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International development aid and young people’s participation in the societal development of the global south

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International development aid has in recent years sought to strengthen youths’ societal participation by cooperation between international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and local youth associations. In this paper, we address and conceptualise some of the underlying causes that may enable and/or limit such efforts to support youth participation in the global south. We seek to contribute to the growing literature exploring the multiple scales of young people’s political agency. A core argument proposed is that notions of generational relationality, as seen in the case of international development aid targeting youth, must include conceptions of power as a topological relation across space.

Keywords: civil society, young people’s participation, NGOs, international development aid, topology, generations

# International aid and young people’s civic participation

Youth studies in recent years have contributed significantly to demonstrating how young people, through their agency, participate in and change societies around the world (Ansell 2014; Hart 2008; Horgan et.al., 2017; Osborne et.al., 2017; Skelton 2010). Today, most researchers and development practitioners agree with Ansell (2014), who argues that young people matter not only because they are numerous but also because they play a role as intentional actors in the social processes of transformation. This argument by Ansell represents both a normative stand – young people should participate – and an empirical stand – young people do indeed participate – in societal development. Accordingly, participation has become a central issue among development agencies that target children and young people (Hart 2008), and youth participation and youth as change agents are presently at the core of the rhetoric and policy of development agencies and organisations. (Bersaglio, Enns, and Kepe 2015; Ginwright and James 2002; Skelton 2007; Thomas 2007). Nonetheless, ‘authentic participation’ among youths is not a straightforward issue; young people are at risk of being provided with agency guided by the goals and purposes of adults as opposed to the goals and purposes of the youths themselves (Ansell 2016; Azmi, Brun, and Lund 2013; Gaskell 2008; Kallio and Häkli 2011; Morgan 2016; Skelton 2010).

Moreover, the academic literature has been critical and inconclusive regarding both the need for and the effects of efforts to increase societal participation by international development aid, and there appears to be limited evidence of the impact of such efforts (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015; Font and Galais 2011; Lewis 2014; Mitlin, Hickey, and Bebbington 2007; Refstie and Brun 2016; Riddell 2007; Tvedt 2006). Cooke and Kothari (2001), for example, emphasises that participation itself is not a solution to the challenges and common interests that non-government organisations (NGOs) seek to address. As Young (1989) argued some decades ago, participation with real political consequences is often a privilege for people with the resources, power and knowledge to be able to turn participatory processes to their advantage. Hence, participation tends to favour the people who are well organised and have strong links to important actors in civil society or the state (Coelho and Von Lieres 2010), which often does not include young people. These critical reflections call for a closer examination of the role of international development aid in developing young people’s opportunities to participate in the global south (Hart 2008; Wyness 2013).

To address the limitations of and challenges to efforts to increase young people’s participation in the global south, aid programmes focusing on facilitating and providing opportunities for their participation have been developed (Hart 2008). However, Hart (2008) claims that these efforts focusing on technicality and practicalities are insufficient, and he suggests that attention be paid to the underlying causes that hinder authentic participation. Similarly, Mason (2017:257) argues that ‘[…] children's lives and childhood as an institution can only be fully understood by analysis of the structural factors that operate to create, influence and limit choices and opportunities, and through the social relations that operate upon and within social structures’.

 In this paper, we respond to this lack of attention to underlying causes by discussing how ‘power’ is articulated by the engagement between international development organisations and youth associations. This focus expands the ground for discussing some of the possibilities and limitations of INGOs’ efforts to strengthen young people’s participation in the societal development of the global south. We follow Allen (2016) in understanding power as a relational issue that identifies the possibility of causing things to occur through action, not through the potential inherent in the control of resources (Allen 2016). A particular focus of this paper is the exploration of power as an element of the possible position in which young people are supposed to act based on their own rights as they simultaneously engage in fulfilling the missions of INGOs and their donors situated elsewhere on the globe.

Empirically, we use a case from Malawi in which an INGO is funding programmes to strengthen youth participation in societal development. We determined that Malawi is a particularly interesting context in which to explore this issue. It is an extremely poor country with a large proportion of young people and is a country in which INGOs are highly visible. Malawi is also a country in which youths have been manipulated by adults for political purposes throughout its modern political history (Chirambo 2004; Chirwa 2001; Eidhammer 2005; Englund 2006; Ihonvbere 1997; Mapanje 2002; Phiri 2000).

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, we aim to develop power as a concept when analysing the interventions that seek to support young people’s participation from a distance. Second, we use this conception of power to develop a deeper understanding of the possibilities and limitations of international development aid in strengthening young people’s participation.

In the next section, we begin this theoretical discussion by addressing the issue of power as a generational and spatial relationality as seen in the relation between international development aid and young people’s participation in the societal development of the global south.

# Understanding articulations of power in youth participation

Throughout history, young people have often been perceived as incapable of participating in societal development on their own, and the research literature has tended to describe young people as ‘citizens of the future’ rather than as actual social actors in their own right, with ‘a legitimate voice and valuable perspective’ here and now (Roche 1996; Marshall 1949; Gifford, Mycock, and Murakami 2014). This rejection of young people as potential actors in the present has often been based on assumptions that they are incapable of rational, ‘adult’ decision-making (Matthews, Limb, and Taylor 1999: Urdal 2006). Participation in associations and civil society organisations therefore becomes a manner of training youth to become a part of society in the future as responsible adults and good citizens (Mills 2013; Pykett, Saward, and Schaefer 2010). Importantly, Nagel and Staeheli (2015) note how young people are seldom engaged in participation if it threatens the existing order (see also Staeheli Atton and Michell 2013). According to Gifford, Mycock, and Murakami (2014), this view of young people has produced significant normative restrictions on the extent to which new generations can remake themselves in opposition to their predecessors; consequently, young people’s autonomy and political agency have been limited.

In child and youth studies, a response to the ignorance and/or rejection of young people’s agency has often been to consider young people a separate category that deserves to be researched on its own (Ansell 2014). As previously suggested, much has been gained by this new focus on youth. Ansell, however, argues that by placing young people in a separate category, we may fail to fully consider that to be ‘young’ is a relational construct in which the opportunity to change society is a product of young people’s positions relative to other groups. Accordingly, research based on children and youths in the global south has been criticised for too little consideration of young people’s relationships with people in other age groups or their embeddedness in wider societal processes (Ansell 2008). Therefore, we suggest that if young people’s transformative power is to be fully appreciated, we must recognise that to be young is a relational construct embedded in power.

In this article, our focus is on two dimensions of the relationality: the relations between generations and spatial relationality. According to Ansell (2014), the focus on youth as a generational relationship allows us to address how power works in terms of reinforcing or shifting patterns of dominance between generations, which she claims is an issue that requires more attention. Similarly, as will be discussed later, generational relationality may also be about enabling young people to act on their own terms. Little of the discussion regarding the politics of participation has, however, emerged with regard to the efforts involving the young as political actors with the potential to change and maintain societies (Hart 2008). In general, according to Ansell, the generational perspectives remain rather focused on individuals and their families although exploring generational power structures that link individuals to their contexts and their peers could have more radical potential (Ansell 2014). To address generational relationality, we therefore argue for the need to draw more attention to how young people’s individual actions are embedded in societal structures. This aspect, we suggest, is particularly relevant in terms of INGOs’ engagement among youths in the global south because these organisations may be perceived as powerful external agents with potential impact on young people’s societal participation in the global south (Hart 2008; Bersaglio, Enns, and Kepe 2015).

The above argument indicates the need for understanding generational relationality through the concept of power when considering INGOs’ attempts to influence young people’s participation in the global south. We thus follow Gallagher (2008), who emphasises that considering power is crucial for understanding children and young people’s participation in societal development (see also Prout and Tisdall 2006). Nevertheless, we believe that power should not be reduced to a lack of resources that are controlled by children and youth. Here, we agree with Gallagher (2008), who criticises a tendency within youth studies in which researchers narrowly theorise power as an asset used for social control and domination.

Obviously, the actors in the global north generally have access to more material and discursive resources than their counterparts in the global south, and adults generally control more resources than young people. Nevertheless, Gallagher (2008) refuses to accept that power may be concentrated in the hands of a particular set of people. He references Foucault (1983) and suggests an examination of power as a mode of action that works upon others’ actions, at the present or in the future. Power is thus not something people have; it is rather about what people do, and power thus becomes desterilised by how it depends on others’ actions. Generational relationality thus becomes an issue of power; the power of adults could therefore be embedded, constrained and enabled in the action of youths, and the present power of youths could be embedded in a potential future. For the case discussed in this paper, this definition implies that power is not only a matter of the ability to control resources but also a question of agency within societal development. To take youths seriously is to perceive them as purposive actors with the power to make a difference and challenge agendas established by adults.

A second aspect of the relational dimension of power, which we argue is particularly relevant to understanding the collaboration between INGOs and local youth organisations in the global south, is how power is articulated at a distance. As Cooke and Kothari (2001) argue, by focusing on the personal and local levels as sites of empowerment and knowledge development, participatory approaches minimise the importance of other places in which power and knowledge are often located, for example, within the ‘expert’ development communities in the global north. In this paper, we address this issue by following Allen (2016), who suggests the need to move beyond simple geometry and address the topological workings of power, that is, how power relations are mediated by events, technologies and practices that enable them to be stretched, folded or twisted to transcend the landscape of a fixed distance. The topological conception of power, we argue, may illuminate the manners in which powerful actors may be present at a distance and thus exercise a type of power that is diffused but effective from a distance.

For this paper, the stretching of power across distance can further be observed in how INGOs that typically have their origins as well as their sources of funding in the global north can be present and conduct their programmes at particular locations in the global south. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that power involves much more than control, and Allen (2016) argues that power is an enabling tool more than an instrument of constraint. Power, he argues, is always exercised with a purpose in mind. He thus emphasises how the ‘power to’ make things happen is distinct from the more familiarly exercised ‘power over’ other people. From this perspective, INGOs’ presence in the global south involves the pursuit of change to improve the situation of youths and their society in the global south, and it may also involve causing people to take action when they otherwise would not. This perspective is as much about power with others as it is about power over others, and it involves how adult-driven international organisations with funding sources in the global north attempt to make things happen among young people in the global south. However, power as a relational concept will always be a matter of counterforces (Allen 2016; Castells 2007). In this case, these counterforces include how youths can seize the opportunities given to them in different ways than intended by both the adults running the INGO and the funders in the global north.

By extending the generational relationality view of young people’s participation and adding the concept of power and how it is articulated at a distance in a topological sense, we seek to contribute to the growing literature on the geography of young people that has recently explored multiple scales of young people’s political agency (e.g., Bartos 2012; Bosco 2010; Hörschelmann and Refaie 2014; Mitchell and Elwood 2012). We thus intend to further develop Hakli and Kallio’s (2016) argument suggesting the need to complement traditional approaches to youth by making sense of political agency by studying the topological relations that influence people’s everyday lives (see also Häkli and Kallio 2014). As Häkli and Kallio argued, we cannot reduce young people’s agency to local practices, simply because a lived life does not entirely concern local practices but also involves relationships that stretch over distances. We argue that INGOs’ presence among youths in the global south should, in addition to a generational approach, be observed from the perspectives of recent advances in relational theory in geography and how spatial relations are being twisted and stretched over distances in a topological sense (Allen 2016).

# Methodological considerations and empirical sources

In the remainder of this paper, we continue the discussion of generational and spatial relationality with reference to an empirical study of Plan International Malawi (hereafter called Plan Malawi) and affiliated youth local associations, conducted by one author during a four-week fieldwork in Malawi in 2013 (Vold 2013). The data comprise interviews, focus group discussions, observations and written sources.

A primary reason for using Plan Malawi, a branch of Plan International, as an empirical case is that Plan, as a large global INGO, emphasises in its strategic goals the strengthening of participation among young people and youth organisations in Malawi (Plan Malawi 2012; Plan International 2013). All of Plan Malawi’s funding is generated by fundraising offices in developed countries and is received through Plan International; however, the vast majority of staff of Plan Malawi are of Malawian origin. Data gathering involved interviews with 11 Plan Malawi staff members, of whom 6 worked in field offices and 5 worked in the national head office.

Data were also gathered from two different types of local youth associations receiving funding from Plan Malawi to implement projects related to youth empowerment. First, five large and well-established youth organisations based in different urban areas were studied. These youth organisations were established and registered in the late 1990s, with the exception of one that was founded in 2006. The primary areas of engagement include advocacy for youths’ rights, training and capacity building among young people, running youth centres, health, and facilitating youths’ public engagement. The staffing level of the organisations varied from 20 employees to 100 employees, and they all had volunteers. All the organisations were funded by a variety of international donors, and Plan International typically contributed only a small portion of the total budget. The one exception was the organisation established in 2006, of which Plan Malawi was the sole funder at the time this fieldwork was conducted. Within each of these youth organisations, at least one person in a leadership position and one person who worked directly on programme implementation were interviewed, and a total of 12 persons from these organisations were interviewed.

Second, empirical data were also collected from three youth networks in rural areas, all of which were supported by Plan Malawi. ‘Networks’ here refers to relatively informal structures involving youths and comprise representatives of locally organised ‘youth clubs’. One network focused particularly on climate change whereas the other two networks focused on many different issues that affect youth, with the overall goal of empowering youths to participate in local governance and decision-making and to enhance their livelihood opportunities. Plan Malawi is actively involved in the youth networks’ activities, and funding is only provided in small amounts for specific activities, not for larger projects. The data from the youth networks were collected during three focus-group discussions with the participants in the networks that lasted from 3-4 hours; a total of 45 members of the youth networks participated. The topics of the discussion were their motivations, achievements and challenges as members of a network and the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ aspects of working with Plan Malawi.

For both purposive and convenience reasons, we considered the associations as youth organisations or networks if they defined themselves as such and involved youth below the age of 25 in their work. Consequently, several organisations in the empirical material defined themselves as ‘youth organisations’ despite staff, volunteers and members being in their late twenties and thirties. However, the exact age of the members of the associations has not been of vital relevance to this research. More important is that ‘youth’ as a social category generally refers to the fluid transition from childhood to adulthood, from dependence to independence.

In terms of ethical considerations, a few points are crucial to note. First, one of the authors was a Plan International Norway employee during the research. This provided the advantage of being an ‘insider’ in terms of access to the youth associations and Plan staff and of obtaining logistical support from Plan Malawi to conduct the fieldwork. This role may, however, have inhibited the participants during the interviews because the researcher could potentially be perceived as representing the funders (and donors) and hence a person who had control over resources provided to the associations. Similarly, the presence of Plan Malawi staff during focus-group discussions, as a child protection requirement and for translation purposes, may also have influenced the discussions. However, the participants appeared to voice criticism quite openly and without fear of sanctions, and the dynamic between Plan Malawi staff and the youth participants yielded worthwhile observations in themselves and became a component of the data collection.

Second, it should also be noted that the participants in this study all had a certain degree of vulnerability because of their financial dependence on the INGO, either for salaries or for various forms of volunteer allowances, a vulnerability that was compounded in a resource-scarce situation with few other opportunities. The young participants were also vulnerable simply because of their age, and a greater level of sensitivity was required to avoid harm caused as a result of being involved in this research. The findings are therefore presented in a manner in which the individual research participants cannot be identified or linked to particular statements or findings. For this reason, the gender and age of the research participants is not provided in this article.

We continue by examining how articulations of power by spatial and generational relationality may be observed in the activities of Plan Malawi and their work with youth associations in Malawi. We begin, however, by briefly addressing the historical context of youth engagement in Malawi.

# A case of international development aid that targets youth in Malawi

Throughout Malawi’s modern history, adults in positions of power have promoted youths’ engagement and participation in societal change; however, as several scholars have noted, these adults have tended to use young people for their own gains and as instruments of surveillance, oppression and violence (Chirambo 2004; Chirwa 2001; Eidhammer 2005; Ihonvbere 1997; Mapanje 2002). Control over youths’ participation has also been widespread in the new era of democracy, with political leaders ‘buying’ youths with money and alcohol in exchange for public support, violent demonstrations, and harassment of opponents (Englund 2006). As claimed by Youniss et al. (2003), the result has been the cultivation of negative images of youths as political actors, which, in turn, has become an important barrier to their political participation because youths have been perceived as unable to participate in societal development in a constructive manner. Can international development aid seeking to enhance youth participation change this situation? We begin this conversation by first discussing Plan’s effort to make a difference for youth in Malawi and continue by examining how the youth responded to Plan’s efforts.

## Making a difference from a distance

In our empirical case, we observed how youth in Malawi today are engaged by adults and organisations working on international development to influence the development of their society. Notably, however, even this situation is a case of adults engaging youth for certain purposes; it involves a type of power that differs from the previous history of youth mobilization. Indeed, our empirical case demonstrates how the partnerships between Plan Malawi and youth associations were focused on promoting youths’ participation based on the youths’ own interests and the notion of young people as active agents in the development of their own lives and society. In addition, the efforts undertaken by Plan Malawi, as illustrated in the quotation below, have had positive effects on the involved youths in terms of youth civil society engagement and enhancing opportunities to improve their living conditions. A member of a youth network explained this issue in the following manner:

[Through engagement with Plan Malawi,] we have managed to negotiate with the chiefs that we should be included in development planning activities. Youths are now participating in decision-making activities in development, such as the Village Development Councils and Area Development Councils.

Nevertheless, despite these good intentions and positive results in terms of contributing to youth participation and empowerment as seen in the excerpt above, we argue that INGOs such as Plan International may also be perceived as exercising subtle forms of control and domination across generations and space. One such form of domination may be observed in the manner in which the INGO influences which issues the youth associations can work on, as exemplified in the following quote by a member of a youth network:

We only receive support from Plan to work in Plan’s areas. Plan should allow its

partners to work independently. We would like to work on many issues – child protection, HIV/AIDS, and youth empowerment (…) but Plan only funds the activities already in their plans.

This concern was raised consistently by both youth organisations and youth networks. Because the INGO determines which issues local youth associations receive funding to address, the INGO is also exercising great influence on the role the youth associations may play within local civil society. This influence may also be observed in the selection of which youth associations to support. Notably, the youth civil society organisations that originated from traditional and religious institutions were not included in Plan Malawi’s partnerships. Further, several research participants expressed concern that there appeared to be a clear bias towards supporting well-established organisations based in urban areas as opposed to organisations based in rural areas. One youth network member expressed the following:

Plan [Malawi] should change its approach to partnerships, not only working with established partners who are far away [in the city]; they should work with the youth organisations that are local [in rural areas].

Banks, Hulme, and Edwards (2015) argue that the aid industry tends to operate with a narrow definition of civil society and fails to recognise organisations other than the organisations that can master the donors’ terminology and working methods. International aid thus leads to the selection of particular types of organisations in civil society that resonate with the international donors’ manner of thinking. The empirical data also demonstrated a clear preference for supporting youth associations able to fulfil ‘donor requirements’, and the larger, urban organisations were perceived to be better able to do so. Notably, Plan Malawi staff also expressed awareness of and a concern for their own power and influence over the youth actors. One Plan Malawi staff member expressed it as such:

It is hard for us to give [youth organisations and networks] money to implement their own plans. Most of the time, it is us giving them the money and asking them to implement the plans we have […]. We have not had the courage to support youth groups directly to see how they will manage. It could lead to problems for us with our donors. It might backfire because the money will not be well managed.

In addition to this emphasis on meeting donor criteria, Plan Malawi staff expressed concerns related to the general lack of flexibility in funding with regard to both geographical areas and thematic focus. As an extension of such concerns, Plan Malawi staff recognised that some of their staff were prone to micro-management to make their partnerships work as intended and ensure that donor requirements were met. This type of control by management was most apparent in rural-based networks in which Plan Malawi was involved in most aspects of their activities. These youth groups had not developed a strong organisational infrastructure, which was necessary to receive greater Plan Malawi funding for self-organised activities. The members of the networks expressed not feeling trusted to implement activities on their own. This was a view also shared by one informant from the organisation, who said that ‘Plan staff want to be our bosses, to be in control’.

This controlling aspect of the partnerships appears to challenge what Banks, Hulme, and Edwards (2015) argue to be NGOs’ primary advantage, namely, their perceived legitimacy that is based on grass-roots linkages and proximity to beneficiaries. This linkage is supposed to render it possible for INGOs to tailor bottom-up programmes that reflect the local context, needs and realities; instead, however, they claim that this possibility is to a large degree lost because they must satisfy donors’ needs. In the case of Plan Malawi, the importance of working with a bottom-up approach was consistently expressed in both documents and interviews. However, this approach was challenged with regard to developing and implementing programmes in practice according to the requirements of donors. It was evident from interviews across various youth associations and Plan staff that the INGOs heavily influenced youth engagement by their selection of partners with whom to cooperate, by determining or influencing the types of issues they would work on, and at times, by managing their operations and activities in a detailed manner. The next question we address is how the youth who were targeted by the Plan Malawi’s efforts responded to this external intervention.

## Young people’s response to involvement from a distance

In the Plan Malawi case, we determined that young people joined the youth associations for many reasons, including a commitment to specific causes, a wish to contribute to their communities, wanting to learn new skills that could enhance their employment opportunities, or simply wanting something to do. Nevertheless, we observed that the youths’ motivation to participate was closely related to economic incentives for participation. This empirical review thus examines the role that these economic incentives play in the articulation of power relations in the youths’ participation in partnerships with Plan Malawi. We first consider how economic incentives may be the expressions of the youths’ exploitation by distant adults, and we then examine how these incentives play a role in how youths manoeuvre international development aid as purposeful agents. We emphasize in the discussion what Lund (2007) described as the fragile borderline between the empowerment and disempowerment of young people in development projects. We begin with an excerpt from an interview with one representative of a youth organisation, who stated the following:

The international NGOs, they are exploitative […]. They identify youth clubs. The clubs do not have negotiating power. The youth clubs are used as mobilisers. International NGOs find them handy. […] [The youths] go voluntarily if they get bottles of Fanta. That is not volunteering. [The INGOs] buy them with bottles of Fanta.

Youths’ lack of economic empowerment thus renders them vulnerable to exploitation by any actors who can provide them with access to resources, which are typically controlled by certain groups of adults. Given the extreme levels of poverty and high levels of unemployment in Malawi (Banik 2010), it is understandable that economic motivations are important reasons for engaging in any activity, including those led by INGOs. Even getting a bottle of soda, some food or a small transport allowance may be perceived as a form of access to resources, with a hope for access to more in the future. Plan Malawi is, in the Malawian context, an organisation with many resources; therefore, this organisation can also influence youths’ engagement and participation in political issues. As was frequently expressed by the informants both from Plan Malawi and the youth associations, youths in Malawi are unlikely to decline any involvement in activities that could provide access to resources, irrespective of whether these activities address the issues that they identify as important.

Most youths were open and direct during the fieldwork about viewing their involvement in the youth clubs and networks as a possible source of livelihood. For example, one member of a youth network explained,

 [I]f we become a proper organisation, we can create our own jobs. [...] We can apply for funding, so we have some money for allowances. It will not be like a formal job, but we can still manage.

This sentiment illustrates how being connected to an organisation or a network cooperating with INGOs with access to aid funds, such as Plan Malawi, became a livelihood option and a manner or attempt to access and generate resources. Participation was used by the youths as a strategy to secure economic income for themselves and their households. The money that was provided for transport and food allowances for meetings, for example, became an important source of income for extremely poor youths. The strategic involvement of the youths was also acknowledged by Plan Malawi staff, as observed in this quote:

If we have some incentives, we give them to the youths. That way they are more likely to participate [...] the time they came here, they got transport allowances, meal allowances [...] For those who are poor, the little they get, they make use of it. They can buy notebooks, or school supplies.

Despite raising questions of legitimacy, such economic motives were not necessarily perceived by Plan Malawi staff as a problem that undermined the partnership between Plan Malawi and the youth organisations. Rather, as seen above, the economic incentives became a means to support youths’ material conditions and thus were also consistent with the overall strategy of empowering youth in Malawi.

Thus, this empirical review emphasises how Plan Malawi as an INGO has the power to influence the role and position of youth within Malawi. Nevertheless, the empirical data also indicate that although funding received from the INGO came with clear conditions and was often tied to specific programmes and projects, this did not place the youths and their associations in a position of being merely passive receivers of aid. Instead, the case study reveals how youth in the global south can operate as clever agents in terms of utilising opportunities available to them to access resources. Nagel and Staeheli (2015) demonstrate how local youth associations that are involved in international development aid can develop their own political programmes that differ from the intentions of INGOs. It is not the development of alternative political strategies at an organisational level that is evident in our empirical data, but rather a type of everyday politics (Kallio and Häkli 2013) using alternative strategies that ensured a livelihood for families, private incomes or career development, and working for the goals established by donors and the INGO.

In the next sections, we continue the discussion by asking how this empirical case highlights the role of generational and special relationality in international development aid that targets youths in the global south.

# Dimensions of generational and spatial relationality in international development aid

Based on the relational approach outlined in the initial conceptual discussion, several dimensions of power and participation have been identified in this paper. First, the previous discussion illustrated how young people’s societal participation may involve fulfilling the purposes of adult actors, whether they are INGOs or the local elite. Youths are then equipped with agency but not as citizens with the opportunity to participate in politics based on their own interests. Rather, they become subject to other people’s objectives, and youth participation becomes an instrument for adults’ interests (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Second, we have demonstrated how youths’ agency in the context of international aid is articulated as individual efforts to satisfy one’s own (and one’s close family’s) needs. In such cases, young people are not engaging and participating in political issues at the societal level, and they do not participate in transformative societal change, which Banks, Hulme, and Edwards (2015) claim should be the goal of INGOs that work in a development context. This type of engagement in international development aid, however, may be perceived as an articulation of a type of everyday politics in which youths as purposeful agents strive to obtain their share of available resources (Kallio and Häkli 2013). Third, we have demonstrated how young people, by their involvement with the INGO, obtained agency and took responsibility for societal development by involvement in village development councils and similar arenas.

These dimensions of participation illustrate how INGOs and their donors can increase their power by being present on the ground in the global south, and they can thus also influence the living conditions of the young people who live there. In the empirical case, we observed how, through Plan Malawi, donors can, in the words of Allen (2016), reach youths in Malawi using a type of subtle and diffuse power that is articulated as a topological force. However, the three dimensions of participation also illustrate how such stretched relations have limitations because young people develop alternative strategies to approach the programmes that are initiated by the INGO by addressing their own needs for livelihood support. All together, these dimensions of youth participation and articulation of agency to make a difference show, as observed in the case from Malawi, how young people are not merely passive objects in the power relations that are created by the intervention of international development aid; rather, youth perform a type of resistance that simultaneously accepts and challenges the intervention from a distance. As seen in the empirical section, young people can use the presence of INGOs in purposeful ways for their own benefit, as in the cases of cash and individual career job opportunities. Their participation may thus be genuine although the youths’ rationale for their participation does not necessarily resonate with the rationale of the INGOs.

Young people’s capacity to participate in society in this manner is not less than adults’ and INGOs’ but is likely different. Young people in the global south, however, may be more vulnerable to external manipulation, although this vulnerability does not necessarily cause them to become passive victims. We argue that young people should be considered purposeful agents with their own rightful goals and projects that may not be consistent with how the INGO and donors see the world. When young people act in manners that are not intended by INGOs, such as participating for cash payments, such actions should not merely be perceived as a failure of the INGOs. Instead, such participation may be the expression of young people’s ability to act beyond the intentions of the INGOs and their donors; thus, they become active in international issues as well as actors at the local level where they live. This may be conceptualised as a type of counterpower articulated as a response to attempts at control from a distance and by adults.

On a more concrete level, our study suggests that INGOs that work in the field of youth societal participation in the global south should be aware of the diffuse and subtle form of power that is inherent in the formation of partnerships and in the collaboration between distant adults and youths on the ground in the global south. As seen in this empirical case, international aid may be considered an articulation of adults who attempt to affect youths and their living conditions from a distance; regardless of the intention from the point of view of the INGOs, the issue is one of possible domination. This dilemma is not easily resolved in development projects because it is inherent in the aid structure (Edwards and Hulme 1996). We suggest that if youths are to be taken seriously as actors within an agency and to have the capability to participate in their own society in purposeful ways, INGOs must recognise and accept that youths approach development projects with intentions and goals other than the intentions and goals suggested by international aid actors.

# Concluding remarks

The goal of this paper was to address and conceptualise some of the underlying causes that may enable and/or limit INGOs’ efforts to support youth participation in the global south. A primary argument has been that notions of generational relationality, as seen in the case of international development aid targeting youth, must include conceptions of power as a topological relation across space. Form this point of departure and with support from our empirical case from Malawi, we discussed how INGO involvement in youths’ societal participation in the global south can be viewed as a relational matter in which adults in the global north seek the power to affect youths and their participation from a distance.

First, we argue that the effect INGOs have on collaborating youth in the south may be viewed as a possible act of domination and control regardless of the noble intentions of development actors. INGOs have, as we have demonstrated, the ability to influence youth from a distance and make them act in accordance with the INGOs’ goals and in manners that first and foremost fulfil donor requirements. Thus, domination and manipulation of youth may occur when there is no direct relation and without adults and young people being present in the same place. Further, we suggest that the power relations inherent in international development aid must be understood as being about much more than control, manipulation and domination from a distance. The manner in which young people in the global south engage with INGOs may also enable youth to become active participants in both developing their own society and enhancing the outcomes of international development aid. The manner in which young people in the global south engage with INGOs may also enable the youth to act as active participants in an agency that renders them able to participate in not only developing their own society but also enhancing the outcomes of international development aid. The power exercised by the INGO is then not simply a question of ‘power over’ youth but also a question of ‘power with’ youth to enable their agency. Finally, our discussion suggests that youth, despite lacking resources, are active agents exercising a type of counterpower that is determining the outcomes of the INGOs present in the global south.

This multidimensional aspect of power, as outlined above, illustrates and highlights the possibilities and limitations of INGOs’ efforts to strengthen youth participation in the global south. The lines between empowerment and control appear to be thin and blurred and do not mutually exclude one another. Subtle forms of domination by distant adults may be a novel form of empowerment of youths as long as such domination does not appear in the

form of exploitation. This thin line between empowerment and domination is obviously not something exclusively relevant to youths in the global south who are engaged in international development aid. Similar relations may be observed in most international aid organisations but also in adult-youth relations outside aid structures. Nevertheless, for youth living in one of world’s poorest countries, with a colonial past and a history of youth exploitation, the possibilities and limitations of being attached to international aid are particularly relevant.

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