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The Art of Reception: Field Visits as Microcosms for Development Interventions of Non-Governmental Organisations in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Field visits are common phenomena with non-governmental organisations in Uganda. During these visits, Ugandan national staff guide visitors on series of meetings and interactions in the field. Following an actor-oriented approach and drawing on ethnographic data on 14 field visits, this paper understands the field visit as a microcosm for the development industry. The space is manufactured and mediated through what is coined here the art of reception, which is a combination of presenting and curating the field—fieldmaking—and co-constructing the roles of visitors—visitormaking. These dynamics prioritise internal safety and continuity of the visit, and follow interests and power asymmetries that exist in the aid chain, such as asymmetries in mobility, knowledge and credibility. Understanding how these microcosms work contributes to an understanding of NGO development as a whole, and the ways in which development is manifested in encounters, as well as how encounters shape development processes.

1 | Introduction

'My wife asked me if I am becoming a tour guide,' John laughed as he said this over lunch in Kampala, Uganda. John was joking, but as in many jokes there was a core of truth. He alluded to the relation between Ugandan staff and international visitors during field visits, which are common occurrence in the international development sector. He is a Ugandan national, an experienced agriculturalist, development worker, and country representative of an International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) that runs several projects in Uganda with various local partner organisations. He had told me about a youth trip he hosted a few weeks before, and a field visit to the north

of Uganda of a crew from the European headquarters we had just finished. He was in Kampala only for a short time, and already preparing for the next field visit of headquarter colleagues to the southwest of the country.

Typically working with multiple partnerships at a time, development organisations in Uganda may facilitate several field visits per year, sometimes even per month. Moreover, some of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) initiatives in Uganda and in other countries, are direct results of field visits of individuals or groups to projects, areas, villages or other places (Appe and Oreg 2020). Among other actors, NGOs have come to play a central role in the international development sphere, where they shape development theory, policy and practice (Lewis and Kanji 2009). The international development

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industry, or aid chain (Bornstein 2003), includes funders and donors, governmental departments and ministries, (I)NGOs, local implementing partners, subcontractors, workers and local stakeholders.

Uganda, like many African countries, has seen a booming growth of NGOs in numbers and importance in service provision and development over the past decades, from 120 registered foreign NGOs in early 1990s (Dicklitch 1998) to around 14000 registered NGOs in 2024 (International Center for Non-Profit Law 2024). They are a significant part of civil society in Uganda (De Coninck and Larok 2021; Isgren 2018), rooted in policy and governance, as much of the country's government's development plans and policies are complemented by (international) NGOs (Barr et al. 2005; Dicklitch 1998). Among other domains, NGOs play pivotal, if sometimes controversial, roles in the post-war reconstruction in the north, the large number refugee settlements in the north and west, as well as in disease and epidemic responses.

The NGO community in Uganda has periodically received backlash over white saviourism and ego-politics (Kimeu 2022), corruption and lack of effectiveness (Anonymous 2022). In 2023, Ugandan (I)NGOs were briefly but hotly under fire when the online activism of #UgandaNGOExhibition exposed cases of sexual oppression, nepotism, corruption and other misconduct. The amount of high-profile coverage of these cases shows how important NGOs are for employment, development and politics in Uganda. Nonetheless, they remain an important vehicle for development around Uganda—reaching communities in the most remote places.

Rather than taking a normative or instrumental valuation of NGOs, or how receiving aid may change local politics and intra-village relationships (McNamara 2022), this paper zooms in on the situated practice of visiting the field, which allows actors from divergent plumage to meet and interact. These convergences happen in or near project locations, in microcosms of development intervention that show patterns and dynamics in the development industry writ large. Understanding how these microcosms work contributes to an understanding of NGO development as a whole, and the ways in which development is manifested in encounters, as well as how encounters shape development processes. These encounters are where power relations and inequalities inherent to world development systems are played out (Escobar 1991; Simpson 2004).

2 | Theoretical Approach

Scholarship on anthropology of development (Escobar 1991) focuses on power dynamics in development encounters (De Herdt and Bastiaensen 2004; Long 1989). Within this field, this paper offers a contribution on transnational development NGOs, only one of the tracts in which development materialises, alongside Official Development Assistance, bilateral development cooperation, private sector investments, Corporate Social Responsibility, (local) government and Civil Society. Following an actor-oriented approach to development sociology, it focuses on the experiences, motivations, and actions of

individuals and groups, without necessarily invoking instrumental questions (Long 2001). It questions not whether, but how development works and change is produced (Mosse 2004), and how different actors make up and live in the particular spaces of field visits.

Many scholars have focused on highly mobile and professionalised classes of expat workers (Fechter and Hindman 2011; Harrison 2013) in favour of national development workers (Kamruzzaman 2017; Kumi and Kamruzzaman 2021). In addition, 'local staff' are often understood in relation to their instrumentality in implementation and impact, as gatekeepers to worlds of the other (Sundberg 2019), or their perceived capacity to adhere to project specifications (Foley 2008).

Situating different social groups within the spaces of field visits adds heterogeneity to the 'looking glass worlds' (Apthorpe 2011; Venugopal 2018), captured in notions of aid chain (Bornstein 2003), aid industry (de Haan 2009) and Aidland (Apthorpe 2011; Mosse 2011). Field workers cannot simply be neutral but occupy vital crossroads positions (De Jong 2023), while facing potential exploitation and ethical quandaries (Molyneux et al. 2013). Anthropology of field research similarly points to uneven distributions of power during fieldwork between researchers, assistants or associates, and their subjects of study (Kamuya et al. 2013).

Actors shape and make sense of a world, as well as its inhabitants through interactions (Berger and Luckmann 1971). In turn, interactions have to be understood as embedded in political, organisational, managerialist and technological context (Long 2001). The ways interactions can go wrong (Goffman 1967) pose risks and opportunities to individuals and groups involved. Risks are both imagined and real—being rooted in inequality and threat of (material, symbolic or actual) violence (Graeber 2012). This speaks to work on colonial and post-colonial interactions in asymmetric power relations and the study of the subaltern in human interactions (Fanon 1963; Mamdani 2012).

Literature on the roles of development brokers (Bierschenk et al. 2002) focuses on the intermediaries that connect funds to activities and groups. This was expanded by looking at what brokers do on various levels, in encounters at interfaces (De Jong et al. 2023; Lewis and Mosse 2006), showing the importance of mediation and translation (Marabello 2023), and re-assembling practices on the ground (Koster and van Leynseele 2018; Watkins and Swidler 2013). This paper connects this to literature on everyday resistance in unequal power relations that shows how resistance and (covert) collaboration shape shared political spaces (Scott 1985). It makes this connection by focusing on interactions in the temporary and politically laden space of a field visit.

A particular notion of spatial or organisational locality, *the field* is the place that is both geographically and conceptually seen as a locus of action (Stellmach 2022). From a distance, it is an almost mythical destination where ideas, procedures and other organisational and ideational concepts are turned into impact or failure (Autesserre 2014; Mosse 2015). Mythical beings reside there, such as field staff and beneficiaries, or implementers

and communities. For professionals, it is a place to go to and return from, carrying stories, marks and sometimes scars (Sarma et al. 2022). Up close, it is “a clearing whose deceptive transparency obscures the complex processes that go into constructing it.” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 5).

The mobile and temporary nature of development encounters in field visits is also found in work on *voluntourism* (Brown 2005)—organised leisure—and voluntary work trips or gap years of western middle-class youth to development and aid projects in the Global South. This industry is seen to pervade asymmetries and dynamics of othering, benefiting identity work of tourists, rather than communities where they are (Banki and Schonell 2018; Hasanova 2017).

The data for this paper gives us two main categories of field visits. A field visit that aims to accomplish project objectives I call a *mission*. These field visits may include activities like *Monitoring & Evaluation*, to gauge progress and adherence to the processes and protocols, *coordination* and *implementation* of actual project activities, or *diplomatic* activities to explore, establish or maintain relations with organisations, either on behalf of an overarching organisation, or of a local one. The second category is the *guided tour*, which features inspection, observation and exploration activities. In many instances, though, different purposes feature in a single field visit, which may cover all of the above activities.

3 | Methodology

This study took an organisational ethnography design. In contrast to more traditional ethnography, it is multi-sited and fluctuating, which necessitates a variety of data sources, apart from face-to-face engagements in participant observation, such as documents study, phone calls and texts (Yanow 2009). Shadowing techniques (Czarniawska 2007) were employed with workers and work, which involves following research participants over a prolonged period of time, as they are doing their work, yielding a “detailed, first-hand and multidimensional picture of the role, approach, philosophy and tasks of the person being studied” (McDonald 2005, 457). In addition, narrative diaries and correspondence were used to record workers’ daily experiences (Monrouxe 2009), and (mostly informal) interviews were employed. An ethnographic understanding of the field visit as a development encounter offers insight into how development is configured through situated practices (Gold 1997; Li 2007).

The distance between visitors and (actors in) the field described in this paper pervades in this ethnographic method, the researcher being a male *muzungu*, and thus a perpetual visitor and an interloper (Anteby 2024). Building rapport over time with the interlocutors was essential to produce this paper’s analytical insights into how the field and the visit are made, as it allowed the researcher to enter into trusting relationships. In most cases, the researcher occupied an in-between position between international visitors and local facilitators, or that of a harmless guest attaché to the field visit. Dynamics of distance and the art of reception applied, especially in interactions with local hosts, with whom less rapport could be established. To adequately represent

and analyse local hosts’ perceptions on their own participation in field visits, a field visit is, as argued in this paper, a flawed tool.

3.1 | Empirical Materials

Fourteen field visits, ranging from 2 days to 1 week in duration, form the ethnographic data for this paper, comprising a total of 55 days between 2020 and 2023; in addition, another 12 field visits were experienced from afar through stories and reflections shared with the researcher (Appendix 1). A distinction in ethnographic data is made between four field visits with international visitors and 10 with exclusively Ugandan nationals.

In total, 13 organisations have been included in the empirical materials for this paper—eight INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organisations), one Ugandan MBO (Member-Based Organisation) and four Ugandan NGOs. Permissions and negotiations for access on these visits were based on a rolling approval, from the involved workers and their inline superiors, under a general approval of the various organisations’ leadership of the study. Up until publishing, this approval has been continually solicited and confirmed.

The insights offered in this paper are collated by extensively comparing various field visits, ranging from scoping studies to endline data enumeration, extracting patterns that are supported by the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and related to literature. These patterns are represented by curating the vignettes and other data in this paper, so as to best underpin the analysis. Events and activities in these vignettes are therefore not unique, but they stand for more broadly observed and experienced patterns of action and interaction in the data. Throughout this paper, anonymisation of individuals, groups, organisations and locations ensures that individuals and organisations will not face normative judgement.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, the paper zooms in on how actors negotiate the field visit in interactions, using the art of reception. Subsequently it shows how these interactions, as well as the inherent structural characteristics of the field visit constitute a political space that poses risks, opportunities and limits. The paper continues with a reflection on the (absence of) international visitors (in Luganda: Muzungus), before reflecting on life after the field visit and its role in international development organisations.

4 | Artfully Receiving Field Visitors

It was a hot afternoon in a small hamlet in the northeast of Uganda. Thankfully, we were sitting in the shade of a canopy of low trees near a farm, on low wooden stools and benches. I was in a Resilience workshop with two local agronomist extension workers Elaine and Tom, a European project expert Matthew, a local support staff Benard, and a group of members of a farmers’ association who received us at their chairman’s farm. They were part of a project that was underway, following a method that

emphasised self-reliance and self-help capacity of the group. During the first part of the meeting, some drawings and tables were presented on flipcharts, showing how the group had progressed through the timeline. The farmers had been enrolled in the project for some time now. Being an integral part of the participatory method, the flipcharts were presented as important outcomes of the project. The drawings included sanitary facilities in the farm compound, as well as crops and livestock. After the chairman closed the meeting, we had a short tour of his farming compound, where he showed his improved sanitation facilities which were part of the project's COVID-19 focus.

Elaine and Tom were both working for Matthew's partner organisation in Northern Uganda as agronomists and field workers on various projects, ranging from promoting crops to training and tailored advice. Matthew normally worked in the European headquarters of the INGO and was visiting Uganda for the first time in 2023—mostly to inspect and advise with the local partners on the ongoing project. He had also been filming snippets to use for funding and communication purposes and talking with farmers about agroforestry. The farmers in the farmers' association had been grouped up in the context of the Resilience project, and existed of farmers around the area. Tom was the one who usually did their workshops, trainings, and advice, sometimes accompanied by Elaine.

Throughout 2020 to 2023, I have been participant in a baker's dozen field trips. During these visits, a lot was done to present the field in a curated way. Preparing and representing the field for consumption or representation is captured in the concept of fieldmaking. In similar vein, actors within the field visits engage in visitormaking to ensure that the visitors are able to project their own roles and images, either according to their own fancy, or in the image of what appears to be a formal position. The combination of the two is what is called here *the art of reception*.

4.1 | Fieldmaking Produces Curated Field Visit Experiences

In the above vignette, the flipcharts and the corresponding sanitary facilities on the compound reflect choices that were made about what is visible and what is not. In other words, the field, as a representation, is made. A term first coined by Goodman (1978), *worldmaking* describes the performative and imaginative ways in which artists and musicians build a world around them to embody a role. This concept is used in tourism studies to point to the imaginative processes and projective promotional activities employed by mediating bodies to give off a particular representation of a space (Hollinshead 2016; Hollinshead et al. 2009).

Whereas tourists set out to visit or consume the world, field visits are aimed at visiting a specific field (of action, intervention, research), marrying an exotic reality with some imaginary of development in action. Within the field visit, it is possible to decide

that one subject or object is part of the field (due to association or inclusion in a project) and others are not (due to the limited scope of a project). The sanitation facilities were part of the field, but the kitchen and living quarters were not. The farmers were part of the field, but their neighbours were not.

Field visitors are made to understand the world around them in terms of the project they are visiting at that time. Matthew was there to inspect the way farmers worked with the *Resilience* method, with at its core self-sufficiency and which happened to include sanitation facilities. In other visits with other projects and organisations, savings boxes were shown, or fields of beautifully growing cassava plants, or a recently built hen house. It depended on the nature of the project, and the purpose of the visit.

Fieldmaking is part of the concerted efforts to make the visit into some kind of success for parties involved. The definition of success, however, may not be shared among all actors, and may be unclear. For facilitating staff, positive assessment of their projects and their own hosting are essential, this allows the relationship with superiors or donors to continue. The hosts, in many cases project participants, have other interests which do surface occasionally, even as they keep to the imperative of fieldmaking.

During the workshop, one of the farmers stood up and humbly requested for the project to be extended and expanded, before mentioning that the farmers' association could use a tractor so that they could complete preparing the land to sow before the rains set in, which was impossible using their hand hoes. Matthew seemed visibly taken aback by this last request, which did not fit the self-sufficiency aspect of the project. Elaine was quick to intervene and explained to the group how they could start saving for a tractor by collecting 10000 shillings each per month. Walking back to the car, Matthew lamented to Elaine that they still wanted a tractor from outside, despite the ongoing Resilience program. She replied this was a mentality issue, that should change with time. On this note, we entered the vehicle and set off to the next meeting.

There is an imperative to keep presenting a version of the field that is safe for all interests involved in the field visits. As the tractor example illustrates, the primary concern is for the field visit to continue—being the activities and interactions that serve the goal of the visit—rather than to allow for deviations or distractions. For facilitators and intermediaries, interpretive labour (Graeber 2012) is essential to flatten out emerging wrinkles and misunderstandings. Elaine was well-versed in this. Unfortunately for the farmer making the request, this meant the dismissal of the idea of a tractor.

Several of the farmers that had hosted Matthew during his extended field visit in north Uganda were familiar to me; some of them I had visited before, on previous field visits in 2021 and 2022. One of them, a charismatic farmer Fred, I had seen twice before. He owned an impressive farm with several types of

orchards and crops growing in a rotational scheme. Given the imperative to make the field fit the visit, it makes sense to return to farmers who are well versed in receiving visitors, and providing for safety in their interactions. For Fred, it seemed that the exposure he gained from the visits presented him with opportunities. He told me that he had been selected multiple times by the government and other organisations to facilitate tours, give trainings and host visits on his farms.

Fieldmaking starts with preparation and selection of activities, sites to see, places to stay, what to eat and who to meet. It is a collective endeavour to ensure a safe and unchallenging presentation of the field and its inhabitants for the benefit of a visitor. This is how the world of the field visit is made through the intervention of field staff and local stakeholders, who subsequently help visitors understand it (Mwambari 2019). In arranging and representing the field, fieldmaking helps the visitor understand and accept what they experience.

4.2 | Visitormaking Produces Safe Visitors

The political nature of interactions during field visits ensures that visitors are allowed and encouraged to live up to a self-image that fits their role, as well as their personal view of their job in the field visit. Matthew, in the workshop, fulfilled his roles of workshop facilitator and project inspector, his job of project expert and his position of headquarters staff. The visitor-image was accentuated by his position within the organisation and by expectations of this role within the field visit itself—facilitator, expert, advisor. This relates to what Bourdieu calls *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977), internalised underlying societal norms and ideals.

A public self-image is produced and confirmed through a specific strain of face-work (Goffman 1967), which is called here visitormaking. It refers to the social and collective construction (Berger and Luckmann 1971) of a preferred and performed identity (Pike and Beames 2007), through efforts made by intermediaries and hosts. Similar to fieldmaking, facilitating staff produced a visitor-image throughout their preparation and facilitation, and farmers confirmed this role through their participation and silence (if not their full attention). Visitors are made through interpretation of their roles, purposes and personalities, as well as through cues taken from their conduct that might indicate preferences.

Matthew had official tasks, including inspection, but he was also an expert on the method which led him to explain and lead the workshop. Rather than provoking Matthew to gain alternative and new insights, or challenge the validity of aspects of the project, pre-existing worldviews and the proscribed project reality were prioritised. It is hard to imagine a farmer without tractor elsewhere; still, the request for heavy equipment was explained as a mentality issue rather than something for the project expert to take seriously. Dependency mentality—the bane of contemporary NGO programmes—was invoked, instead of taking seriously the fact that the farmers' association might actually need agricultural equipment. The visitor is encouraged to find a specific representation of the field, as well as of themselves within the field.

4.3 | The Art of Reception Combines Fieldmaking and Visitormaking

Fieldmaking and visitormaking combined is what is called here the art of reception. In the field visits in this paper, visitors have invariably had powerful positions, due to hierarchies, or their embodiment of donor organisations or headquarters—sometimes projected onto them rather than formal. At the same time, however, visitors were largely dependent on intermediary staff and local hosts, from lodging to victuals, from navigation to introduction. Producing a safe field for the visitors to interact with, and a safe representation of the visitor themselves within this field, are ways in which to render the field visit safer. This can be understood as part of a *public transcript*—an official reading of the situation and its power relations, largely for the benefit of not upsetting an asymmetric power status quo (Scott 1990).

In some of the field visits constituting this paper, visitors were produced as inspectors, prospective investors or donors, researchers, consultants, experts and in some cases *fêted* emissaries. The fields they met were organised as workshops, stakeholder meetings, presentations, inspection tours, focus groups, among others. The function of the public transcript, however, is to obscure aspects of the power relations that are subversive, or as Scott calls them, the hidden transcript and *infrapolitics* of the powerless (Scott 1990, p. xiii). It is not as much misrepresentation, or “pulling the wool over the strangers' eyes” (Kibreab 2004), as it is a safe representation, to allow for safe interactions. In many of the abovementioned field visits, requests were made like the tractor request that Matthew experienced, which were rendered safe in similar fashions. Interpretive labour informs the art of reception, to allow visitors to ‘unquestion’ a situation (Graeber 2012). The art of reception, then, is not the only dynamic of interaction at play during the field visit—it is rather a way of masking other dynamics, including those of local politics.

The art of reception produces a reality according to the logics of the project—it sets individuals and groups in their relation to the project (participants/beneficiaries, project staff, headquarter staff, etc.), and links them to its themes (NGO dependency, sanitation and resilience). This fits pre-conceived ideas about identified deficiencies, which tempts visitors to represent in themselves the ideal world that is imagined as a future for the persons they are interacting with—those that are targeted for development (Ake 2003, 128). The resultant condescension, that was described as *leaning over* by Fanon et al. (2008), may not be intentional, but it is characteristic of the structural incline that favours a top-down direction of knowledge from expert to project participants. It is met with silences and *actes de presence* instead of challenging and motivated interactions. This may give off an impression of acquiescence, but it is ultimately uninterpretable, masking hidden transcripts of the field visit (Scott 1985, 1990). The produced field meets the produced visitor, and the visitor meets themselves in the field.

This calls for a consideration as to how ‘local’ field visits really can be. It also poses questions as to the aspirations and expectations of local hosts regarding these field visits, and to what extent there is real engagement with those aspirations and expectations. The art of reception limited possibilities of equal exchanges of information between hosts and visitors—like the

farmers and Matthew. This pattern is embedded in the development sector (McNamara 2022; Woensdregt and Nencel 2023) and exacerbates the divides between social groups. The field visit is made safe through the art of reception, but at the cost of being able to learn with and from each other.

5 | A Microcosm on the Move

After an early morning start to unsuccessfully beat Kampala traffic, I accompanied a team of Women Saving Women—expat¹ Country Director Claire, Ugandan program coordinator Theresa, and expat consultant Paul. We crossed the Nile at Karuma to enter northern Uganda and meet a prospective local partner. The SUV came to a stop at the cross-roads town of Kamdini to meet another crew and their grey pickup truck on the roadside. After navigating murrum² roads for slightly over an hour, we reached our first destination: a primary school in a small hamlet surrounded by cotton fields.

The school building was one large classroom and a headmaster's office, with freshly painted walls and practically unused school furniture. Inside, we greeted a number of men and women, as we found seats; Claire and Theresa in front of the class with the hosting country director Mary, her programme coordinator Rebecca, and field officer Sarafina. After proper introductions of all present, Claire, Theresa and Paul asked questions. In the answers from the group, we learned that they were a savings group, which was also in charge of a sponsored drinking water borehole. As the meeting progressed, several women entered the school and sat down in the back of the classroom, while some children were peering inside through the windows.

An elderly man stood up and introduced himself again as the chair of the savings group and headmaster of the school. They needed books, he said, they needed support for uniforms and other necessities for the children and supplies to keep the school running. One by one, several of the other members voiced similar requests to the visitors, before Mary intervened and suggested they should have asked her as the local representative. 'Any other questions?' Mary asked the group. The ensuing silence was interrupted when one of the women stood up and asked where the visitors were from. The meeting was concluded with a short tour followed of the headmaster's, the newly built and sponsored latrines, and the borehole. Then the savings group joined the children in the school courtyard to watch how we filed into the vehicles and followed the grey pickup to the next destination.

This vignette, of a field visit in 2021, shows the itinerant movement of field visits, allowing for interactions between actors otherwise unlikely to meet and build relationships. It also shows how these interactions are limited by time, and by mediation. During the visits to several savings groups that day, Mary's crew guided and introduced their guests, and Theresa introduced Women Saving Women on behalf of her country director, who expected her to say the right things. This layered space reflects hierarchical inequalities between development workers of different stations (Peters 2020), with facilitating staff shifting between visiting and hosting roles.

The space of the field visit is a "socially negotiated arena" (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010, 1136), where actors bring their personal and non-personal or official interests to the field. It is a microcosm of the interventions of development NGOs, in which rules, customs, symbols and sanctions are generated internally, while being permeable to outside forces (Moore 1973, 721). Asymmetries inherent to this microcosm shape dynamics of inclusion, opportunities, and risks that reflect a globalised political arena of transnational NGO development.

5.1 | Inclusion and Mobility

As alluded to in the previous section, inclusion in field visits is informed by the imperative to make the field visit successful. The Women Saving Women crew had aimed to explore the partnership and learn about savings groups, and Mary's crew facilitated this. Several different types and sizes of savings groups were gathered to interact with them that day, reflecting the scope of activities and projects. From the visitors' angle, a single space on the move is received by a series of hosts in different places, as most of the field visits are series of meetings on different locations. The intermezzos in the SUVs were used by the Women Saving Women crew to reflect on experiences or discuss aspects of the field. Sometimes, respites at the hotels, or guest-houses, restaurants on the road and other places where only the travelling crews were present, were used to reflect, deliberate and plan ahead, or change plans.

From the hosting communities' perspectives, a field visit can only mean something else entirely, reflecting a pattern of those who travel easily and those who do not (Redfield 2012). It is one encounter in a series of similar encounters that are sometimes remembered or referred to during the visit. Delays are almost inevitable. On other field visits, it occasionally happened that people had been waiting for the visitors to arrive; sometimes for a few hours, and sometimes until the message reached them that they would come the next day, or that they would have to cancel altogether. Within the space of the field visit, however, it is difficult to glean their diverse expectations, fears or hopes. Only sporadically, these surfaced during the limited time allotted for questions from the savings groups, which invariably included a request to the visitors to extend, expand, or support in other areas. Requests for general and specific support were a common theme during most field visits, as well as the responses and parries from facilitating staff.

In development projects in general, processes of selection are opaque and political (Schüring and Gassmann 2016) and tend

to reflect a need to maintain a social order (Dekker 2017). Similarly, field visits are designed and organised in this way. Like Matthew who visited selected farmers, the Women Saving Women crew visited specific savings groups—field visits are invariably targeted. Inclusion and exclusion are part of the negotiated space, and reflect professional and personal interests (Appel and Oreg 2020; Briggs 2021), practical and pragmatic factors (Flink et al. 2016) and project eligibility and modes of selection (Ellis 2012). There are limits, however, to this premeditated targeting in field visits. On several occasions, local notables such as priests or politicians have joined meetings and seized the moment to give speeches to constituents, or business people took advantage of the experts who were present to seize upon them to visit their farms.

5.2 | Negotiating Opportunities and Risks

Interfaces between social worlds (Long 1989) represented in the actors in the field visit provide opportunities to gain new ways of access or support. For staff, there are opportunities to profile themselves and represent their work in a certain light. In their workshop, Elaine and her crew could showcase their proficiency in the Resilience method, and their progress in terms of the project, and for Mary and Claire at the savings group meeting, there was a potential partnership. The farmers, as well as the savings groups, could interact and learn from the interactions with project staff and their visitors.

It was also shown above that seeking opportunities may go against the purpose of the field visit. These instances pose risks when someone is going off-script, or when something is presented that does not fit the purpose and expectation of the field visit, or of its participants:

On the morning after a visiting European project lead had left, Elaine addressed the remaining staff in a meeting, stating that if the project lead had come into the field with them that day, he would have been surprised by all the farmers who had a problem with the project. “They would have complained too much, they might even have chased him, and he would have been shocked. You know how these farmers are when they do not get what they were promised.” These comments were directed to John, who had received and guided the visiting project lead. It was a warning that a visit poses risks of negative exposure, with an undertone of violence. Throughout that week, she had given us stories of field workers being chased out of villages when they would not deliver on promises.

Mostly, it is uncertain what would happen if a field visit should go wrong—whether something bad may happen directly to those involved, or down the line. The uncertainty and risks of failure seem to function as social facts that inform and constrain behaviour regardless of their being imagined or real (Durkheim et al. 1938). In this case, the risks were clearly pronounced by Elaine, if the project lead had found out about certain things,

it would have meant trouble. She emphasised this to John, lest next visitors may go into the field and find out. In fact, she points out what happens if the art of reception is not successful, and the hidden transcript becomes public. Similarly, Claire and Theresa decided not to give too much information in her introductions after the request from the savings group, so as to not raise expectations. In like fashion, a lot of the efforts during field visits described in this paper seem to be empowering development interventions rather than the societies they are aimed to empower (Chandler 2022), following a rationality of governance above self-determination (Li 2007).

5.3 | Development Is Localised

Being only a fraction of the geospatial spaces in which development is manufactured, the field visits do show that development is always a localised affair, be it in workshops, fact finding missions, scoping studies, Ministry Departments, consultancy offices or farm plots. Field visits show how the aid chain is made up of these localised geopolitical spaces in which rules, norms and objectives are shaped internally. Field visits, in particular, are geared towards safety in favour of exchange, and pose opportunities for local populations to engage that are often treated as risks to be parked or parried. Whereas they seem to raise expectations and provide opportunities, effort is made to localise and defuse those expectations and opportunities through the art of reception—as is shown by the skilful interventions of Mary and other facilitators and representatives in this paper.

In obscuring unwanted parts of local reality, the art of reception allows for the political space to exist and to ‘run smoothly’ (Graeber 2012, 121). This facet of representation during field visits may bring nuance to literature on everyday resistance or trickery by project beneficiaries, staff and partners (Kibreab 2004; Scott 1985, 1990), and show how representations actually contribute to continuity (Tsing 2011). It also shows the mutual dependency of actors in the aid chain and the negotiated nature (Swedlund 2017) and trust issues of their relationships (Pomerantz 2004). Rather than fully engaging with the local, field visits superimpose a space, which lingers for a moment and leaves traces when it is gone. This microcosm shows how local interests and perceptions interface (Long 1989) with a globalised setting (Tsing 2011) of transnational NGOs.

6 | The Muzungu Effect

I entered the hotel courtyard in the morning, after a cold bucket shower. It was half-dawn and veiled in morning mist. We could not see past the gates, behind which the eastern Ugandan city of Mbale was rumoured to exist—we had arrived in darkness. 7AM and Pamela, Monitoring and Evaluation officer, was already working on her laptop—despite the late arrival yesterday. She wore a heavy sweater against the morning chill and told me she wanted to work some before the program started. Two hours later, Program coordinator Sarah, Pamela, Henry the

driver, myself, and a team of cheerful enumerators, flocked out of the van we called Namukadde or old woman. The small hamlet on a hillside was the stage for the day's work.

Sarah and Pamela stayed back at the house where the celebration would be, and the data enumerators each went their own way, finding project participants and taking questionnaires with them. We would see them when the festivities would start. One of the participants took us to show his goats, his coffee plants, and the plans for a shed and a piggery. He told us about his future plans after the project's end, as well as his gratefulness of the project—pointing to a graduation gown his son had gifted him before he led us back to the tent. Without the support, his son would not have graduated, he pointed out.

Back at the tent, there was no long wait before a group of men and women, dressed in the dark green polo of the project, approached the tent, and the ceremony began as the chairperson started a prayer and speech over the crackling PA system. After the ceremony, we began the long road back to the city, where we would eat at a roadside restaurant after dusk, before the team would occupy the hotel courtyard again, or put tables together in one of the hotel rooms 'to work on some backlog', 'to finish this thing for the office.' The next morning, this pattern repeated itself, interspersed with negotiations with the hotel proprietor about dysfunctional plumbing, lack of water pressure, or lack of buckets.

As per the categorisation at the beginning of this paper, field visits organised by and for Ugandan nationals were more alike missions, while international visits looked more like guided tours—however unlesurely and demanding they were. The field visit in the anecdote featured long days, long drives in crammed vehicles, cheaper accommodations, and breakfast (often skipping lunch) and dinner in local food dives, rather than in hotels. There was invariably driving at night, and at times we would show up at accommodations without prior reservations. The fact that the field visit was not organised for international visitors—Muzungu—made it a slightly different experience from those that were. That is, with some important similarities. Arguably grittier in nature, field visits by and for Ugandan nationals still observed dynamics of the field visit microcosm, as well as the art of reception.

The mobilisation of project participants mostly fell on project workers connected to the local partner organisation that had been recruited from the hamlets and villages in eastern Uganda. Likewise, in other field visits, locally stationed colleagues, extension workers, local contacts or partner organisations prepared itineraries and mobilised the local groups and individuals that would be visited in advance. The facilitating efforts of these locally placed workers were then directed at their colleagues

from the city. In some cases, the visiting crew would decide how much would be possible given time availability—or delays.

During plenary events and meetings—such as inception meetings, celebrations, stakeholder meetings, and other information sessions—local actors such as district officers, local politicians or otherwise interested individuals and groups were often able to pose requests or present their viewpoints. This time, art of reception is directed to Sarah and her crew, who have objectives related to the project, as well as related to themselves:

The chair introduced us and the gathered group of women applauded Sarah's name. She was placed on the nicest sofa, with Pamela and some of the enumerators. He thanked the Local Council 3 Chairman, and the chancellor of the subcounty committee for being here, before the speeches began. The Local Council Chairman first commented on the growth of farmers, and the beautiful crops in the hamlet. Then, he argued for investing in value addition in the subcounty—machines for the manufacturing and processing of their raw agricultural goods would bring more employment and economic growth.

A field is presented that is receptive to intervention, as well as wanting for more. The project is both successful and incomplete. The similarity of the request to that presented to Matthew, and to Mary, is striking. The difference resides in the relative ease in following up on these requests—calling, visiting—as opposed to the relative unreachability of international visitors. National staff of international organisations are often faced with double binds between interests of local actors and those of their foreign employer (Sundberg 2020). The instance above shows how this double bind position was given shape in the context of a field visit.

7 | Life After the Visit

After one of the information meetings that had brought us to the terraced mountainous west of Uganda, a District Official (DO) had requested the crew to visit her at her 'agricultural hub' for an assessment for implementing partners. We were on our way back to Kampala, and running late—at the going rate we would reach there some time before midnight. Lewis, Max, and Celine—an all-Ugandan crew of senior staff—exit the car and find what we were looking for. Lewis, a programme manager, and Max, the Business Development expert, had been doing such an assessment in the morning—it took him and his laptop over an hour and a half. The hub, which was a shop in a small room with a freezer, and stacks of equipment and goods for sale, was a far cry from the agricultural processing plant we had left behind that morning. I excused myself for a phone call while the crew squeezed themselves into the cabin.

When I got back after 15 min, they were already done. Apparently, the assessment had been conducted rapidly and without the use of forms or laptops. Lewis asked me to chime in with the final round of remarks. I was caught unaware, since I had missed most of the procedure. Latching onto something the DO had said at the end, I suggested hesitatingly that she should keep up the passion. The rest of the crew looked at me amusedly, while the DO asked them whether she could visit the head office. On the road again, I became the butt of a range of jokes, as Celine kept repeating my words to me. Apparently, the DO's shop had not met any standards of the assessment, and the meeting had been a courtesy call. In the midst of these jokes, and remarks about how other staff members had done throughout the visits, the prospects of the DO visiting the head office was discussed. Would she drop by or not? And what should they report back to her about the assessment? We arrived to Kampala late that night, after hours of storytelling and discussion.

The vignette above shows how a web of expectations or possibilities is spun, without any of the involved parties requiring follow up. Field visits, as a technology of governance, social development, and communication, have an unclear function within the international development industry. Are these activities organised for the local participants, the visitors, or for the organisers who can then show their output? All seem to be true, in the same way as authors argue that development policy is written both for donors and for intended societies (Kamruzzaman 2017). The crews employed field visits in the pursuit of their project objectives, while local actors would often use them to field requests or gain access to donors or other actors.

7.1 | Field Visits in the Development Industry

Mission field visits, as per the categorisation earlier in this paper, seem to have clear enough purposes: implementing project elements or meeting bureaucratic and administrative requirements. There is a tension of interests in the microcosm of the field visit, however. Much of the proceedings during the resilience workshop seem to have been performed for the benefit of Matthew himself. Meanwhile, most of the interventions from local actors reflected their interests for ongoing support. The assessment at the DO's shop was performed for her, but after this assessment it remained unclear what the implications were. Some of the field visits had the aim of allowing for participation from local populations, or gathering information on and assessing local needs.

Field visits are one of the few ways in which development experts can directly appraise themselves of a project, society, or development problem (Kamruzzaman 2017). Indeed, most of the international visitors in this paper did not reside in Uganda, and if they did, they would reside in Kampala, as did most Ugandan nationals. Even when their aims are to empower or muster participation, field visits follow similar rationalities to managerialist

technologies that confirm hierarchies (Girei 2023; Gutheil and Koch 2023), and often show patterns of upward communication (Pot 2019). Visitors were often as intent on not giving off false impressions, or raise expectations, as on leaving behind enough information.

A field visit is a figure in the development dance (Swedlund 2017) where sides try to gauge the intentions and commitment of others, manage expectations, and where half-hearted promises made in reaction to requests are not followed up—as the visitors in this paper have shown. Negotiations and dealings in the development industry writ large are shaped by dynamics of maintaining trust (Sundberg 2020), managing promises, failure (Venugopal 2018) and negotiating commitments (Swedlund 2017).

8 | Conclusion

This paper does not claim to be exhaustive or generalisable to field visits across the board of the vastly heterogeneous NGOs in Uganda, let alone for the development sector as a whole. It does, however, argue that field visits are geopolitical microcosms that are made and maintained through the art of reception. Moreover, development is produced in localised instances, such as field visits. Much like the 'assessment' in the DO's shop, the role of field visits is ambiguous: whereas they serve a purpose, they are performative in the moment, confirming power relations, and they create limited opportunities for those involved.

The political economy of the aid chain in general is featured in miniature scale during field visits, where communication tends to follow powerful hierarchies upwards, and knowledge or expertise flow from top to bottom. At the same time, interpretive labour constitutes the engagements between hierarchically divided actors, shaping a shared space where the field is presented, and efforts are expended to make it fit safe expectations. Rather than opening up an encounter for learning on equal footing, aims to 'develop' and change the field according to presupposed ideas and ideologies remain largely unchallenged. This calls into question what the expected outcomes of a field visit could be—a point of reflection on those engaged in their organisation.

The field visit, as a technology of communication and a vehicle for development intervention, is marred by the distance it maintains from the field itself. Dynamics of distance affect encounters throughout the development industry, where efforts are made to connect local knowledge and professional expertise to structures of upward reporting and accountability. This dynamic should also be taken into account in methodologies of development studies, where researchers are often related (implicitly or explicitly) to their hosting development organisations. The field visit is indicative of a shared space in which common interests for continuation generate a mutual—albeit uneven—dependency relation.

Thus, bringing nuance to scholarship on effects of aid on political dynamics in recipient communities, this paper about field visits illustrates that there are aspects of aid and development that do not really reach the field. Recognition of power relations

inherent in development (Escobar 1991) and of the inequalities that allow for field visits to exist (Simpson 2004) should be a necessary step to understanding these encounters, and the various roles of actors within them. Especially, considering decentralisation and shift the power discourses (Kinsbergen et al. 2023) in the development sector (Cornwall and Brock 2005), these dynamics merit further research.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹ Expat refers to a foreign national residing and working officially in Uganda—as opposed to visitors who are there on tourist visas.

² Murram is a red gravel, generally used to surface roads in Uganda.

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Appendix

Table of ethnographic and narrative field visit data

Year	Type(s)	Activities/goals	Sub-region	Duration	Source
2020	Mission	Introduction and exploration for new area of project activities	Central	2 days	Ethnographic data
2020	Guided tour	Celebration of progress and visit of NGO founder to project participants	Central	1 day	Ethnographic data
2021	Guided tour	Exploration of partnership and visiting project areas	Lango	3 days	Ethnographic data
2021	Guided tour	Donor visit, European headquarters staff inspection, workshops with local partners, accounting and assessments	Karamoja	6 days	Ethnographic data
2021	Mission	Inspection, gathering testimonies and video material	West Nile	5 days	Ethnographic data
2021	Mission	Scoping study with consultant	Central, Western, South Western	3 days	Ethnographic data
2021	Mission	Inception meetings for a new project, information sessions and grounding	Central, Western, South Western	4 days	Ethnographic data
2022	Mission	Workshops, inspection, and video production	West Nile	5 days	Ethnographic data
2023	Mission	Data enumeration, workshops	Lango	4 days	Ethnographic data
2023	Mission	Exit-meetings, celebrations and endline data enumeration	East Central, Elgon	5 days	Ethnographic data
2023	Mission	Workshops, meetings, information sessions on project extensions	South Western	4 days	Ethnographic data
2023	Guided tour	Inspection, workshops, assessments, exploration	Karamoja, Lango	8 days	Ethnographic data
2023	Mission	Selection and onboarding of new project participants, baseline data enumeration, trainings	Western	5 days	Ethnographic data
2020	Guided tour	Founder visiting relevant stakeholders and prospective contacts in Kampala, also interacting and inspecting progress and operations.	Kampala	3 days	Narrative data
2021	Guided tour	Consultant, project lead and donor tour	Central, Lango, Western, South Western	2–5 days	Narrative data
2022	Mission	Consultant Assessments of partner organisations for INGO	Karamoja	2–5 days	Narrative data
2022	Guided tour	Inspection, exploration, workshops	South Western, Central	Cancelled due to Ebola	Narrative data
2023	Mission	Project inception, onboarding and trainings	Kenya	5 days	Narrative data
2023	Mission	Data enumeration, trainings, onboarding	West Nile	5 days	Narrative data
2023	Guided tour	Tour of European school children along projects	Central, Lango, Karamoja, Acholi	5 days	Narrative data

Year	Type(s)	Activities/goals	Sub-region	Duration	Source
2023	Guided tour	Tour of US donor representatives	Central, South Western, Western, Lango.	5 days	Narrative data
2023	Mission	Scientist overseeing an RCT	Central	5 days	Narrative data
2023	Mission	Organisational assessment of partner organisation to INGO	Karamoja	2 days	Narrative data
2023	Mission/Guided tour	Inspection of projects, mapping new project areas and performing surveys	Central	3 days	Narrative data
2023	Guided tour	Tour along several projects by donor representatives	Central, Western, South Western	2 days	Narrative data