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Bad news: seeing communication for and about development through an exposé of Swedish aid to Zambia

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ABSTRACT
Communication for and about development are significant components of international development cooperation, interlinked in practice though separated in research. This article examines their interaction in donor-driven aid through the lens of journalism. How is bilateral development cooperation communicated about in the news? How does a donor agency communicate for and about development? And what are the links between one and the other? In 2016, a prime-time exposé aired by the Swedish public TV reported on alleged corruption in aid to Zambia, depicting events as the double failure of donor and recipient. Our analysis clarifies how (a) how the news media in a top donor country covers public development aid for its citizen audiences; and (b) how a bilateral donor agency understands and practices communication as it interacts with the news media on the one hand, and with partners and beneficiaries on the ground on the other. We focus on the news media as mediator of the donor’s communication with its tax-paying citizen audiences, demonstrating the potential of an integrated conceptual approach to communication for and about development, and raising questions for future research.

KEYWORDS
Investigative journalism; public development aid; accountability; communication about development; communication for development; Sweden; Zambia

Introduction
In the twenty-first century, the future of strategic communication as a clear-cut component of the deployment of public development aid is uncertain (Wilkins 2015; Waisbord 2017). This uncertainty challenges a long-standing divide between communication for and about development in research and in practice. To put it schematically: while scholars focus on normative ideals, theoretical categorizations and empirical studies about communication’s power to promote positive change in developing countries, i.e., communication for development (Ferron and Guevara 2017; Tufte 2017), practitioners in the aid sector worry...
about how to secure the support of tax-paying citizens in donor countries and promote the United Nations’ Agenda 2030, i.e., communication about development (da Costa 2009, 2018; Quarry and Ramírez 2009). In this article, we adopt an integrated conceptual perspective to analyze the overlap of communication for and about development in a specific context. Using a case of ‘bad news’ about Swedish aid to Zambia, we illustrate how a combined focus on communication for and about development reveals links between the communicative practices of donor agencies and the journalistic coverage of public development aid. Contra a hyper-specialized approach to studying journalism about development and communication for and about development as three separate entities, we argue that a hybrid framework makes it possible to unpack and consider the connections between forms that are distinct but interrelated, and thus mutually affect each other (Scott 2014; Enghel 2018).

About the case study

The case that we analyse is an exposé of alleged mismanagement and corruption in Swedish bilateral aid to a Zambian farmers’ organisation that was broadcasted by public service television in 2016. Our analysis is driven by an integrated conceptualisation of communication for and about development as distinct but connected elements of public development aid1 that are put into practice in varying ways by different actors (Vähämäki 2017; Enghel 2018). The exposé, entitled ‘Swedish Aid’ (SVT 2016), was an episode of the investigative journalism TV series Uppdrag Granskning (Mission: Investigate, from now on M:I) that in October 2016 reported on mismanagement and corruption in Swedish bilateral aid granted by Sida to a local partner, the Zambia National Farmers’ Union (from now on, ZNFU), in order to benefit poor farmers. Aired in prime time by the Swedish public service television (from now on, SVT), the report depicted events in Zambia as the double failure of donor and partner. Building on previous research that interrogated what the news say about international development cooperation and the potential of those news to shape the nature of foreign aid by informing audiences in specific ways (Mody 2012, 45–46; 55–58), we examine how the exposé’s main characters engage with communication for and about development. Those main characters are the donor, its local partner, the local beneficiaries targeted, and the investigate journalism team that produced the exposé (Dogra 2014; Vähämäki 2017).

We take the approach that being the object of journalistic investigation works as a stress test of the standard communication practices of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (from now on, Sida) with partners and beneficiaries on the ground in recipient countries – i.e., for development – and with tax-paying citizens in Sweden – i.e., about development. Examining the validity of the accusations of mismanagement and corruption raised by the exposé is not a goal of our analysis. Instead, we examine how public development aid is communicated about to Swedish citizens by the news media, and by Sida through the news
media. We focus on how said communication suggests that those citizens should understand aid and measure its value, and on how Sida, as it struggles to communicate about development in its own terms in response to the news media’s queries, reveals a technocratic approach to communication with its local partner and a lack of communication with its recipients on the ground.

**Research purpose and questions**

The article analyses a specific case of the news coverage of bilateral aid to Zambia in the Swedish media, unpacking what it tells about communication for and about development in donor and journalistic practices. By adopting an integrated approach to the research and the practice of communication for and about development (Wilkins 2009) informed by the analysis of investigative journalism’s narratives (Danielson 2013, 2016), we examine the exposé to clarify (a) how the news media in a top donor country covers public development aid for its citizen audiences; and (b) how a bilateral donor agency understands and practices communication as it interacts with the news media on the one hand, and with partners and beneficiaries on the ground on the other. We focus on the news media as mediator of the donor’s communication with its tax-paying citizen audiences (Strand 2015; Enghel 2018).

The article seeks to answer two research questions. First: *How is the donor’s bilateral engagement in public development aid to Zambia communicated to Swedish audiences by the exposé?* By analysing the exposé’s journalistic strategies and outstanding messages, we clarify what it communicated about development to Swedish citizens, raising questions for future research about what these citizens may have learnt about what aid is and its value – that is, whether it matters or not – based on the exposé’s arguments. A related sub-question is: *How does the donor aid agency seek to communicate about development in the face of the news media’s allegations?*

Second: *How does the donor aid agency implement and understand communication with its partner and recipients on the ground?* We explore how Sida appears to embrace or neglect communication in its everyday work in Zambia to fulfil its responsibility to do good as per the exposé, raising questions for future research about the link between scant communication for development on the ground and the adverse journalistic coverage of Sida’s work.

**Conceptualising communication for and about development from a justice perspective**

Within development communication theory, communication is defined as a more or less participatory tool or strategy that donor countries use strategically to support their intervention (Wilkins 2015). The deployment of communication for development implies doing good for the sake of citizens of recipient
countries. Ideally, it will give voice to the disenfranchised, increasing their access to public means of information and expression and enabling their participation in the making of decisions that affect their lives (Manyozo 2012; Scott 2014). Instead, communication about development generally refers to informing the citizens of donor countries about what development assistance is, how it works and why it matters, ideally linking donors’ accountability to international solidarity (da Costa 2009; Vähämäki 2017, 6–7).

According to the OECD’s Development Communication Network, a forum where directors of public affairs and communication of development ministries and agencies address ‘the challenges of communication about development’ faced by donors (OECD 2014a, 3), development communicators must ‘rebuild public trust in international cooperation’.3 But for donor agencies this is easier said than done in light of the pressure to demonstrate aid results that followed from the adoption of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005. According to Lennie and Tacchi (2013, 2–3), ‘a fixation on greater efficiency in the disbursement of aid funding’ derived from the Paris Declaration has led to ‘an ascendance of accountancy’, such that calling a donor to account for its moral responsibility to do good may be reduced to demanding that it accounts for money spent. In this context, communication about development in turn may be reduced to a matter of promotion and public relations (Kremer, van Lieshout, and Went 2009).

Because communication for and about development have different ends despite sharing common means, mainstream research approaches have traditionally tackled them separately (Quarry and Ramírez 2009; Enghel 2018). We argue that this disconnect stands in the way of understanding, and potentially improving, the forms of mediation by which donor agencies communicate or fail to communicate adequately with citizens at both ends of the donor-recipient equation: those in the donor country addressed as taxpayers to whom accountability for aid results is owed, and those in the recipient country defined by the donor as ‘in need’ and therefore supposed to benefit from aid (Enghel 2016). To bridge the disconnect, we formulate our analysis within the justice framework elaborated by social scientist Nancy Fraser (2008). According to Fraser’s ‘all-subjected principle’, citizens on both ends of the donor-recipient equation are ‘fellow subjects of justice’ inasmuch as they are jointly subject ‘to a structure of governance that sets the ground rules that govern their interaction’ (ibid: 65). This structure of governance, managed primarily by donor countries, is responsible for guaranteeing recipient citizens’ right to development, and the right of both donor and recipient citizens to democratic communication (Linden 1999; Dakrouy and Hoffmann 2010).

Attentive to that responsibility, we analyse the exposé from two vantage points, interrogating how the investigative journalism team and the bilateral donor representatives communicate their respective assumptions about what aid is and should be. Our focus on the news media is warranted by the
importance of the information that they convey about aid agencies and their work, ‘since citizens in countries providing aid seldom have the possibility to see with their own eyes what their money has contributed to’ (Väihämäki’s 2017, 6). We therefore define news-making about public development aid as a form of communication about development generated from outside the donor sector that manages aid, which may coincide or collide with a donor agency’s efforts to communicate the importance and usefulness of its work (cf. Scott 2014, 6–9; Strand 2015). We treat communication for and about development both as an observable fact that is visible in the exposé, and as conceptual lens that we apply to the exposé’s narrative, in line with Karin Wilkins’ (2009) definition of communication about development as the scholarly scrutiny of ‘the ways in which development approaches communicate assumptions about strategic social change’. As we will show, inasmuch as a bilateral donor agency (a) reduces accountability to technocratically mediated accounting, and (b) appears to pay scant attention to communicating with the ultimate recipients of its aid on the ground, it plays into the hands of reporting that represents public development aid as disastrous. Such reporting, in turn, betrays a reductive view of the role of the news media as communicators about development that could have a negative impact on Swedish citizen’s moral support for aid: M:I’s journalistic narrative pays more attention to tax-payers’ money having been misspent than to the donor’s failure to guarantee the solidarity pledged by Sweden to poor Zambian farmers through public development aid.

**Contextualising the analysis**

To contextualise our analysis of the exposé within the bigger picture to which it refers, in this section we briefly introduce the reader to: (a) Sweden as a bilateral donor of public development aid; (b) the donor-recipient relationship between Sweden and Zambia; and (c) M:I and its coverage of public development aid.

**Sweden as a bilateral donor of public development aid**

According to figures from 2017, Sweden is the world’s top donor of Official Development Assistance (from now on, ODA) in proportion to the size of its economy, and the seventh largest donor in absolute terms (Development Initiatives 2018). Sweden is also a top donor of ODA specifically earmarked for communications (González Cahuapé-Casaux and Kalatil 2015). According to a review of how member countries of OECD’s Development Assistance Committee measure and manage results in development cooperation, the country ‘invests and plans for communicating results and is open with the public about the successes and failures of its aid activities’ (OECD 2014a, 35). The review links Sweden’s approach to communication about development to information regarding results achieved, stressing effectiveness, and to transparency
about the occasional failure to deliver. A study of good practices in development communication in turn indicates that Sweden seeks to communicate results to its tax-paying citizens by highlighting the country’s contribution to the global situation and to specific recipient countries, and human interest stories referring to positive results for individuals (OECD 2014b, 17, 30, 58). The study links Sweden’s approach to communication about development to facts-based storytelling. This storytelling, however, requires the mediation of the news media in order to reach tax-paying audiences. Strand (2015, 184) argues that the fact that the deployment of Swedish bilateral aid takes place in locations far removed from the Swedish public exacerbates the dependence of the country’s donor agency on the media in order ‘to showcase its results’ (see also Vähämäki 2017, 6).

The donor-recipient relationship

Sida, a governmental organisation overseen by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, administers part of Sweden’s ODA budget with the overall goal of reducing poverty, allocating it to selected countries according to directives issued by the country’s Parliament and Government. In 2016, i.e., the year when the news coverage of Sida’s operations in Zambia analysed in this article was broadcasted, Sweden’s budget for development assistance amounted to USD 42.3 million, and Sida was the granting agency for USD 41.3.4

Zambia is one of the least developed countries in the world, ranked 139 among 188 countries on the Human Development Index at the time of M:I’s broadcast in 2016 (UNDP 2016).5 According to figures from that year, poverty was high and widespread, ‘with 60% of the population still living below the poverty line, while 42% lived in extreme poverty in 2010’ (ADB 2016). The country has been one of the main recipients of Swedish aid over the years and was in fact the tenth largest recipient according to Sida’s figures for 2016 (Embassy of Sweden, n/d). Sweden’s 2013–2017 strategy for the country aimed to strengthen ‘democratic accountability and poor people’s awareness of their rights’, to increase access to financial services and markets for small-scale farmers, and to lead to the sustainable use of land and resources (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, n/d). According to a report issued by Sida in the same year when the news coverage of its operations in Zambia analysed in this article was broadcasted, the ambitions of Sweden’s 2013–2017 strategy for the country were being fulfilled: ‘In Zambia, 335,000 small-scale farmers have access to seeds, manure and pesticides, and 61,000 farmers can now sell their goods for a better profit’ (Sida 2016).

ZNFU, a membership-based organisation aimed at promoting and protecting the interests of small-scale farmers in the agricultural sector, has been a recipient of Swedish aid since 2009: SEK 21.8 million (EUR 2.29 million) for 2009–2013 and SEK 47.5 million (EUR 4.98 million) for 2014–2017. According to
the former Swedish Agency for Development Evaluation (SADEV), it is an organisation that ‘strives to achieve economic and social development’ (SADEV 2010).

Sweden has an embassy in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, which also serves as the office for bilateral development cooperation staff. ZNFU’s head office is equally located in Lusaka. M:I approached both Sida and ZNFU on the ground, where Swedish aid was meant to do good, and where the organisations are both partners and neighbours.

**M:I and Swedish aid**

M:I is an investigative journalism programme produced and aired by the Swedish public broadcaster that has run for 16 consecutive years since 2001 and is considered ‘a flagship’ of contemporary Swedish investigative journalism (Johansson 2006, 33). Swedish aid is not one of its frequent topics: of the 750+ episodes broadcast until 2016 (Danielson 2016, 105), only four, including the one under analysis here, have investigated it specifically: ‘The Wrecked Foreign-Aid Project’ (2001), ‘Swedish Foreign Aid – Supporting the Fight Against Poverty or Supporting War?’ (2006), ‘The Micro Trap’ (2011) and ‘Swedish Aid’ (2016, which is our case).

The 2001 episode depicted the devastating effects of Sida’s cutbacks and withdrawal from Guinea-Bissau. Instead, in its 2006 and 2011 episodes, M:I focused on Sida’s accountability for the allocation and disbursement of aid, accusing the agency of poor control and poor judgement. The 2006 episode claimed that Sida’s aid was used by the Ugandan government to support a civil war, fuel corruption and crack down on political opposition rather than to fight poverty. The 2011 episode criticised the micro-loans promoted by Nobel Prize Laureate Mohammad Younus via his Grameen Bank, claiming that, instead of offering a way out of poverty, these led to debt and despair among many recipients while generating income for Yunus.

**Method**

Our analysis is based on the qualitative examination of one episode of M:I titled Svenskt bistånd (‘Swedish Aid’) broadcasted on SVT’s channel 1 on 26 October 2016, in the prime-time slot from 20:00 to 21:00. In a nutshell, the episode argued that Swedish aid is malfunctioning to the point that it enables corruption in recipient countries. Produced on location in Lusaka, Zambia’s capital, it featured interviews conducted on the ground with a Sida officer and the Swedish ambassador, and queries to ZNFU’s board of directors raised during a press conference. Secondary characters in the narrative were the anonymous Zambian whistle-blower who denounced the corruption in focus, and a few Zambian beneficiaries of Swedish aid participating in initiatives brokered by local partners.
other than ZNFU. According to figures provided by *M:I*, the exposé had a live audience of 621,000 viewers plus 20,000 additional views via the public broadcaster’s streaming service, *SVT Play*.  

**Method of analysis**

Our qualitative examination of ‘Swedish aid’ is twofold. In the first place, we look for **communication about development** by examining the exposé’s narrative style and strategies from three analytical perspectives that we introduce concisely here. The **first perspective** is a categorisation of three moral domains of accusation developed by Danielsson in a comprehensive study of *M:I*’s overall investigative journalism narratives: incompetence, callousness and deviousness (Danielson 2016). **Incompetence** is constructed by displaying the subjects under investigation as lacking know-how, adequate practices and routines, leadership, resources and forbearance. **Callousness** is shown through a subject’s indifference to suffering, unwillingness to take responsibility, and prioritisation of bureaucracy or profit over rightful concerns. **Deviousness** is constructed by presenting a subject as hypocritical, evasive, manipulative and corrupt, and by implicating his/her engagement in activities such as enrichment at the expense of others, hiding facts or trying to silence witnesses or otherwise hinder journalistic investigation (Danielson 2016).

The **second perspective** is William Labov’s typology of evaluative devices, originally developed in the early seventies in order to identify four elements that are typically distributed throughout a journalistic narrative in order to indicate transgression and build up moral deviation: correlative, intensifier, comparator and explicative (Labov 1972, 366–393). **Correlative** designates the way in which the narrator increases the moral charge of a story by pointing out a connection between one subplot and another, so that seemingly unrelated events point in the same moral direction, joined together by a single moral verdict. **Intensifiers**, such as gestures, repetition or quantifying, aim at reinforcing the moral evaluation of an event. **Comparators** impute moral value to an event or actor by offering a contrast (Labov 1972, 381–382; Patterson 2008, 27). **Explicatives** add a moral dimension to a story by suggesting a contextually value-laden explanation for a certain course of action (Labov 1972, 390).

We used these two perspectives, combined, to clarify how *M:I* presented the audience with a problem by first constructing a moral point of departure and then crafting a compelling narrative about shocking deviances from that point (Ettema and Glasser 1998; Protess et al. 1991; Ekström 2002; Mølster 2007; Danielson 2016).

The **third perspective** is William Benoit’s straightforward typology of image restoration strategies developed in the late nineties in order to assist organisations held publicly responsible for offensive actions. The strategies are denial, evasion of responsibility, and reduction of offensiveness. We adopted this
perspective to examine how Sida visibly sought to communicate about development in the episode to meet M:I’s accusations (Benoit 1997, 179).

In the second place, we look for communication for development through a simple heuristic: we analyse the exposé’s overall narrative in order to identify if and how Sida communicates with its partner organisation in Zambia, ZNFU, and with the supposed recipients of its aid on the ground. The heuristic is derived from the fact that contact with local partners and direct beneficiaries, be it as a means to an end or an end in itself, is an agreed-upon cornerstone of the democratic practice of development (Quarry and Ramírez 2009; Sida 2010a, 2010b; Chambers 2012; Thomas and van de Fliert 2014; Wilkins 2015).

Limitations

We are aware that, as argued by Hall, Critcher, and Jefferson (1978, 53), ‘The media do not simply and transparently report events which are ‘naturally’ newsworthy in themselves. ‘News’ is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories.’ It is precisely because the news media operate on the basis of assumptions about what development cooperation is and should be that we chose this case for analysis, attentive to M:I’s role as mediator of the information that citizen audiences in Sweden received about aid through the exposé under analysis (Scott 2014; Strand 2015; Vähämäki 2017; Enghel 2018). In this sense, we adopt a constructivist or constructionist approach to analysing the exposé’s narrative strategies, such that we don’t conflate the material world, where public development aid is deployed as a complex practice over time, with its occasional symbolic representation in the news (Hall 2013, 11). Or, to put it simply: we understand that there is more to Sida’s engagement with communication for and about development over time than meets the eye via the exposé. But we argue that it is nonetheless useful to ‘read between the lines’ to consider how Sida communicates based on what the exposé shows and doesn’t show, inasmuch as M:I, in line with journalistic conventions and ethical regulations typical of Swedish news-making (von Krogh 2016; Allmänhetens Pressombudsman 2019), made a visible effort to allow Sida to respond to accusations on-air.

Communicating about development

In this section we look for communication about development in the exposé as expressed by M:I on the one hand, and by Sida on the other.

How does M:I communicate about development in the episode?

Our analysis of the episode starting from the perspective of moral domains of accusation (Author 2016), summarised in Table 1 below, revealed that
Table 1. Allegations made by M:I categorised by moral domains (Danielson 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral Domain</th>
<th>Allegation: Sida …</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incompetence</td>
<td>Relies on a flawed control system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fails to detect embezzlement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lets aid be embezzled without taking appropriate measures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Has not learnt from past mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expresses a gullible trust that the embezzled money will be repaid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does not communicate with the farmers who should be benefiting from its support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviousness</td>
<td>Dodges journalists’ requests to get in contact with the farmers who should benefit from aid to ZNFU; makes excuses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>States that further assistance to ZNFU has been frozen, but whistle-blower maintains that payments continue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callousness</td>
<td>Shows no interest in the whistle-blower’s accusations initially; does nothing to support him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detaches itself from the farmers who should benefit from its support to ZNFU.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Still pays money to ZNFU’s director despite allegations of embezzlement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Swedish Aid’ portrays Sida primarily as incompetent and also, to a lesser degree, as devious and callous.

Further consideration of these explicit and implicit accusations put forward by M:I through the lens of Labovian narrative analysis (Labov 1972) allowed us to distil four distinct arguments raised in the exposé about Swedish development cooperation at large and Sida in particular: (1) that Swedish aid is managed by a negligent organisation, (2) that Sida does not care about citizens on either end of the donor-recipient equation, (3) that aid is being both wasted and misappropriated for wrongful purposes, and (4) that development cooperation is an enterprise not to be trusted by Swedish citizens. We present those arguments below, using direct quotes from the exposé’s narrative to substantiate them.

**Argument 1: Swedish aid is managed by a negligent organisation**

The episode portrays Sida as an organisation that has little control of how funds are used or the extent to which they reach the intended beneficiaries, which leads to corruption. Sida fails both the beneficiaries of aid and the tax-paying citizens to whom it is accountable. This negligence is represented as a repeated offense, which further intensifies the moral charge. The episode links corruption at ZNFU to a previous case of mismanagement of funds in Zambia, giving the impression that Sida is an organisation that does not learn from previous mistakes:

*Reporter – voiceover:* ‘Sida has supported Zambia with a substantial amount of foreign aid since 1965, but it has not been problem-free. In 2009, a serious corruption scandal erupted. Money from Sida supposed to support medical care disappeared. The scandal was discovered by a whistle-blower and not by Sida’s own control. And now it is the same story all over again’ [0:04.58].

When the Sida officer and the Swedish ambassador in Lusaka respond to the reporter’s questions by stressing that the agency’s control system is good, and has even been strengthened over the years, the narrative expands on accusations of ineptitude by pointing to a lack of self-critical insight.
Sida officer: ‘… more focus on internal control than before …’ [0:07:55], ‘… systems designed to make it as hard as possible to commit crimes’ [0:09:08], ‘… lessons were learned, and systems were tightened …’ [0:11:02]

The impression that Sida is a gullible and incompetent organisation is emphasised when its officer expresses the conviction that asking ZNFU to repay the misappropriated funds is a plausible solution to the problem. The narration points to what could be interpreted as a surprising level of organisational naivety, or worse, hypocrisy.

Zambian reporter ‘You are saying that the [ZNFU] board has refuted the findings, and at the same time you want to recover the funds – how do you hope to get back the funds?

Sida officer We have an agreement, and in that agreement, it says quite clearly if funds are misappropriated, they should be refunded’ [0:06:41].

As these excerpts from the episode show, negligence is represented as a matter of Sida’s inability to follow the money allocated to entrusted local partners.

**Argument 2: Sida does not care**

The episode strongly implies that Sida’s lack of engagement with events on the ground has paved the way for the embezzlement. This allegation is emphasised by evidence that the agency has no contact whatsoever with the farmers who should benefit from aid allocated to ZNFU. In a pivotal scene, the M:I investigative team is driven by the agency’s officer to visit a farmers’ community that, as it turns out, has no connection at all with ZNFU.

Reporter – voice over: ‘He shows us his project in Chongwe. It’s called Musika and is supported by Sida … We’ve previously asked to see farmers within the ZNFU but [the Sida officer] has said no’ [0:17:29]

At that point in the narrative, the accusation is expanded into the domain of deviousness: is the officer blocking M:I’s access to the farmers affected by ZNFU’s alleged wrongdoing? Or is Sida’s communication with the actual beneficiaries of its aid to ZNFU non-existent, to the point that the local officer has no clue of how to reach them?

Sida officer: ‘I don’t know where they are. We have to go with the representatives. We support an organization, and they would have to show us where their members are. I have no way of knowing where they live’ [0:20:07].

This last excerpt from the episode shows Sida as avoiding direct contact with the farmer beneficiaries that ZNFU should have served, and thus remaining at a distance from their needs and realities.
Argument 3: aid is being both wasted and misappropriated for wrongful purposes

The episode narrates how precious aid is not just lost to corruption: it is moreover misappropriated for wrongful purposes that are visible to the whistleblower although the agency’s representative on location remains oblivious to them. M:I shows that the money that was supposed to assist farmers was used for the enrichment of ZNFU’s director, a corrupt individual:

Reporter
‘Have you visited his home?’

Whistleblower ZNFU
‘Yes, I’ve been there. It’s what surrounds it which is amazing. It’s all green, it’s a game park […]. It’s a golf course, it is a lot of wild animals in it, the impalas, zebras, ostriches, surrounded by a fence of course, surrounded by cameras all over. Most of it has been achieved through money donated by, given to ZNFU by Sida’ [0:40:54].

The whistleblower moreover implies that some of Sida’s aid, meant to promote democracy in general, was used instead to promote a specific political party.

Whistleblower ZNFU: ‘Ndambo supported the opposition party in 2015, by way of printing T-shirts for [party] using money from ZNFU donated by Sida. If you go to the books of accounts in ZNFU you won’t find payments directly showing that this went to payment of T-shirts, but it happened’ [0:49:47].

Here the focus is on funds misappropriated by the local partner without consideration of the impact of this wrongdoing on the farmer beneficiaries.

Argument 4: development cooperation is an enterprise not to be trusted by Swedish citizens

The episode provides no attenuating information in defence of the wider project of Swedish development cooperation. M:I mentions that Sida has been active in Zambia for 50 years to ‘promote democracy, support poor people and counteract corruption’ [0:56:02], but says nothing about the Swedish government’s rationale for the long-standing support or any positive achievements attributable to Sida’s management of those funds over the years.

Having noted at the start of the episode that ‘every Swede gives about SEK 10 per day’ to development cooperation, towards the end the reporter summarises the allegations against Sida by suggesting that Swedish taxpayers will probably refuse to ‘put more money in that kind of project’ after the exposé [0:56:28]. In this way, M:I’s critique of Sida boils down to a matter of no ‘value for money’, and the outstanding message to the audience is that they should think twice about continuing to support the project of Swedish aid. The risk that the investigative programme’s approach to
communicating development may affect poor Zambian farmers by encouraging the discontinuance of support is not visibly considered by M:I, but it is raised by a farmer who begs the reporter to convey a measured argument to Swedish audiences. The farmer clearly identifies the danger that the narrow definition of the problem as the waste of taxpayers’ contributions may reinforce self-interest against a commitment -both moral and political- to continued support.

*Reporter* What do you want to say to the Swedish people, taxpayers who will see this story? And who say, ‘We don’t want to put more money in that kind of project?’

*Farmer* What I want to say to them is that […] they should not stop funding, because we need money in order to be assisted. The only thing that I advise them is to change the way they do their program [0.56.28].

**How does Sida appear to communicate about development in the episode?**

Faced with *M:I*’s allegations, what does Sida try to communicate about what aid is, how it works and why it matters, as it responds on-air? Analysed from the perspective of Benoit’s image restoration strategies, the episode displays various ways in which both Sida’s officer and the Swedish ambassador in Lusaka seek to minimise the gravity of the accusations. Their strategies are summarised in Table 2 below.

As the table shows, Sida’s position is to deplore the embezzlement and emphasise that the agency followed procedure. The misappropriation of funds is referred to as an unfortunate and unpredictable event beyond the agency’s control mechanisms, without ever mentioning its impact on farmer beneficiaries. Overall, the episode shows that Sida politely refuses to accept any

| Table 2. Image restoration strategies (Benoit 1997) employed by Sida in the programme. |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Strategy                        | Key characteristic | Claims                                                      |
| Shifting the blame              | Someone else is responsible | One person and his entourage committed a crime. An entire organisation chose to double-cross us. |
| Defeasibility                   | Lack of information or ability | We have done what we could.                                  |
| Bolstering                      | Stress of good traits | We fight poverty. We are transparent towards journalists. We react to wrongdoing and protest. |
| Compensation                    | Victims will be compensated | We would like to make amends to the whistle-blower for our lack of interest and personally express our gratitude. |
| Corrective action               | Plans to solve/prevent the problem | Our control system has been strengthened over the years. We have commissioned audits. We are demanding that the embezzled money be refunded. If Sida money has been used for political propaganda, that has to be followed up. We have frozen ZNFU’s assets. We will learn from this and work more with extra audits. |
| Mortification                   | Apology, recognition and dismay | We acknowledge the benefits of journalistic investigation. Corruption is awful – not acceptable. If Sida money has been used for political propaganda, that is grotesque and deeply deplorable. We are truly sorry if the whistle-blower feels that we have not given him a proper response. |
responsibility for corruption at ZNFU, suggesting instead that the local partner alone should be blamed.

_Reporter_ ‘You make it sound like you have been deceived, and that you have done all that can be expected of Sida. That’s how it comes across.’

_Sida representative_ ‘Well, that’s how I’d like it to come across’ [0:00:33]

By taking a defensive stance and attempting to distance itself from wrongdoing by ZNFU’s director and board, the agency communicates about development by insisting on portraying it as a rational procedure along these lines: a donor allocates funds to a local partner of choice, but has nothing to do with how they are disbursed by said partner. The reiterated references to control systems are in line with Lennie and Tacchi’s (2013)’ observations about development cooperation’s fixation on accountancy. The fact that the reimbursement of funds will be pursued is emphasised, but nothing is said about how the Zambian farmers who are members of ZNFU might be compensated for the support that was pledged but never reached them. Solidarity with the recipients is not a visible concern, to the point that Sida barely refers to them as it seeks to defend its position. The agency’s communication about development, in this sense, loses sight of the overall goal of public development aid, i.e., to reduce poverty.

**Communicating for development?**

Having established how M:I and Sida communicate about development in the exposé in connection with the misappropriation of funds at ZNFU, in this section we examine what the episode discloses about Sida’s approach to communication for development on the ground. We analyse how Sida communicates with ZNFU, i.e., its partner organisation in Lusaka, selected by the agency to deploy aid by channelling funding to recipient farmers according to an agreed-upon strategy, and with the farmers that, as the ultimate recipients of aid, should have benefitted from ZNUF’s intermediation.

**How does Sida communicate with ZNFU?**

When interviewed by M:I’s reporter, the Swedish ambassador in Lusaka affirms, ‘We have had ongoing audits and dialogue’ [0:14:35]. However, the episode does not show Sida in dialogue with ZNFU. It shows a press conference held at the Swedish embassy in Lusaka where Sida informs the local media that ZNFU will be asked to return the misappropriated funds, but no representatives from ZNFU’s governing structure or membership base are visibly in attendance. It also shows a press conference held by ZNFU’s board of directors, who deny the allegations of corruption, with no Sida or embassy representatives in attendance. The episode in fact shows no evidence of the existence of the ongoing
dialogue mentioned by the ambassador, or of any other kind of regular communication between Sida and ZNFU. If dialogue between the parties existed prior to the corruption scandal, its absence in the narrative indicates that it may have broken down. It is also possible that it may not have existed in the first place.

Establishing which was in fact the case would of course require further study through a methodological approach other than ours here. But the apparent absence of dialogue observed in the exposé is nonetheless problematic, because ZNFU is Sida’s mediator on the ground for the purpose of adequately delivering aid to recipients: by choosing it as a local partner, Sida tasked ZNFU with the responsibility for allocating funding in a way that would benefit its member farmers. The primary way in which Sida appears to communicate with ZNFU in the narrative is by way of commissioning external audits to review the organisation’s finances (Newton Lungu & Associates 2013; KPMG 2016). The focus is not on monitoring the timeliness and quality of ZNFU’s implementation of agreed-upon plans to deliver aid to poor farmers, i.e., on ZNFU as a reliable partner in terms of taking care of the ultimate recipients of Swedish support, but on tracking funds.

How does Sida communicate with ZNFU’s member farmers?

Sida’s officer speaks repeatedly of how bureaucratic control works, but never of having communicated with the farmers who should have benefitted from support channelled via ZNFU: contact and consultation with recipients are absent from his interventions in the exposé. In contrast, the fact that Sida’s much-predicated concern with accounting for funds could and should have been complemented with dialogue with the supposed beneficiaries of Swedish aid is strikingly clear for a farmer interviewed by M:I:

**Farmer** They should have been having reports on what was happening on the ground, but it seems there was completely nothing.

**Reporter** They say to us that they were fooled by Ndambo.

**Farmer** Yeah, the problem is, they’re not. It’s important also to actually see the programs. At a later stage, donors are supposed to send representatives to go and see exactly […] Once in a while they should come and interview farmers asking, ‘Are you getting anything from this?’ [0:55.02].

Unlike this farmer, the Sida officer in Lusaka seems unaware of the importance or the usefulness of communicating with beneficiaries directly. When confronted by the M:I team about having led them to Zambian farmers not served by ZNFU and thus not affected by its wrongdoing, he replies evasively:

**Reporter** We are talking about tax money amounting to 50 million SEK in a few years. Of course, you should have been able to show us the poor farmers who actually are the supposed beneficiaries of that money.

**Sida officer** Yes, but you did see poor farmers, didn’t you?
Communication with farmers could have been of use to Sida in at least two ways: at the start of the funding round, to ensure that they were adequately informed about Sida’s support and ZNFU’s plans to deliver it according to its commitments, thus promoting transparency; and during implementation, to allow farmers to provide direct feedback to Sida, thus contributing to participatory monitoring of the process and providing an ongoing ‘reality check’ (Chambers 2012).

To conclude: Seeing communication for and about development beyond accounting

Having teased out different forms of communication for and about development from the journalistic narrative under investigation, we now bring them together by returning to our research questions.

First, how is the donor’s bilateral engagement in public development aid to Zambia communicated to Swedish audiences by the exposé? Our analysis shows first and foremost that M:I communicates development cooperation not only as a malfunctioning and thus questionable enterprise, but also as an issue primarily of value for money rather than of the recipient citizens’ right to development and international solidarity. In this respect, M:I follows the fixation of the international development cooperation’s system with demonstrating results at the donor end, thus reducing democratic accountability to accounting for the disbursement of tax-payers’ support, and doing away with issues of justice. In other words, M:I watchdogs how money is spent from a one-sided cost–benefit perspective, but fails to provide adequate information for tax-paying citizens in Sweden to hold the donor agency accountable for failing recipient citizens in Zambia. As noted by Vähämäki (2017, 6), this begs the question of ‘whose perspective of what should be seen as “results” actually counts’ in news media coverage: that of the donors, or that of the recipients? And moreover, what are the potential implications of framing ‘results’ narrowly in terms of costs, and of framing ‘deliveries’ in terms of local corruption (i.e., the failure of partners to deliver results), without taking the fate of recipients on the ground and the democratic value of international solidarity into consideration?

Second, how does Sida appear to implement and understand communication with its partner and recipients on the ground? The episode suggests that Sida does not communicate directly with the Zambian organisation that it has tasked with delivering support to farmers. Though M:I does not provide enough information to establish whether this state of affairs pre-existed or resulted from the discovery of corruption within ZNFU, the fact that communication between donor and
partner is absent from the narrative nonetheless speaks of a distant relationship with a problematic impact on the farmers supposed to benefit from Swedish aid. The reasons why SIDA did not appear to communicate directly with ZNFU despite having a desk in Lusaka that makes both organisations not only partners but also local neighbours would merit further research. Why? Because for the deployment of public development aid to be characterised by democratic integrity, the donor agency should demonstrate an active commitment to communicability with the partners it selects to bring support into effective action.

Our analysis moreover demonstrates that Sida’s officer in Lusaka actively avoids communication with the farmers supposed to benefit from Swedish public development aid. As far as the episode shows, communicating with them is not even an afterthought for him, considered not as an individual but as a representative of the agency’s ‘ways of doing’. Contrast with the viewpoint of the farmer discussed on page … , this neglect indicates that the agency’s operations in Zambia do not take into consideration communication for development as a strategy or a tool for substantive dialogue with the recipients whom Swedish intervention is supposed to benefit. Overall, Sida’s concern with accounting for funds appears to override consideration of its accountability for doing good towards those Zambian citizens.

Importantly, from an integrated perspective, Sida’s focus on accounting at the expense of accountability is in our view intertwined with M:1’s approach to covering public development aid as expressed in the exposé. As our analysis has shown, the team of investigative journalists acting on behalf of the Swedish public broadcaster buys into the same conception in its coverage. The exposé identifies grave accounting problems that indeed merit attention, but reveals them through a narrative that is so focused on numbers, and on aid as an unmanageable and thus unwarranted expense, that it could potentially lead Swedish citizens to conclude that all development cooperation equals waste -a risk to be considered an empirical question and investigated via audience studies including focus groups.

It must be stressed that noting this problematic aspect of how M:1 communicates about development is not to say that mismanagement and corruption in the deployment of international development cooperation should be ignored by the news media in donor countries. Instead, we highlight it in order to raise two important questions for future research: Could donor agencies minimise the risk of resources being bluntly redirected to wrongdoing by local partners by engaging in systematic dialogue with the ultimate beneficiaries of intervention on the ground? And could such an approach moreover prevent the risk of journalistic coverage throwing the baby out with the bathwater by illustrating, if not demonstrating, donor agencies’ substantial commitment to recipient citizens’ right to development? These questions should be tackled empirically, rather than normatively, for research to make a significant contribution to improving the communicative practices of donor agencies.
Notes

1. Following Vähämäki (2017, 1), we define public development aid widely as ‘financial assistance provided by governments to assist the development of countries with fewer resources’. This assistance is pledged from the national budgets of donor countries financed primarily by tax-paying citizens to which their governments are accountable.

2. Introducing the non-specialist reader to the extensive literature in this respect is beyond the purpose and possibilities of this article. See Tuft (2017, 12–21) for a very short history and McAnany (2012 for a more thorough one).


6. SADEV was active until the end of 2012. See https://openaid.se/sadev-evaluations/# [Accessed 20 April 2019].


9. A total of 1,036 episodes were studied. All the accusations were empirically recorded, and then categorised into three general domains (Danielson 2016, 97–98, 122).

10. Direct quotes from the episode correspond to the English subtitling in the DVD version provided by M:I.

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