (1991) set out the reasons for the Bank's decision to begin 'an institution-wide effort to expand its work with NGOs' (Beckmann, 1991: 134). This decision was based on the recognition that states and markets had limited capacity to reduce poverty while NGOs had distinctive competences such as closeness to the poor, committed leadership and capacity to build access to services for the poor. This was the beginning of an explicit recognition of the role of NGOs within the unfolding neo-liberal development agenda, which had gained confidence rapidly following the end of the Cold War.

Interest in the third sector was also an outcome of the bundle of different ideas and approaches implied within new public management perspectives (Ferlie et al 1996) that formed part of efforts to reshape public administration from the 1980s onwards, based on ideas about linking efficiency and accountability. To varying degrees this thinking has been the dominant model of government reforms throughout the industrialised and developing worlds. NPM has led to structural reforms and changes in practice which generally include the restructuring of the public sector through privatisation, the introduction of internal markets and the contracting out of public services to both market and non-market agencies (such as third sector organisations), a reduction in the overall scale of the civil service and the use of a raft of new managerial techniques for improving efficiency such as the use of performance indicators and incentives (Minogue 1998).

This was the context for an increasing the role of the third sector within social policy. Ideas such as the purchaser/provider split in public service provision, the use of agency contracting in order to link performance and incentives, and efforts to improve accounting transparency based on quantifiable output indicators all contributed to a policy climate in which new roles have now been opened up for third sector organisations in service provision as government roles had been redefined and reduced (Turner and Hulme 1997). The attraction for governments and donors of working with third sector organisations within this general paradigm was primarily one of improved efficiency. Third sector organisations are seen as more cost-effective vehicles for service provision than other forms, as able to reach certain sections of the population with specialised services, and with potential

gains from the 'synergy' which could be created between government and NGOs working in 'partnerships'. This type of thinking carries a strongly functionalist logic in which third sector organisations are represented as having a set of comparative advantages in relation to public sector agencies such as cost-effectiveness, less bureaucratic operating styles, closeness to communities and reduced prevalence to corruption (Cernea 1988).

In Britain, the gradual shift in the 1980s and 1990s towards using private social service delivery with a reduced government role was termed 'the mixed economy of welfare' bringing uneven results in terms of the quality of provision, despite making more government resources available to the sector (Kendall 2003). In the developing world, the adoption of structural adjustment policies by African governments, for example, led to cuts in social services with the result that third sector organisations were left attempting to fill the gap. In Zimbabwe, church missions provide 68% of all hospital beds in rural areas, while in Zambia the third sector – which is mostly church-based – provides 40% of health services in rural areas. In Uganda, many rural schools are being managed and funded by parent-teacher associations despite being still nominally under the control of the state (Robinson and White 1997).

In this way, the third sector can be seen as prominent idea that has helped to frame policy primarily within neo-liberal governance processes. What all these variants of the third sector idea have in common is that they form part of an increasingly ubiquitous way of defining institutional landscapes and policy parameters with versions of a 'three sector model' - whether in terms of development donors' 'good governance' agenda, or within the UK government's current vision of the reform of public services. Yet an ethnographic perspective suggests a disjuncture between the model's easy clarity in the way that it offers up a tripartite separation between three distinct areas of institutional life, and the messy realities of professional life revealed in the life histories.

This disjuncture is revealed through an examination of the movement of particular individuals across these sector boundaries. There are both persons who build careers within the third sector and then 'cross over' into a new job within a government agency, as well as others who maintain interests and relationships in both sectors at the same time (Lewis 2008a). In the UK, DFID has recruited many staff from the NGO sector since they may have relevant experience, sometimes creating new informal sets of relations between them. Such persons may simultaneously serve to uphold the idea of difference between government and non-governmental sectors, while subverting it through a transfer of ideas and knowledge often in informal and less visible ways (Lewis 2008b). For example, Oxfam, a large and long-established UK non-governmental organisation, now has numerous former employees in senior positions across a range of UK government agencies. Use is made of these individuals, referred to by some as 'ex-fams', by Oxfam to gather information about policy processes and to build alliances as the NGO goes about its work. At the same time, the UK government agencies make more and more use of secondments and placements, bringing key policy thinkers from non-governmental settings into government, broadening 'big tent' politics but also arguably reducing dissent and criticism of government policy (Lewis 2008a). The boundary between third sector and government is therefore far more complex and porous than the three sector

model suggests. In the next section, we turn to another aspect of the conceptualisation of the UK third sector which seeks to simplify a complex and messy set of historical and political relationships, namely, the parallel worlds of work lives in domestic and international settings.

The parallel worlds of the UK third sector

The British 'third' sector has long been divided into two quite distinct sub-sectors which in a sense form two separate 'parallel worlds'. One is apparently outward-facing and contains the various 'non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) that have worked overseas in 'developing' country contexts; the other is the world of more inward-facing 'voluntary organisations' that are concerned with domestic, UK-focused work 'at home'.⁵ Despite the organisational diversity found within both sub-sectors, these two broad clusters of organisations are of essentially similar type. Although they work in different geographical areas, many undertake broadly comparable types of activities (grassroots community work, service delivery, lobbying and advocacy). Yet there are few links and little communication between these two sub-sectors, and as a result two different and separate communities of third sector professionals co-exist uneasily in the UK (Lewis 1999). The persistence of these two professional worlds reflects a dominant and problematic binary worldview that continues to separate problems of poverty and social justice in the UK from those in the rest of the world (Jones 2000). The binary worldview seeks to conceal - and indeed largely obscures - a range of continuities and connections in relation to migration, displacement, trade, conflict, transnational institutions and many other inter-related elements among broader landscapes of colonial history and globalisation (Kothari 2005; Jones 2000).

Life-work history interviews⁶ were conducted with individuals from within both contexts, making it possible to learn more about people's reasons for choosing to work in one or other of the two domestic or international 'sub-sectors'. The narratives revealed an unexpectedly sharp division between these worlds of domestic and international work, and of particular interest were the stories of people who had tried to challenge or subvert this prevailing dualistic order. These efforts to rupture the expert consensus that has emerged around the two 'parallel worlds' of the UK non-governmental sector suggests ways that ethnographic research, with its capacity to reveal and explain the less visible aspects of policy processes, has the potential to contribute to understanding the ways in which expertise is socially situated.

Ideas about the third sector have therefore become important as a site for the construction of knowledge about global and local poverty and of strategies for addressing poverty reduction. Professional identities among third sector personnel in the UK have as a consequence been shaped historically by the creation and maintenance of a conceptual boundary that helps to determine choice, first about whether to work in a non-governmental or governmental setting, and second, whether to work 'at home' on domestic poverty and social welfare issues, or whether to focus instead on international development issues and the 'third world'. But this is not a simple one-way causality, because as we will see, the maintenance of professional identities

and interests also generates boundaries of protection in which both sides uphold the division. In the UK third sector, part of the way that this bounded knowledge community operates is by restricting the movement of individuals between these two professional worlds, and as we shall see from some of the accounts below, it ultimately serves to limit the exchange of ideas and information across them.

Working in the parallel worlds

Raymond Apthorpe (this volume) draws attention to what he terms the 'virtual reality of aid-land' as a useful tool for framing new thinking in the anthropology of development:

Of course the world of aid is real enough to those who have to plan, manage and deliver it. Those subject to it know it well too. But looked at in another way – allegorically – it is different: an *inauthentic* world of only *virtual reality*. Indeed sometimes those who live and work in aid-land, not just travel through it with a donkey or a consultancy, will say so. So this must be true! ... What is 'virtual' about aid-land is its trick *trompe l'oeil* quality of being both there and not there. Not a nowhere exactly but inexactly a somewhere, with the characteristics of a nowhere. An idea of a somewhere but about which more is desired – or feared or neglected - than known.⁷

Reading Apthorpe's chapter led me back to reflect on my own earlier identification of these two 'parallel worlds' of the UK third sector (Lewis 1999), which seemed a striking, albeit little-explored, area of the 'virtual reality' of policy land. The dichotomy was clearly derived from elements of an 'othering' relationship between West and non-West, with continuities back to colonial relationships and earlier, and central to the construction of ideas about 'development' itself (Gardner and Lewis 1996; Cooper and Packard 1997; Kothari 2005).⁸ Such a binary distinction at the level of worlds of policy can clearly be understood in relation to work on the ways in which the power of 'experts' is exercised through the act of 'simplifying' the world and 'resolving it into simple forces and oppositions' (Mitchell 2002: 34), and in new approaches to the anthropology of development which argues that policy can be analysed as a set of practices that are enacted through the construction and constant maintenance of coherent representations of meaning and action (Mosse 2005). What came through strongly in the life history narratives, and which seemed to require further explanation, was the strength and persistence of this category boundary among a community of people within the broad UK third sector whose moral and political outlook, and day to day working environment, might be expected to encourage a relatively high level of reflection and exchange in relation to global social and political issues. It seemed parochial rather than cosmopolitan, if cosmopolitans are defined as those 'who identify more broadly with their continent or with the world as a whole' (Norris 2003: 289). And it seemed significant that the operation of these two sub-sectors appeared to be holding out against, and to some extent refusing, the logic of a more globalized order.

While the extent and extremes of poverty in areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America cannot be compared to disadvantage and inequality in the industrialised societies of 'the North', it makes little sense to obscure or deny the global relationships and continuities which connect social and economic change within such different contexts. Poverty is not nor has ever been confined to a 'third world', but is also a condition also experienced by many individuals and social groups in better-off societies. Organisational responses within the third sector to poverty and marginalisation may increasingly be comparable and inter-connected within the broad logic of neo-liberal policy frameworks, and intervention strategies such as micro-finance or participatory planning are increasingly exported between settings in different parts of the world. The restructuring of welfare systems (involving the use of third sector organisations as service contracting agents), as well as the organised resistance to the growing marketization of service provision imposed by international financial institutions are both common phenomena within institutional and policy landscapes in many areas of the world. For example, Lind (1996) has analysed women organising in the third sector to construct communal soup kitchens in Peru, seeking to influence policy in Bolivia, and fighting violence against women in New York all within a single global conceptual framework that links gender rights and organisational responses to poverty.

Yet informants working in the UK third sector speak of having to make clear either/or choices between a professional identity based on either working 'at home' or focusing on 'third world' contexts. For the individuals involved, this leads their subsequent career trajectories into quite separate worlds of practice, within *either* voluntary organisations *or* NGOs, despite the common challenges of poverty, exclusion, participation and accountability found within the policy contexts of both spheres, and the comparable tools and techniques deployed to try to tackle them.⁹ Sometimes, the parallel worlds can exist even inside the same organisation.¹⁰

The ethnography of 'home or away'

We turn now to explore some of the ways in which the subjects of my research spoke about their decisions to embark upon work in local or international contexts, and the ways in which such decisions have helped to construct professional identities. Research reveals a complex bundle of motivations and circumstances that operate to determine a person's choice of work context. The non-governmental professional is motivated by various factors: political solidarity, humanist compassion, an exploratory world-view, an interest in trying to escape one's own culture and family, or a sense of religious or humanitarian mission, among others

In the UK, a decision to work overseas may be expressed in quite romantic terms, drawing on an interest in travel, adventure and extending one's general experience. For example, one informant, working in an NGO, talked about a strong predisposition towards travel and international service from a relatively early age:

I think I was interested in a wider world, not necessarily the 'doing good' end of it but, you know, the wider geography. I was always interested in travel and finding out more, and seeing more. So there was a sort of ... a cultural thing as well, and then there was this class thing, and probably community service cause that's ... my parents were very strong in ... you know, if you're a member of the community and you ought to support it, and I'm sure that got embedded in very early on actually. So there was all that ... I can see all the bits of it, but I don't know what sparked it. But ... by the time I left university I wanted to save the world anyway, that was quite clear ...

The desire to construct a more cosmopolitan identity as a young white British young person, by exploring the possibilities of combining international work with elements of self-realisation, comes across in the following account:

[My first job] ... was actually a gap year between school and university and I went to India ostensibly to change the world and make a difference and so on, which I very quickly had eaten out of me or drummed out of me by realising that a white, middle-class, eighteen year old who'd travelled but not lived, had very little to offer to people in a rural village community in central India, except perhaps a little bit around English, the use of the English language and so on. But that ... that whole experience, that whole year I worked for an organisation ... it did give me a taste for different realities, I'd say, and different experiences and different ways in which people live their lives and so on. And I went from there to study development studies at university... My work direction has always been overseas-focused and always been ... kind of development-orientated ... [I]t was probably the single most concentrated period of learning in my life, I'd say that one year overseas just in terms of knowing who I was and my own resources, how I cope with adversity ...

Both of these accounts resonate with those of other observers of the world of UK development agencies. Kaufman (1997) in her work on aid agency personnel explores the idea raised by one of her informants that many UK NGO staff can be described as in some way culturally 'disassociated' people, for example, people who had grown up overseas with a sense of being away from home. Her data suggested a more general idea that such persons tended to have 'had their horizons extended at an earlier age' (1997:126) more than most others of their peer group, and that this sometimes led them into overseas work.

The motivation of a person from a more cultural and geographically diverse background within a minority community in the UK is likely to reflect a less binary - or more cosmopolitan - justification for working internationally. For example, a British Asian man who had grown up in East Africa worked, after completing university studies, in the UK voluntary sector. He saw this job as far less 'separate' from international work than the other informants:

[T]here weren't many Asian models [of] people working on development issues in Africa at the time. And there was quite a lot of tension when I was growing up between the whole 'Africanisation' agenda in these countries and so on. And one of the things I grew up with was a very strong feeling that actually ... I'd really like at some stage to see more Asian people working in the development field in Africa. So immediately after finishing university ... this was 1981, I began to think about ... how do I ... go overseas and work,

because that's where I saw the real challenge of what I wanted to do. I made some initial inquiries with a number of voluntary organisations, the UN system, NGOs and so on, and everywhere where I went, people said, 'Well, actually ... you don't really have any real experience'. So it was quite a difficult path. I eventually took my first job working in a night shelter for young homeless people in London ... after having done that for a year, I decided ... my dream was still to work overseas, and I made some enquiries with UN Volunteers. And was selected for a post to work as a community worker [in an African country] ...

Many informants offered political or ideological analyses of why they decided to work in the UK as opposed to overseas. This was particularly true for those informants who had begun their working lives in the 1970s amidst discussions of the politics of social work and community organising. These arguments can be read partly as the desire to avoid what Midgley (1981) called 'professional imperialism' in the social work field, which imposed '... alien theory and techniques on developing countries, which were unsuited to their cultures and development needs' (p.xiii).

Such choice-making makes explicit a political analysis that expresses discomfort with working in distant post-colonial contexts, as this informant explained:

I was involved in community development programmes and ... the choices you made about where you were going to go and live and work could be in the UK, or they could be in ... some sort of international 'third world'-type context. There was a pretty strong feeling that it was really important to do things in the rest of the world, but actually it was really important to do work 'at home' too. It was almost like the rediscovery of poverty type stuff, at the end of the nineteenth, early twentieth century ... not quite, not as dramatic as that ... but a sense that *'hang on a minute, we've got a lot of awful problems here'* and it's fine ... and important ... to go and do work internationally ... but if you're not doing anything here, then it's a bit of a cop-out ...

Accepting that there is a vague sense of unease rather than a firm position on this issue, another informant spoke of her concerns about the politics of work with distant others:

... there is a something in there ... a worry about disaster tourism, or about disaster employment ... that sort of thing ... I know that that's not what it is about. But there's still a little bit of me that feels very reserved about it. I was in ... oh ... an Islington women's group [laughs] that I'm in. One of the women in it is an advisor on women and medicine for the developing world, works with [an aid agency] on that. I mean she was presenting her work on that, you know it was fascinating, you know, really interesting stuff, and I kept thinking ... not *'Why are you doing that'*, but rather *'You're talking about a world that connects to mine politically, and in terms of morality and ethics, but it still feels like a different world. And somehow you are telling me a story from a strange land ...'* Whereas another woman telling me about what she is doing something about ... prostitution in King's Cross doesn't feel like that...

Life cycle pressures, and the fear of weakening social and family networks, are also an important set of factors which influence a person's decision to continue working internationally. While dislocation may help to

trigger the desire for international work, its lack of resolution may also feed the tension between 'home and away', perhaps related to sense of place, of ageing and of family. This dislocatory tension may ultimately inform an attempt to try to 'cross back' between the two worlds, as another informant explained:

And then I came home, back to the UK. I'd been away for a quite a few years and my parents had got older, my nieces and nephews ... I was really aware that I was kind of losing touch with my family. People would come out and visit me, and as much as I loved [an Asian country] - and I probably will go back there ... or anywhere else I've worked, because I like that - but I really thought 'Now I really have to go back home and start investing back in personal relationships, back here', because you know, I'd been away a bit ...

The (dis)organisation of professional knowledge

These short extracts from the life-histories provide glimpses into narratives of decision-making that suggest that the 'parallel worlds' distinction remains a feature of the UK third sector, serving not only to construct non-governmental professional career identities, but also to segregate certain areas of expert knowledge. Professional lives in the third sector are influenced and constrained by policy assumptions at two main levels. First, they take shape within the broader three sector model, that creates a separation between three institutional spheres which obscures the messy boundaries and connections that exist between them in practice. Second, the further construction of the two 'parallel worlds' within this third sector serves to create artificial and ahistorical boundaries between the domestic and international work. This latter distinction is expressed by one informant who speaks of the fact that it is usually difficult for both people and ideas to move across the boundary:

I do see the international development sector as really almost a 'sub-sector' or a 'co-sector' really, alongside ... you know ... the voluntary, the UK voluntary sector. And I think there's ... little movement probably between international development and UK voluntary sector.

The boundary exists as a barrier to the travel of ideas, even where there may be useful potential for exchange and learning across contexts. The importance of possible 'policy and theoretical convergence across boundaries' is recognised by Jones (2000: 240) in his analysis of why it is 'alright to do development "over there" but not "here"'. For example, he finds increasing areas of common need around issues such as participation and citizenship in both 'first world' and 'third world' contexts.

A key problem that can be identified in relation to these parallel worlds is a general lack of exchange and communication that seems to exist between the respective sub-sectors (Lewis 1999). This state of affairs appears to be continuing, and is supported by many of these new narratives. For example, this NGO staff member speaks of her experience of a general lack of openness to cross-learning between domestic and international settings:

[T]he saddest thing is that I find in [the NGO] is [that] I don't think we're open enough to ideas coming in from all sorts of places. Because I think so many people have come up [through] straight routes and they don't know that there is a life out there. And that's what I worry about all the time, that people aren't seeing the potential from these other places. Like the Humanitarian Department, we've done this [new plan] and we've put a lot of ... stuff into getting our humanitarian [approach] really slick ... [F]rankly, it's been really hard work to persuade them to go and look at emergency services in other places, including the NHS. And you just think 'Oh for heaven's sake' ... and they finally did go to say, the County Council for example, to look at their emergency procedures ...

This lack of openness to other sources of ideas is attributed to the fact that people tend to come into the international NGO sector and stay there during their careers, moving between a relatively small number of organisations. Unable to imagine that useful knowledge or relevant lessons might be available from within the UK, NGO colleagues restrict their consultations to other similar NGOs, sometimes drawing on their own previous jobs in these broadly similar organisations. Part of this is an unwillingness, according to this informant, to connect 'developing' and 'developing' country contexts.¹¹

The same informant continued her account in which her previous work in the UK health service tended to be undervalued by her 'development' colleagues, even where she felt there were potentially relevant comparisons about accessing more directly the views of service users/beneficiaries:¹²

And there is that thing about not seeing that there are relationships, because I think I know quite a lot about development actually, not in the sense of Africa and all that ... but when you get round to it, the skills and the things you do, they are so similar really... I mean, I didn't know much about delivering humanitarian stuff, and then I got into debates about actual beneficiaries and their ability to comment on services and things. And I was thinking, wait a minute, I've been here before with patients, you know, and all the same things are just there ...

In order to get around the problem that her knowledge from the domestic sub-sector was not valued by her international colleagues, she explained that she sometimes found it necessary to pretend to know *less* than she actually did in some meetings. This, she said, was a response to the negative power of people's preconceived expectations about the value of 'her' knowledge as against 'their' highly specialised knowledge field of development:

I [had previously done] all this work on quality at [a UK organisation], and ... a new accreditation programme and all that ... And eventually [at the NGO] I sort of started writing some stuff down ... about the different ways ... you have accreditation of individuals, you have accreditation of organisations ... all those sorts of things that you think about looking at, in terms of quality. And at first it looked like I was completely out of my mind ... there were one or two words about '*She's never worked in the humanitarian sector before, you know*'... And you just think, honestly, this is terrible, really. [W]e ended up doing peer reviews which again, I think I have spent quite a lot of my time slightly pretending I don't know as much as I do about some things, so that people can discover them for themselves. And that's what happened ... I feel I've had to learn how to be very ... gentle ... [T]here's a very heavy culture

and I don't just mean in [this NGO], I mean in that whole sector, you know, ... you can get change to happen, but if you look like you're bringing something hard from ... you know ... *outside*, I think you've got trouble.

Another informant explained certain other ways in which knowledge was segregated. She had come to know of work in the NGO world in relation to the evaluation of community-level interventions because her sister worked in an NGO, but did not find it easy to interest her colleagues in exploring possible opportunities to exchange ideas between the sub-sectors. She was unusual in that she was about to start a new job in an international NGO having spent most of her professional career in the domestic sector. She characterises her colleagues as introverted and unwilling to consider the international context as a valid source of knowledge:

I think there's very little cross-fertilisation. I think one of the things that I really find interesting is ... a whole of debate about impact and evaluation ... in the voluntary sector generally. I know ... there are sort of parallel debates going on in international development ... You don't get the cross-fertilisation, you don't get, you know, the learning from the international development sector coming into the UK. It's like ... they're just talking amongst themselves. They don't talk to the broader voluntary sector. I mean, that's my take on it, and I'm quite interested to see, when I move into [an NGO] if it's true.

The compartmentalisation of the two sub-sectors, and the professional identities that this tends to shape, makes movement by professionals between them comparatively rare. Where people do develop an interest in moving across, there are barriers that result from the different knowledge communities each sub-sector represents. From a perspective within the UK voluntary sector, some informants view the world of international development as exotic and exciting. For the following informant, the view of the international part of the UK third sector is a somewhat idealised one, and is expressed as part of a desire to 'escape' from the everyday into something more exciting. She suggests that people who do make it across do so as a kind of 'one-way traffic' from which there is an unlikely chance of return:

I think it's quite difficult to get into the international sector you know, if your experience is mainly UK. And once you're in the international sector people don't tend to want to come back to the UK sector. And I can see the reasons for that. There's some sort of excitement, perhaps, about working overseas, but also the need. You can't really compare the needs of kids in Africa to the needs of, you know, even the most deprived kids in the UK.

All this can pose difficulties for people who wish to blur the boundary between these two professional worlds, since they find that their knowledge may be differently valued. One senior NGO staff member interviewed recalled being asked about her earlier career in the UK public sector during her NGO job interview. Under increasingly hostile questioning from the panel about the status and validity of her UK-based knowledge and experience, she reflected during her narrative:

... you know, I was starting to think, but I *do* know about development... I mean someone said to me, 'But you never had ... "dirt under your

fingernails”. And I said, ‘Well, I’ve had grime under my fingernails in inner London, you know, is that not the same thing?’

The organising principle of the parallel worlds, while operating at the level of general policy discussion in the UK, also informs individual agency, whether as an idea helping to structure decisions over choices of work location or in conditioning managerial responses to challenges of everyday work practices.

Conclusion

This chapter has drawn on life-work history data in order to explore the complexities of professional identities among those who work in the UK ‘third sector’, both in the domestic sphere and in the parallel world of international aid and development work. The personal narratives highlight the significance to these professionals’ career histories of values, political and religious commitments and family histories as well as relationships to wider historical and political events. The stories reveal ideas about, and tensions within, the separation of state from third sector, and about the distinguishing of work at home from that abroad. The life-histories work to construct and reproduce, as well as to subvert, these sector divisions and dominant policy models.

The life histories combine two important elements within current dominant rationalities of aid and governance. The first is the tripartite model which provides a framework for neo-liberals to conceptualise a ‘good governance’ agenda that first disaggregates, and then finds synergies between, the state, the market and a ‘third sector’, thereby helping to create a persuasive rationale for policy simplifications such as ideas about organisational ‘comparative advantage’. The second is a colonially-rooted discourse that distinguishes poverty in the UK from poverty in the ‘third world’, thereby denying both the interconnectedness of global social inequalities and links with the poverty-related domestic issues of immigration and racism. The obscuring of such continuities is reinforced by the ahistorical character of three sector model, the boundaries of which map uneasily and often unconvincingly onto local and global institutional landscapes, yet they achieve a power that continues to organise policies of aid and governance.

The professional life histories presented here begin to reveal ways in these dominant policy models are constructed, and how they operate. In relation to the first issue of the boundary between the public and the third sector, boundaries are in practice more complex, subtle and unstable than the three-sector model tends to allow for. For example, ‘non-governmental’ actors are linked in potentially important ways to government through movements of people, resource flows and transactions, even though such links may be far from visible. They may include kinship relations within elite families, age-sets or alumni groups which connect NGO staff with colleagues in other spheres, the embeddedness of employees within wider communities, and funding streams which generate ambiguous roles, allegiances and identities among individuals (Lewis 2008a and b). In relation to the second issue of the separation between home and away, a set of ‘defining tensions’ helps to construct the identities of these non-governmental professionals in the UK within a highly simplified frame. At the level of policy, a key function of

the dichotomy is to deny the connections around international development and domestic policy. At the level of practice, the distinction functions to create and maintain spheres of professional expertise through the construction of 'relevant' and 'non-relevant' areas of competency and knowledge.

Such policy maps may become increasingly anachronistic as the linkages between the three sectors are rendered more apparent, and the international relationships and networks which transcend such simple binary thinking about domestic and international sub-sectors become more visible and less avoidable. For the present they remain relatively fixed, and form part of this 'virtual reality'. Yet this reality appears to contain a 'mirror image': while the boundaries of the three sector model are increasingly complicated in practice under current neo-liberal governance arrangements in the UK and elsewhere - as the life histories of 'cross-overs' indicate - the model itself remains in place, sustained within the good governance policy discourse; but in the case of the domestic and international distinction, the model is increasingly unsustainable as themes and techniques such as micro-finance converge, yet at the level of professional practice the division has been reproduced and appears to be stronger than ever.

Notes

1. Research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Grant Reference RES-155-25-0064, as part of its Non-Governmental Public Action (NGPA) Programme. The study was based on the collection of professional life histories in four countries: UK, Bangladesh, Mexico and the Philippines. An overview can be found in Lewis (2008b). This chapter takes as its focus some of the life histories from the UK.
2. These overlapping terms each have distinctive histories and are embedded in different geographical and cultural contexts, briefly discussed below.
3. *Third Sector*, 10th December 2006. The weekly UK newspaper *Third Sector* for 'charities, voluntary organisations, social enterprise' boasts a circulation of more than 17,000.
4. In the development sector, for example, NGOs became seen as a *tabula rasa* onto which were projected ideas such as empowerment and participation, and new forms of management and organising (Lewis 2005).
5. Despite the lack of any clear analytical or terminological logic to the distinction, I am following here the convention among those working in the UK third sector in which the term 'NGO' is used for organisations working in international development, and 'voluntary organisation' for those working in the UK.
6. A detailed description of the strengths and weaknesses of the life history method, and the experience of using life-work histories within the wider ESRC research project, can be found in Lewis 2008a).
7. This quote is taken from an earlier conference draft of Apthorpe's paper, which has unfortunately disappeared from the later published version!
8. When Oxfam launched a small UK programme in 1996 after six decades of working internationally, arguing that expertise acquired through its years in developing countries was transferable to Britain, the *Daily Mail's* headline was 'Stick to the Third World!' (NCVO, 1996).
9. Pearson (2000) for example writes of the ways in which certain types of micro-credit schemes have been adapted from Asia for use in interventions in poor communities in the UK.
10. Organisations such as Save the Children Fund (SCF) which operate both domestic and overseas programmes have tended to reproduce this division *within* their organisations, and until comparatively recently the two halves of SCF organisation remained very separate, with little communication or exchange of ideas between them. On the other hand, Christian Aid must be careful not to involve itself directly in the rights of refugees in the UK, since this is seen as the preserve of another non-governmental agency also linked to the Church of England.
11. However, evidence suggests that when structured opportunities for learning and exchange between context are presented, they are eagerly taken up. For example, an issue of the international practitioner journal *Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) Notes* on this topic has been particularly well-received in recent years (PLA Notes 38: Participatory Processes in the North, International Institute for Environment

and Development (IIED), June 2000, Guest Editors: Charlotte Flower, Paul Mincher and Susan Rimku, available from www.iied.org).

12. There is also sometimes a parallel language dividing the discussion in the UK and 'development' settings such that, for example, people labelled 'users' of voluntary sector services in the domestic UK setting are frequently termed 'beneficiaries' among NGOs working in developing countries.

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