



Delivering output and struggling for change: Tacit activism among professional transitional justice work in Sierra Leone and Kenya

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Anne Menzel 

Abstract

The professionalization of transitional justice (TJ) has received extensive academic attention in TJ and related international relations and peacebuilding scholarship. This article adds an element that has received hardly any attention: namely the presence of activism even among professional and usually donor-funded TJ work. I argue that noticing activism in professional contexts requires attention to the ‘everyday’, meaning to life in between, aside and beyond high politics and officially important actors, actions, processes and events. Based on field research in Sierra Leone and Kenya, I describe and discuss everyday examples of a specific form of activism, namely tacit activism that I encountered with three key interlocutors, one Sierra Leonean and two Kenyan nationals involved in professional donor-funded TJ work. Their activism was ‘tacit’ in the sense that it was not part of their official project activities and my interlocutors did not advertise their extra plans and efforts to (prospective) donors. And yet, it was precisely through these tacit plans and efforts that they hoped to meet at least some of the expectations that had been raised in the context of professional TJ projects.

Keywords

Activism, everyday international relations, Kenya, professionalism, Sierra Leone, transitional justice

Introduction

The professionalization of transitional justice (TJ) – including measures such as international and national criminal trials, truth commissions, legal and institutional reforms and reparations programs – has received extensive academic attention in TJ and related

Corresponding author:

Anne Menzel, Freie Universität Berlin, Edwin-Redslob-Strasse 29, 14195 Berlin, Germany.

Email: anne.menzel@fu-berlin.de

international relations (IR) and peacebuilding scholarship. Professional TJ has been described as a ‘global project’ (Nagy, 2008) and, increasingly, as a standardized and usually donor-funded component of liberal peacebuilding and development cooperation (e.g., Subotić, 2012). As such, it has been shown to often marginalize grassroots voices and agendas (e.g., Madlingozi, 2010; Menzel, 2020a). It has also often failed to deliver on its promises, at least when assessed in terms of local experiences and perceptions (e.g., Hirsch et al., 2012; Millar, 2015).

This article adds an element that has received hardly any attention, though many in the academy and those involved in practical TJ (or peacebuilding and development) work will likely be aware of it on some level. It points to the presence of activism even in the context of professional and usually donor-funded projects. Inspired by encounters and conversations during field research in Sierra Leone and Kenya, I analyze activism among ‘everyday’ professional TJ work. Focusing on the everyday means paying attention to life in between, aside and beyond high politics and officially important actors, actions, processes and events: to people’s more or less deliberate micro-level practices as well as to their experiences, intuitions, reflections and choices that may seem trivial but can reveal much about wider power relations by ‘adding greater density and nuance to how we understand the space for agency and change’ (Björkdahl et al., 2019: 125). At best, everyday perspectives generate unexpected insights and add depth to seemingly well-known IR topics, such as professional TJ (for a similar argument on a different topic, see Visoka, 2019).

This article makes two contributions. Firstly, based on field research in Sierra Leone and Kenya, I draw attention to a specific form of activism in professional contexts. I present examples from key interlocutors – one Sierra Leonean and two Kenyan nationals involved in professional donor-funded TJ work – who engaged in combinations of professional work and activism that I have come to think of as *tacit activism*. Their activism was ‘tacit’ in the sense that it was not part of their official project activities and my interlocutors did not advertise their extra plans and efforts to (prospective) donors. And yet, it was precisely through these tacit plans and efforts that they hoped to meet at least some of the expectations that had been raised in the context of professional TJ projects.

Secondly, in the process of analyzing and interpreting these examples, I developed a conceptual distinction between activism and professionalism that I found helpful for thinking about and exploring real-world relations and combinations between the two. In short, this distinction holds that activism, as a particular mode of struggling towards desired change, is directly concerned with effecting change in people’s lives. Professionalism, on the other hand, focuses on designing, implementing and overseeing sophisticated measures; such measures are often (and certainly in the case of TJ) associated with promises and expectations of change but do not directly focus on or prioritize them. The tacit activism I describe in this article is a combined form that sneaks activism into professional contexts. Producing such a combined form is not necessarily a strategic or fully conscious process. Probably more often than not, tacit activism emerges from actors’ desire to achieve meaningful change while largely adhering to the logics and demands of professional work.

Gaining a closer understanding of contemporary forms of, and conditions for, activism is relevant beyond TJ, as activism and professionalism also have complex and entangled histories and relationships in other national and inter-/transnational fields such as

development aid and social work (e.g., Krause, 2014; Yuill and Mueller-Hirth, 2019). I want to highlight that everyday perspectives are particularly useful for ‘seeing’ activism in professional fields where activism has no official place. To illustrate this and set the scene for the remainder of this article, I begin with a participant observation – and interpretation – of activism during a TJ event in Nairobi/Kenya.

Setting the scene: activist interludes at a professional event in Nairobi

In March 2018, I had the opportunity to attend the commemoration of the International Day of the Right to Truth held at Kenyatta International Conference Center in Nairobi. The event was partially funded by the Dutch embassy and organized by the Kenya Transitional Justice Network (KTJN), a loose association of Nairobi-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs), individual professionals (mostly lawyers) and a few more grassroots oriented activists. Although commemoration was the official purpose of the event, a good portion of it turned out to have a more forward-looking focus: namely the issue of a future reparations program in Kenya to be funded by the Kenyan government. Such a program to benefit victims and survivors of ‘historical injustices’ – from Kenyan independence in 1963 until mass post-election violence in 2007/2008 – had already been envisioned in the report of the Kenya Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) submitted in 2013 (cf. Gitari Ndung’u, 2014: 9–10). But no program had (or has) been implemented so far. This was (and is) despite efforts by some KTJN-members who had been working with the Kenyan Department of Justice to finalize a reparation policy framework (cf. Songa, 2018: 32).

I was sitting next to a Nairobi-based KTJN-member and survivor of sexual violence, Zawadi Kiara,¹ who had invited me to join the event. It featured: a photograph exhibition on the history of colonial and post-independence human rights violations in Kenya; a brief visual performance by survivors of sexual violence (committed during post-election violence in 2007/2008, see e.g., Materu, 2015: 49–53); a number of lengthy podium speeches by international partner/donor, KTJN and Kenyan government representatives; and several musical interludes by Kenyan artists. We were listening and swaying along to a fiery liberation song performed by a band called *Mau Mau All Stars* when Zawadi drew my attention to the podium. She pointed out a representative from the Office of the Attorney General (which is part of the Department of Justice), a middle-aged lawyer wearing a gray skirt-and-blazer ensemble, who was enthusiastically singing along to the liberation song and even raising and shaking her fist. ‘Look at her. Now she is really feeling like an activist’, was Zawadi’s amused comment.²

Next on the program was a speech by this lawyer, in which she elaborated challenges and achievements in the process of formulating a policy for a reparations program. She asserted that the Department of Justice together with its KTJN civil society partners was currently working towards such a policy but that it was no fast nor easy business:

For serious matters, for expensive matters such as the human rights violations [. . .], we cannot make payments without a structural framework. This may not be very nice to hear. But the fact remains that we have to have a framework, and we are working on a framework.³

The next and final item on the program was to allow questions and contributions from victims and survivors in the audience. A few spoke out and relayed experiences of loss, pain and injustice, including instances of police violence they had suffered only recently.⁴ Some survivors directly addressed the lawyer from the Office of the Attorney General and demanded that reparations should finally become a reality. When it was her turn to answer, the lawyer drew a deep breath and began to explain that ‘not every matter [. . .] belongs to reparation, belongs to compensation in the way that you are thinking’.⁵ She detailed that victim’s suffering needed to be verified via certain procedures and that it had to fit the conditions and categories defined under the yet-to-be-finalized policy in order for them to become eligible and receive payments or services (such as free health care). It was clear that these procedures, conditions and categories would exclude many, not least those victims and survivors whose suffering was too recent to be covered by the envisaged program.

Having to deliver this message visibly distressed the lawyer from the Office of the Attorney General. After a brief pause, she suddenly switched pace: she informed her audience that her first name was Agnes (there had been some confusion during introductions) and encouraged those who had spoken out to come to see her after the event. At one point, she even turned off the microphone and leaned down to her audience to make informal suggestions as to where they might turn to raise attention and possibly find support for their claims for justice. Agnes was now speaking Kiswahili and, according to Zawadi who translated for me, she suggested ‘going to the media’.⁶

This constituted quite a break in Agnes’ way of addressing her audience. By speaking to victims and survivors directly and focusing on their immediate situations and pathways for action, she briefly behaved like an activist in the sense that her focus switched to bringing about change in people’s lives, rather than elaborating and defending a policy that might one day bring benefits for some. But her brief shift into activist mode did not destabilize the event. Agnes soon returned to her seat on the podium and switched back to English. And yet her excursion points to the ways in which activism can be present, to some degree, even in the context of a professional event. Unlike the performed liberation song – arguably a stylized form of activism that mostly served as decoration – Agnes’ shift into activist mode appeared to be triggered by real (if possibly only momentary) frustration with her professional work; her frustration, however, did not incline her to cause a major disruption. This short episode already contains hints at the kinds of experiences and choices shaping the examples of tacit activism that I am going to describe and discuss in greater detail below.

In the following, I begin by briefly revisiting the history of the field of TJ (cf. Arthur, 2009; Subotić, 2012) and drawing on this history to illustrate a conceptual distinction between activism and professionalism as different modes of struggling/working towards desired change. This distinction did not initially guide my empirical research. I developed it in the process of exploring materials from my field research (interviews, field notes and obtained documents) while also thinking and reading about professionalization and the power of expertise in TJ and other fields (e.g., Eagleton-Pierce, 2018; Ferguson, 2013; Kennedy, 2018; Thunder Hawk, 2007). Once developed, I used this distinction to analyze the relationship between activism and professionalism that I had already sensed in my field research materials. Following the

introduction of this conceptual distinction, I briefly describe two established lines of thought on the relationship between activism and professionalism, which also inform my analysis: one highlights the domesticating effects of professionalization (e.g., Allen, 2007 [1969]; Engle, 2020; Ferguson, 2013), while the other suggests that activists can make a difference when they engage with, and/or themselves become professionals (e.g. Eagleton-Pierce, 2018; Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

Next, I provide some background on my field research and then describe and discuss examples of tacit activism among professional TJ work in Sierra Leone and Kenya. I want to stress that my aim is not to conduct a case comparison but to detail and illustrate what tacit activism can look like, based on different examples I encountered with three key interlocutors. I do not claim nor expect that these examples are exhaustive. But they should give readers concrete ideas that will make it easier to notice and identify tacit activism in professional contexts. Finally, I conclude by summarizing and pointing to a direction for further research.

Activism and professionalism: different modes of struggling/working towards desired change

The professionalization of TJ is usually described as a fairly recent process that has taken place over the last two decades (since the early 2000s) and in the context of an increasingly standardized inclusion of TJ measures into donor-funded peacebuilding and development cooperation. In her seminal article on the topic, Jelena Subotić (2012: 117) finds that TJ has become much more ‘obviously professionalized’ in this context and over this time frame. Focusing on leading international NGOs (INGOs), such as the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), she argues that they have seen ‘a profound cultural shift from do-gooder volunteerism to professionalization, specialization and bureaucratization’ (Subotić, 2012: 118).

Yet this focus on fairly recent developments omits a longer history of professionalism in TJ. One might even argue that TJ already emerged as a largely professional field – with always already distant roots in activist struggles. This latter take is supported by Paige Arthur’s (2009) ‘Conceptual History of Transitional Justice’, in which she traces the emergence of core questions and concerns that shaped the practice of what soon became called ‘transitional justice’ to a number of conferences in the late 1980s. Arthur particularly zooms in on a 1988 conference titled ‘State Crimes: Punishment or Pardon’ organized by the Aspen Institute, a US think tank, and funded by the Ford Foundation (Arthur, 2009: 349). The Aspen Institute conference brought together ‘human rights activists, lawyers and legal scholars, policymakers, journalists, donors, and comparative politics experts’ (Arthur, 2009: 324) from various countries. Its purpose was to devise appropriate measures for dealing with past state violence and repression so as to also support (and by no means impede) transitions to democracy. Discussions at this conference largely focused on the design and combination of measures to be employed by post-repression successor governments in Latin America and elsewhere, including trials and commissions of inquiry. Arthur (2009: 355) argues that the conference’s conceptual structure, that is, its core theme of devising sophisticated measures of dealing with the past to support transitions to democracy, signaled the emergence of the TJ field.

This early focus on sophisticated measures was already far removed from the activism that had only recently drawn attention to the issue of *past* state violence and repression. Citing an interview with Juan Méndez – director of Americas Watch (now Human Rights Watch) in the 1980s and later president of ICTJ in the 2000s, who had also participated in the Aspen Institute conference – Arthur highlights that it had been ‘local human rights groups’ (Arthur, 2009: 335) in Argentina who first put the issue of accountability for past abuses on the transnational human rights agenda in the 1980s. However, these local groups did not participate in the Aspen Institute conference and their activism was quite different from the professional concerns discussed at the conference.

Take, for example, the activism of *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) in Argentina. The *Madres*’ public demonstrations to demand information about their abducted (‘disappeared’) children already began in the late 1970s when Argentina’s military dictatorship was still in power; they continued over decades (cf. Bosco, 2004). Though riven by internal conflicts, the *Madres* struggled on to keep alive the memory of the ‘disappeared’. One *Madres* subgroup also began to voice demands for social justice to continue what they saw as their children’s fight for a better society (cf. Bosco, 2004: 388). Their activism focused directly on bringing about and, as far as possible, already living the change they wanted to achieve – for example, in public commemorations and by sharing their experiences with young activists (cf. Bosco, 2004: 391) – rather than investing most of their energy into devising sophisticated measures to support change.

Following Arthur’s (2009) account of the emergence of the TJ field, there are good reasons to regard professionalism as inbuilt and not as a more recent development. Major INGOs in the field have certainly seen and gone through changes over the last decades. But these have not greatly affected the dominant mode of working in the field of TJ, which is about devising, implementing and overseeing sophisticated measures to facilitate and support ‘transitions’ – that is, desired change.⁷ Doing this professional work does not usually include activism of the kind practiced by the *Madres* and by many other unprofessional(ized) groups and movements (see e.g., Gready and Robins, 2017).

A conceptual distinction

Thinking about activism and professionalism in terms of different modes of struggling/working towards desired change is at the heart of the conceptual distinction I want to propose. This distinction does not focus on different types of actors – nominal activists and professionals – but *on what actors do*. This is how it enables analyses of how activists and professionals actually approach desired change, in an activist or professional mode or in some combination of both. In short, my proposal is as follows: while activism focuses directly on bringing about change in people’s lives, professionalism is about designing, implementing, and overseeing sophisticated measures.

Because of its immediate concern with desired change, activism often directly involves many of those whose lives it seeks to affect and change for the better. It is, in principle, open to participation by everyone with a credible commitment to its cause and does not require formal training. There is, in fact, often distrust of outside experts who are not accountable to the group or movement (see e.g., Gready and Robins, 2017: 968–969; Madlingozi, 2010: 213; Thunder Hawk, 2007: 104). Activism calls for personal

determination, dedication, and willingness to make sacrifices. This includes struggling on without the material support of donors (such as foundations, governments, and international organizations) who usually demand professionalized approaches that entail the risk of diverting and deradicalizing activism. Red Power social justice activist Madonna Thunder Hawk put it this way, ‘Activism is tough; it is not for people interested in building a career’ (Thunder Hawk, 2007: 106).

Professionalism, on the other hand, is about getting sophisticated measures ‘right’ according to the current state of expertise in a respective field (see e.g., Kennedy, 2018: 163; Menzel, 2020b: 309). This is why professionalism usually requires an academic education or, at the very least, task-specific training (e.g., interview training for local truth commission statement takers and the like). It involves identifying, designing, and implementing – and often also documenting, monitoring, and evaluating – sophisticated measures and delivering outputs. Such measures and their outputs are often connected to visions of change that they are meant to facilitate and support; this is certainly the case in the field of TJ (think truth commission reports, verdicts, and reparation programs). But unlike activism, professional activities can come to a successful completion long before and even without eventually effecting promised and/or expected change. This is because their official success depends not actually on achieving change in the lives of ‘beneficiaries’ but on professional agreement that the right things have been done and achieved (see also Mosse, 2005: chapter 7).

All of this is not to say that activism and professionalism cannot combine or that they exist in no relationship to one another. On the contrary, it was exactly my interest in combinations and the relationship between activism and professionalism (arising from my field research experiences and materials) that led me to formulate this conceptual distinction for analytical purposes. Moreover, there are existing bodies of scholarship that already contain insights and ideas on relations and combinations between activism and professionalism. I want to highlight two established lines of thought in particular, as they provide important points of reference for my ensuing discussion of tacit activism: one highlights the domesticating effects of professionalization, while the other finds that activists can achieve at least some of their goals when they engage with, and/or themselves become professionals.

Relations and combinations between activism and professionalism

The idea and finding that ‘professionalization’ – usually meaning training, bureaucratization, and the availability of donor-funding and formal employment – domesticates activism, in the sense of rendering it compatible with prevailing conditions and power relations, is quite common across scholarship on social movements and professional fields such as social work and humanitarian aid. Some authors find evidence of strategic domestication, others focus more on structural effects. Examples of the more strategic variant are Robert L. Allen’s (2007 [1969]) and Karen Ferguson’s (2013) studies of the Ford Foundation’s impact on the anti-capitalist Black Power movement in the United States. Starting in the mid-1960s, the Ford Foundation rolled out a massive program to fund initiatives led by activists associated with the movement and invested heavily – via educational programs, research centers, and individual grants and fellowships – in

professionalizing Black activism, thereby also leading activists into directions that were compatible with liberal capitalism. Allen describes that prospective youth leaders ‘were taught skills in canvassing, interviewing, and recording community opinions. There was apparently little discussion of who would ever read (not to mention act upon) their interviews and reports [. . .]’ (Allen, 2007 [1969]: 57). Ferguson stresses that the Ford Foundation’s efforts constituted a deliberate ‘top-down and conservative strategy of leadership development to manage the black community’ (Ferguson, 2013: 11).

Other authors emphasize structural effects that impede or reign in activist ambitions in professional fields. One example is Monika Krause’s (2014) analysis of how the ‘log-frame’, a widely used tool for planning, monitoring, and evaluating projects, shapes NGO-practice in the fields of humanitarian and development aid. According to Krause, the logframe normalizes a narrow focus on improving some few conditions for selected beneficiaries – rather than considering the sources of suffering and inequality, and a more comprehensive politics of fighting them (cf. Krause, 2014: chapter 3). Additional strains result from bureaucratic requirements such as producing extensive documentation. These absorb not only professionals’ imagination but also their time. Chris Yuill and Natasha Mueller-Hirth (2019: 1544) analyze the current situation of United Kingdom social workers who feel caught up in ‘paperwork time’ with little opportunity to do what many regard as their actual calling, namely ‘to better the lives of others’.

There is also scholarship with a more positive take on activists’ ability to make a difference once they professionalize and/or enter professional fields. For example, analyzing international trade justice activism directed at policymakers, Matthew Eagleton-Pierce (2018) introduces the figure of the ‘critical technician’. Critical technicians are reform-oriented professional activists, usually with an academic background and a paid position in an (I)NGO, who command the kind of expertise that is valued in the respective field where s/he seeks to make a difference. Critical technicians speak the professional language of those they seek to influence. They analyze existing policies and their impacts in order to identify contradictions and undesired effects. These can then be used to argue for reforms – without unsettling the prevailing orthodoxy. Critical technicians know just how far they can push their target audience. There is always a point at which demands become ‘unrealistic’ and may damage their own and their organization’s professional reputation (cf. Eagleton-Pierce, 2018: 249). In other words, critical technicians can effect some limited policy changes exactly because their activism is domesticated.

A particularly well researched example of professional activism are efforts to put conflict-related sexual violence against women on the international policy-agenda in the 1990s and early 2000 (e.g., Engle, 2020; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Here, the record is mixed and its evaluation depends very much on whether ‘success’ is judged in terms policy influence, support for grassroots struggles or even desired change. Impressive achievements in the realm of high politics – including the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolutions up until today – have been accompanied by increasingly harsh critiques. Feminist scholars and scholar-activists have drawn attention to harmful compromises and exclusions made in order to put sexual violence on the international security policy agenda, including an overemphasis on sexual violence as the decisive harm suffered by (racialized) women (e.g., Engle, 2020). Feminist grassroots activists in post-conflict countries are

now often expected to embrace WPS topics and frames, especially if they are interested in access to institutional allies and donor funding – to the detriment of struggles that are not easily framed in these terms (see e.g., Martín de Almagro, 2018: 16–19).

In sum, existing scholarship clearly indicates that relations and combinations between activism and professionalism are always shaped by power relations and professionals/activists' structured choices – be they based on reflection and planning or habit and intuition (or some mix thereof). The same is also true for the examples of tacit activism among professional TJ work that I describe in the following pages.

Tacit activism among professional TJ work in Sierra Leone and Kenya

The fieldwork that generated the empirical basis for this article – three months in Sierra Leone and six weeks in Nairobi⁸ – took place in the context of a research project on the truth commissions in Sierra Leone (2002–2004) and Kenya (2008–2013). Among other things, the project asked whether and how both commissions' work on women and sexual violence still had repercussions at the time of research between 2016 and 2018. I approached these questions by aiming to identify repercussions (or their absence) in current donor-funded efforts and local initiatives concerned with the situation of women and girls. I mapped focus topics and paid close attention to the activities, experiences, views and concerns of people involved in donor-funded projects and local initiatives (see also Menzel 2019). This is how I met three people who were working in professional donor-funded projects while also pursuing positive change for victims and survivors of violence and injustice in ways that I eventually came to think of as *tacit activism*. They themselves did not use this term. In fact, only one of them described her efforts as activism.

With hindsight, it seems to me that I have heard about and come across many more examples of tacit activism (and not only in my latest field research). But the three interlocutors I focus on in this article stand out because they allowed me to take a closer look, and they discussed their tacit plans and efforts with me. They had different backgrounds and were doing very different jobs at the time of my research. Moreover, what they did in terms of tacit activism, how they did it, and their reasons for doing it varied in a number of ways. But their tacit plans and efforts also had three things in common: (a) they were not part of their official project activities; (b) my interlocutors did not advertise these plans and efforts to their (prospective) donors; and (c) and yet they made these plans and engaged in these efforts exactly because they wanted to meet at least some of the expectations that had been raised in the context of professional TJ projects.

It is helpful to relate these commonalities back to the two established lines of thought on relations and combinations between activism and professionalism that I outlined above, in order to clarify the features of tacit activism before I detail the three different examples. In some ways, tacit activism is not unlike the professional activism that Eagleton-Pierce (2018) describes for the 'critical technician'. Like that of critical technicians, my interlocutors' activism was domesticated in the sense that it entailed no radical challenge to, nor even a disruption of, the system of donor-funded professional project work. In fact, probably the most 'radical' among my interlocutors (Zawadi who already appeared in my description of the TJ event in Nairobi) was also working hard to become

recognized as a proper professional within this system. But unlike critical technicians, my interlocutors did not use recognized expertise to develop sharp-witted ideas for reforms and to influence powerful actors. Instead, they sought to make a difference in the lives of victims and survivors by also – in addition to their regular project work – making tacit efforts and plans that were not officially part and purpose of the donor-funded projects they were working in.

The first example I present below is one I encountered with Ibrahim Kamara who worked at a local office of the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) in Sierra Leone. NaCSA is a Sierra Leonean government agency mandated to deliver pro-poor services. Its projects are co-funded by external donors.⁹ Among other things, NaCSA was in charge of implementing a reparations program for victims of wartime violence (from the 1991–2002 civil war) that had been recommended in the final report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission published in 2004 (see e.g., Williams and Opdam, 2017). The program was at its winding down stage at the time of my research in early 2017, even though many victims were still waiting and hoping to benefit. This was why Ibrahim supported a tacit scheme to bring (some) victims – especially those who had not yet received and likely would not receive any reparations – as beneficiaries into another donor-funded NaCSA project.

The next two examples are from my field research in Nairobi where I met members of the city's active human rights civil society circle, including Atlas Nkulu, a lawyer working at one of Kenya's foremost human rights NGOs, and Zawadi Kiara, a Nairobi-based activist advocating for survivors of sexual violence. Both were involved in KTJN, the civil society network advocating for a reparations program that had originally been recommended by the Kenyan TJRC in 2013 (cf. Gitari Ndungú, 2014: 9–10). Atlas had been closely involved in KTJN's recent collaboration with the Department of Justice to develop a reparations policy (see also my description of a TJ event in Nairobi that set the scene for this article) even though participating in this collaboration was never part of her/his¹⁰ official duties. As there was no official donor support for this collaboration, Atlas and other civil society lawyers tacitly integrated it into their everyday work schedules in the context of other, often donor-funded projects. Zawadi, on the other hand, was working hard to get donors interested in her vision for a broad movement of survivors of sexual violence across Kenya – so far to no avail. Her tacit plan for pursuing this vision was to stay involved in donor-funded project work, even though she often found it inadequate. Zawadi wanted to use available piecemeal donor support to keep some limited activities going and establish herself as a recognized professional to eventually win donors' trust. She hoped to then persuade donors to invest in her broader and long-term vision for a sustainable movement.

I now describe these three examples of tacit activism in more detail and then conclude by pointing out important implications and directions for further research.

Reparations by other means

When I met Ibrahim Kamara in February 2017, he was in his late thirties and had been working at the local NaCSA office in one of Sierra Leone's larger provincial towns¹¹ for about 10 years. He was not, however, on any kind of permanent contract. The way I

understood it, Ibrahim had paid project work (e.g., as enumerator or interviewer) when it was available, and he received handouts from his superiors when it was not.¹² He made it clear that he took pride in being involved in what he regarded as (mostly) important work and that he was loyal to his NaCSA superiors/patrons. Although he was critical of many aspects of NaCSA's work, he insisted that they (including himself) were trying their best with what donors and the government handed them.

In 2008, NaCSA had received the mandate to prepare and implement a long-awaited reparations program, which eventually focused on registering, verifying, and re-verifying various categories of victims of wartime violence and handing out cash payments to those who fulfilled all necessary criteria. Although the program had originally envisioned services such as pensions, free education, free health care, and skills training, the most frequent service actually provided were one-time or short-term cash payments of about US\$100 (cf. National Commission for Social Action, 2016: 7; Williams and Opdam, 2017: 1292). This was due to a lack of funding as donors had expected significant contributions from the Sierra Leone government and proved unwilling to step in when these funds were not forthcoming (cf. Suma and Correa, 2009: 13).

Ibrahim had been involved in the reparations program from the start and personally knew many of its beneficiaries as well as people who had not passed the program's verification processes. At the time of my field research, he was part of a team doing a last round of re-verification interviews with war widows (in other parts of the country, ongoing re-verification focused on victims of sexual violence)¹³ – even though, as Ibrahim explained, it seemed that NaCSA did not actually have funding to distribute payments among re-verified victims. These funds would have to come from the Sierra Leone government to complement donor contributions; and it did not seem as if this was going to happen.¹⁴

Ibrahim's frustration over these matters was softened by his excitement about a more recent NaCSA-run and largely World Bank-funded program (with a contribution from the Sierra Leone government, cf. World Bank, 2019: 16), which was expected to be expanded soon. This was the so-called Social Safety Net (SSN) program, which targeted the poorest and 'most vulnerable' households in the country and aimed to provide them with regular trimonthly cash payments (World Bank, 2014, 2019). Ibrahim explained that he liked this program because it focused on people who were often not able to work and could not be expected to help themselves. Moreover, unlike the reparations program, SSN payments were supposed to be more permanent, although this would still depend on the availability of external donor and/or government funding.¹⁵

There was an additional reason why Ibrahim was enthusiastic about the SSN program. According to him, NaCSA was trying to bring victims – especially those who would not receive any reparations – into the SSN project.¹⁶ This was also mentioned in passing during interviews I later conducted at NaCSA headquarters in the capital city Freetown.¹⁷ I was unable to ascertain the status and origin of these plans, but I am fairly certain that they were not part of any official strategy for two reasons: I have found no reference to them, neither in pertinent National Commission for Social Action (2016) nor World Bank (2014, 2019) publications; and the idea of predefining SSN beneficiaries, however apparently poor and vulnerable they may be, goes against the sophisticated procedures for identifying the 'most vulnerable' via a three-stage process, including proxy means testing, devised by the World Bank (2014: 5).

However, it is important to stress that Ibrahim did not set out to undermine these sophisticated procedures. His tacit efforts rather aimed at giving victims a better shot at demonstrating their actually existing vulnerability during upcoming visits by SSN enumerators. In particular, Ibrahim saw the need to explain to potential beneficiaries that these enumerators would not be looking for verifiable stories of wartime victimization but for indicators of most severe vulnerability. During meetings with victims that Ibrahim organized for me, I was usually only allowed to ask some few questions before he went about disseminating information about the SSN program. In one village, this amounted to something of a sensitization event. Ibrahim had assembled a group of women who had been trying to register with the reparations program as victims of various categories (plus a considerable number of bystanders). He explained that they needed to give the right answers if people should come to the village to assess their SSN eligibility (which, as Ibrahim explained to me, was likely as the village was in an area that had already been selected for future World Bank activities). He stressed that the new program was not about wartime suffering but helping the ‘most vulnerable’ (he used this English expression). Ibrahim explained that they would be asked funny questions, even how many clothes they had, and that they must not be shy and tell the truth.¹⁸

Ibrahim made these efforts knowing that many victims and others in desperate need would still not make it into the new program. This had already become apparent during a first round of selecting beneficiaries the previous year. Although the World Bank had devised sophisticated procedures for identifying and verifying the ‘most vulnerable’, there were just too many who matched this category and not enough funding for all.¹⁹

Integrated efforts and a tacit long-term plan

While the reparations program in Sierra Leone came late and underfunded, there has been no official reparations program at all in Kenya so far. This is despite a public declaration of political will by Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, which he delivered in a state of the nation address in March 2015. The president announced the creation of a fund of 10 billion Kenyan Shillings (about \$ 9.5 million) to be used for ‘restorative justice’ and offered a blanket apology for all past wrongs ‘on my own behalf, that of my government and all past governments’.²⁰ The timing of this declaration is significant. It came three months after the International Criminal Court withdrew all charges against President Kenyatta in December 2014. The prosecution had been unable to present sufficient evidence against him due to the intimidation, killing, and bribery of potential witnesses (Lynch, 2018: 73–74). Both Kenyatta and his deputy president had been charged with directing and organizing the 2007/2008 postelection violence (cf. Lynch, 2018: 69–70), which had produced many of those victims, including survivors of sexual violence, who would be potential beneficiaries of a reparations program.

It was a truly bizarre situation, agreed Atlas Nkulu during our long interview in March 2018. We met in her/his office at one of Kenya’s most prominent human rights NGOs and spoke for over two hours. I was especially interested in learning more about Atlas’ involvement in KTJN’s recent collaboration on producing a reparations policy with the Department of Justice. Atlas explained that, on the one hand, this collaboration had been quite successful in the sense that they had managed to formulate a good policy

framework. S/he let me have a look at the document that had been drafted and argued that the policy was ready to be implemented. It had been submitted to the Office of the Attorney General for consideration in 2017 – but nothing had happened since (see also Songa, 2018: 32).

Our interview took place four days before the KTJN-organized commemoration of the International Day of the Right to Truth, where Agnes – a representative from the Office of the Attorney General – claimed that the policy still lacked some details, especially regarding who would be eligible to receive reparations. During our interview, Atlas voiced a different opinion as to why the process was being delayed. S/he speculated that a good portion of the 10 billion Shillings originally dedicated to reparations had already been spent, mostly on politically motivated handouts. Atlas declared her/his frustration over this situation and stressed that Kenyan civil society needed to learn from this experience. S/he stated that KTJN had never had a donor for the work they had done with the Department of Justice. But even if they had received funding the result would be the same. They would still only have the reparations policy but no implementation.

At this point, I had to ask Atlas to hold on and explain a bit more. How had they worked without donor funding? And what exactly was it that s/he felt Kenyan civil society needed to learn? S/he explained that it would have been impossible to find a donor willing to fund work on a reparations policy with the Department of Justice. In addition to more general donor fatigue in the area of human rights, donors shied away from funding TJ projects in Kenya given the bizarre political situation outlined above. There were still some donors who would give money for special events or short capacity building workshops. But, overall, funding was extremely scarce. This was why KTJN members had decided to ‘integrate’ their collaboration with the Department of Justice into their ongoing work. In other words, some individuals had also dedicated time to this collaboration while being employed in donor-funded projects on other issues. According to Atlas, s/he and her/his colleagues had engaged in this kind of ‘integrated’ activity because they finally wanted to see some improvement for victims and survivors. ‘Their lives have to change’, was how Atlas put it.²¹

In terms of learning, Atlas emphasized that civil society needed to think more about not just formulating policies but also getting them implemented. More concretely, they – Atlas was apparently referring to human rights lawyers like her-/himself – should aim to work more closely with victims and survivors at the grassroots. Once they understood that it was really all about them, victims and survivors would be willing to stage protests and build up political pressure towards the actual implementation of the reparations policy. Atlas stressed that this was why it was so important to also have as KTJN members activists such as Zawadi Kiara who would be able to mobilize the grassroots.

However, when I met Zawadi on various occasions in February and March 2018, she was not at all preoccupied with the idea of staging public protests. Instead, she was juggling several projects and other commitments (including attending KTJN meetings) and was hoping to establish herself as a recognized human-rights professional. According to Zawadi, one problem was that donors were suspicious of people like her who were not obvious members of the local elite. ‘Donors want you to have a car and dress well,’²² was how Zawadi put it. Matching these expectations and living up to the picture of a professional worthy of funding required constant efforts that also took time away from activism.

Zawadi did not have a university degree nor work experience in a renowned NGO. Her expertise – as she explicitly termed it – came from being a survivor of sexual violence herself and from years of struggling to build a movement of survivors across Kenya. Although this movement was still small, Zawadi stressed that it had much potential, ‘They [the survivor-activists] are passionate about it. They want to transform their communities.’²³ Zawadi had plans to build the nascent movement into a decentralized network that would offer solidarity and practical help to fellow survivors and also engage in sensitization, advocacy, and policy work. Moreover, Zawadi’s vision did not exclusively focus on survivors of sexual violence in the context of contentious elections (such as in 2007/2008 and again in 2017, cf. Human Rights Watch, 2017). Instead, the movement was meant to bring together survivors of all types of sexual violence, including ‘ordinary’ crime and intimate partner violence. Zawadi had recently formulated this vision in the form of a professional ‘strategic plan’ that included an implementation matrix as well as ideas for monitoring and evaluation.

Zawadi was well aware that her vision for a movement was too broad, too expensive, and too long-term to easily catch donors’ attention. ‘They [donors] have their objectives and you have to change your concept to match their objectives’, was how Zawadi put it²⁴ (see also e.g., Hearn, 2007; Phillips et al., 2016). In her daily work, Zawadi mostly did what she had to do and had already succeeded in winning some piecemeal funding – if only for projects that she felt were merely a drop in the ocean. Zawadi explained that she worked hard to keep these small projects coming, not least to establish herself as a trustworthy professional in the world of donor-funded project work. This did not mean that she was giving up on her broader vision – on the contrary. Zawadi did not spell it out in so many words, but it became clear that she regarded establishing herself as a trustworthy professional as a necessary step that would (or at least might) eventually give her a shot at realizing her vision. She wanted to bring donors to eventually trust her judgement and capacity, and provide her with meaningful funding for coordinated and more continuous efforts to get a lasting movement going across the country. After a few years, Zawadi envisioned that the movement would mostly sustain itself via volunteer activism and membership contributions, and continue to fight for survivors and against sexual violence.²⁵

Conclusion

This article contributes to a recent body of work (e.g., Björkdahl et al., 2019; Visoka, 2019) that has emphasized the value of everyday perspectives that add depth and nuance to seemingly well-known IR-topics, such as professional TJ. Based on field research in Sierra Leone and Kenya, I have drawn attention to and detailed different examples of *tacit activism* among professional TJ work. This particular combination of activism and professionalism is noteworthy for two reasons. For one thing, it shows how those working or seeking to work in professional projects – who may appear as if they always strictly adhered to donor’s preferences and priorities (e.g., Hearn, 2007) – have goals of their own and struggle to make a difference for victims and survivors. For another, it also highlights the limitations of their situated agency and its complicity – by remaining non-disruptive and probably even ameliorating discontent – with donor-funded professionalism that does not prioritize concrete, positive change in the lives of victims and survivors.

I want to close by pointing out a promising direction for further research. Although the examples of tacit activism described in this article all feature national actors engaged in donor-funded work, I see no reason why tacit activism should be restricted to such actors only. On the contrary, I expect that tacit activism is much more widely practiced, also in INGOs and likely even among employees and civil servants in donor organizations. Indeed, it would be worthwhile to get a better idea of just how common it is. For example, findings of widely practiced tacit activism would suggest that it (unintentionally) contributes to stabilizing professional donor-funded work by channeling hopes and frustrations into non-disruptive actions. This could offer incentives for donors to deliberately create more space for tacit activism, for example, by providing some form of core funding to their recipient partners. It could also spark reflection and discussions among (professional) activists on whether or not they want to stabilize, reform or possibly reinvent the system they work in. In terms of research, it is worth highlighting that noticing and studying tacit activism does not necessarily require new research projects that focus exclusively on tacit activism. Instead, my suggestion would be to integrate and 'mainstream' interest in tacit activism into ongoing and future research that pays attention to everyday work in different organizations/by different actors working in TJ and related fields.

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ORCID iD

Anne Menzel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5466-7404>

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Field notes, 23 March 2018.
3. Transcript from my recording of the event, 23 March 2018.
4. There had also been new cases of apparently organized and/or politically motivated sexual violence in the context of Kenya's 2017 elections (cf. Human Rights Watch, 2017).
5. Transcript from my recording of the event, 23 March 2018.
6. Field notes, 23 March 2018.
7. Since the 1980s, the kinds of transitions envisioned in the field of transitional justice have become much more 'holistic', also encompassing social and economic justice. For a discussion see, for example, Lynch (2018: 13–18).

8. It was my first field research in Kenya whereas I have done a cumulative total of 12 months of field research in several parts of Sierra Leone since 2009.
9. See the National Commission for Social Action homepage, <http://www.nacsa.gov.sl/about.html> (accessed 22 May 2020).
10. Atlas asked me not to specify her/his gender in order to better protect her/his anonymity.
11. I do not specify the location to protect Ibrahim's anonymity.
12. In my experience, such arrangements are fairly common in Sierra Leone, for example, also in political party offices and local NGO offices.
13. Interview at National Commission for Social Action headquarters in Freetown/notes, 23 February 2017.
14. Informal conversation/notes, 6 February 2017. During a phone conversation in January 2018, Ibrahim confirmed that no payments had been made and that the reparations program was coming to a close.
15. Informal conversation/notes, 9 February 2017.
16. Informal conversations/notes, 6 February, 7 February, and 9 February 2017.
17. Interview, 23 February 2017.
18. Field notes, 9 February 2017.
19. Informal conversation/notes, 6 February 2017; and interview at National Commission for Social Action headquarters/notes in Freetown, 23 February 2017
20. The full text of President Kenyatta's speech is available at <http://www.president.go.ke/2015/03/26/speech-by-his-excellency-hon-uhuru-kenyatta-c-g-h-president-and-commander-in-chief-of-the-defence-forces-of-the-republic-of-kenya-during-the-state-of-the-nation-address-at-parliament-buildings-na/> (accessed 12 May 2020).
21. Interview notes, 19 March 2018.
22. Informal conversation/notes, 29 March 2020.
23. Informal conversation/notes, 9 March 2018.
24. Informal conversation/notes, 9 March 2018.
25. Informal conversation/notes, 29 March 2020.

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Author biography

Anne Menzel is a postdoctoral researcher at SCRIPTS Cluster of Excellence, based at Freie Universität, Berlin. Her work combines perspectives from political science, sociology and social anthropology and has focused on experiences and practices of donor-funded peacebuilding, humanitarian and development aid and transitional justice. She has published on topics such as: ex-combatants' efforts at self-(re)integration; conflicts and hopes around foreign direct investments; neoliberal values and teenage pregnancy in post-Ebola Sierra Leone; and the work of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission. [Email: anne.menzel@fu-berlin.de]