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Has APAD lost its passion?

Reflections on engaged and applied work in anthropology of development

Sarah Fichtner*, Anneke Newman**

Introduction

The starting point for this reflective piece was an observation we made ("we" being Sarah Fichtner and Anneke Newman, who have been members of the APAD bureau and editorial board since 2015 and 2018 respectively) that there seems to be a certain lack of passion for APAD's activities among its members. We came to this conclusion because while many "senior" members were keen to contribute to this 30th anniversary issue, only a few "young" or mid-career members of APAD, especially those based in Africa, were initially interested. People often say that they "don't have time" – and we acknowledge the impact of the neoliberalisation of the university and precarity on the strain on our time – but we would argue that people always find time for activities that inspire them and which they feel passionate about. So why are the "younger" generation of members less passionate about the association's activities – and its future – than "older" members? We appreciate that the creation of APAD was informed by a radical left-wing philosophy aimed, among other things, at breaking down hierarchies between professors and students and between scholars in the North and South, and supporting the development of expertise in scientific research in Africa (APAD, 2018). We believe that the values which inspired the foundation of APAD thirty years ago are just as, if not more, relevant today – so why the lack of enthusiasm in talking about the future of the association? And more importantly, what can we do about it?

In this piece, we suggest that one possible cause for this waning passion might be that the early militant spirit and associated actions APAD started out with have been a little

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lost over time. We mean this to be an observation rather than a critique as such; it is only to be expected that to some extent once a small-scale grassroots movement becomes a larger and a more established association, day-to-day bureaucratic activities inevitably take time and energy away from the kinds of activist projects that drove it in the first place. But there is a risk that these bureaucratic logics contribute to a feeling of alienation from the grassroots, including their connections with anthropologists working in practical terms in the world of development and social change.

We unpack this situation based on our personal experiences and positionalities. In particular, we consider ourselves to be scholar-activists who carry out engaged research, not just because our lack of stable academic contracts oblige us to take on these forms of work, but also because this is the type of activity that inspires us and ignites our passion. We define engaged anthropology as “anthropological practice that respects the dignity and rights of all humans and has a beneficent effect on the promotion of social justice” (Low and Merry, 2010: 204). We understand applied anthropology to be a more specific set of activities within the category of engaged anthropology whereby anthropologists use their knowledge and skills to solve practical problems (Van Willigen, 2002: ix). Thus, engaged anthropology can involve conducting academic research on social problems or bringing anthropological knowledge to the attention of the mass media. Applied anthropology is even more hands-on, as it involves anthropologists informing public policy-making processes; applying anthropological empirical approaches to assessments or evaluations; sharing knowledge production and power with community members, often through participatory and action research methods; and linking anthropological theory to praxis (Low and Merry, 2010: 204). We support our arguments with a select few sources (Olivier de Sardan, 2004, 2011; Rosa, 2020a, 2020b; Yarrow and Venkatesan, 2012) that we believe will stimulate an understanding of our observations. Finally, we suggest some practical possibilities that APAD might pursue in order to reconnect with its activist roots. This piece is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of arguments on the merits and challenges of engaged anthropology, but rather a starting point for discussion within the association.

What space is there within APAD and its activities for anthropologists outside academia?

As we reflected on the apparent lack of “passion” within APAD, we began to discuss our experiences of APAD more generally, and one of the issues we identified was that there is limited space for anthropologists who are not based in academic institutions. S. Fichtner reflects on this question:

> APAD has always been a great extended academic patchwork family that welcomed me right from the start of my PhD in 2006. I attended the summer school at the LASDEL (Laboratoire d’Études et de Recherche sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local) in Niamey, Niger, where a core of APAD’s founders and most engaged members shared their insights, experiences, research passions, methodological approaches, advice, personal accounts, and humour with us, a group of newcomers from Africa and Europe. I felt very connected – and on to something! Little did I know

> how my professional initiation into collaborative research at that summer school in Niamey would spark a flame that fuelled many of my subsequent endeavours – in different ways and in different settings. For instance, just recently I had the chance to co-write the book *What Happens when We Meet? Encounter as a Method* (Medienwerkstatt Encounters, forthcoming) with fellow members of "Encounter", an anthropologically-inspired creative media project for transcultural learning and action based in Berlin.
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> However, as much as I feel connected to APAD's ideals and am close friends with some of my fellow Apadians, the more I left the "traditional" academic path, the more difficult it became to keep this connection alive. I was thrilled to be able to help plan and organise the 2015 APAD Conference in Cotonou, when I was still affiliated with the *Les Afriques dans le Monde* research centre in Bordeaux and felt an affiliation with the conference theme through my previous research. I was also lucky enough to have the opportunity to contribute to the 2017 conference in Roskilde as an "independent" freelance researcher, keeping my costs low – and my spirits high – by being hosted by some of the organisers, whom I consider above all to be friends. But since then, since I have been working as an applied researcher and consultant for various development organisations, for example, evaluating UNICEF's child-friendly spaces in refugee camps in Germany, or teacher training in the Democratic Republic of Congo, using film to deliver more practically applicable research results, I have found it increasingly difficult to "find myself" within APAD. This has been even more the case since I was employed by a private research institute in which I focus on development and social change programmes in the education sector in Germany, for instance assisting with the Lions-Quest life skills programme in schools, while developing a digital tool with which pupils and teachers can evaluate their own progress. In turn, this perceived alienation from APAD's "traditional" fields (in a geographic and thematic sense) makes it complicated to justify my engagement with the association to myself and my employer, who pays me for the projects I am assigned to do, and not to attend board meetings with academics who are not even working in my field.
>
> I acknowledge that academics also have to engage in voluntary activities (such as reviewing journals) that receive little reward in terms of career progression, but the situation is worse for those working outside academic institutions. I still try to attend some APAD meetings in my free time – not out of a nostalgic attachment or sense of duty, but because I feel that my opinion on certain issues is heard and valued. But I feel that APAD, which is now turning 30, has the potential to include many more voices who apply the qualitative rigour and context sensibility that characterise APAD members' research in their work as scholars, applied researchers, evaluators, and consultants.

When we thought about the issue some more, we realised that the association's main activities (the journal and academic conferences) cater very much to anthropologists who work on development and social change – or social scientists more widely who use ethnography – within academia. But what about anthropologists who are *doing* development, and those who are conducting research but not necessarily within academic contexts (applied anthropology)? Most people who have trained in anthropology and related social science disciplines work outside academia, given the limited number of stable academic positions – in both Northern and Southern contexts – and yet we feel that there is little space for these people within the association. For us, this represents a problem, because not only have we both relied on this type of work for our livelihoods at various points in the past and present, but also it is precisely the practical activities that

aim to make a tangible improvement in the world – including but not limited to research – that spark our interest.

As we thought through the position within APAD of anthropologists who conduct applied research, we inevitably returned to the work of one of our association's founding fathers, J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, and his well-known piece "Promouvoir la recherche face à la consultance: Autour de l'expérience du LASDEL (Niger-Bénin)" (2011). In it, he argues that there are fundamental differences between what he defines as the "consultancy mode" of investigation resulting from development organisations' requests for expertise, and the "research mode" of social science (*ibid*.: 5). He argues that the former is characterised by the imposition of terms of reference; a short time-frame; rapid data collection methods, usually by means of surveys; limited academic literature review; working within dominant development discourses rather than stepping outside and critiquing them; the use of donor "rhetoric" (such as aims and objectives or recommendations); poor citation practice verging on plagiarism; pressure to generate findings of use to the donor; self-censureship so as not to displease the donor; outputs consisting of reports; and evaluation by donors who lack social science expertise. The "research mode", on the other hand, is characterised by questions and methods defined by the researcher(s); a medium to long time-frame; priority given to intensive fieldwork; rigorous and systematic review of the academic literature; positioning in scientific, theoretical and epistemological debates; the use of research "rhetoric" (including hypotheses and research questions); strict rules on citation practice and referencing to avoid plagiarism; priority given to "new" knowledge and empirically-founded results; freedom of expression; outputs as books, chapters or articles; and academic peer review.

We agree with J.-P. Olivier de Sardan that there are cases in which research that has been commissioned by and undertaken for development organisations and donors simply tells these institutions what they want to hear and does not critique the agendas or assumptions underpinning their discourses, models and practices. However, we see flaws in the dichotomous distinction made between the "consultancy mode" and the "research mode". Indeed, J.-P. Olivier de Sardan himself adds a caveat that some very good consultancy work is done, and that he is not against consultancy *per se*. Despite this, the very way in which he defines these two "modes" reflects a symmetry that entails a hierarchy based on ideal types. It also conflates the source of funding with quality, which does not reflect the diversity of practices on the ground. To escape this impasse, we prefer to define "consultancy" in a non-judgmental way as knowledge resulting from research commissioned and funded by a variety of bodies working in the field of development and social change. As a result, therefore, "consultancy" research naturally varies enormously in quality depending on the criteria for quality and the perspective from which it is assessed, and a good deal of it applies the same rules of scientific rigour as the "research mode", as defined above. Furthermore, J.-P. Olivier de Sardan finds consultancy research to be deficient because he is measuring it against the standards of "pure" academic research, whereas it is designed for different purposes. However, if academic research were measured against the standards of consultancy research, it would also be found wanting because, for example, it is too slow and does not produce clear

recommendations for practice! Thus, knowledge can be produced by practitioners during the course of development practice that does not follow the protocols laid out in the "research mode" but can nonetheless be highly valuable and can, we argue, provide added value to the discipline of anthropology of development and social change.

We are far from being the first to make this critique. In the introduction to their edited volume *Differentiating Development: Beyond an Anthropology of Critique* (2012), T. Yarrow and S. Venkatesan remind us that anthropologists have been key players in the "post-development" movement. However, this critical deconstruction of "development" has often resulted in a total rejection among anthropologists of attempts to work towards a more just world. This can be because they feel that social life is so complex that any intervention can have unintended negative consequences. Alternatively, they argue that the global political and economic structures of which development is a part are so hegemonic that any applied research is a mere drop in the ocean and therefore futile when it comes to addressing global inequalities. They also suggest, however, that this non-engagement also reflects an attitude of superiority among anthropologists *vis-à-vis* other disciplines. They argue that "anthropologists have commented 'on' development from a position of superiority", assuming that they have more "knowledge of the complexities of particular social and cultural realities" as well as greater theoretical sophistication, and are thus "able to see more of the world of development than [...] the various people who occupy that world" (*ibid*.: 4). The following summarises their overall argument:

> In attempting to use anthropological insights to highlight development shortcomings, anthropologists have largely neglected to reflect upon what such encounters might teach *us.* Where anthropology is constructed as a set of analytic or methodological resources to be *applied* in illuminating development contexts, the potential for those contexts to illuminate, challenge, or extend anthropological thinking is therefore foreclosed (*ibid*.: 6).

The contributors of the book's empirical chapters therefore aim to "re-perceive and hence re-orient development practice as potentially a force for good" and, crucially, understand "development as a mode of engagement that, like anthropology, attempts to understand, represent and work within a complex world" (*ibid*.: 2). In particular, they stress that development practice is heterogeneous. The relationships between engaged anthropologists (working within or outside academia) and people with interests in development are also highly complex. In this vein, A. Newman reflects on her experiences of wearing two hats at various times, namely being an "anthropologist of development" and an "anthropologist doing development", and where she feels these areas of action can be productively complementary:

> I really started doing applied development work at the same time as my ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD in Senegal in 2011. I saw an e-mail circulated by a small NGO working in the south of the country. They were looking for an intern to do two weeks of qualitative fieldwork – focus groups using participatory visual methods – to understand how their programme's activities had led to a reduction in adolescent pregnancies. They also wanted a literature review on social capital and intergenerational relationships to theorise how these changes in behaviour had taken place. Why not, I thought; it sounds like an interesting opportunity!

> I was attracted to the NGO because I immediately clicked with its founder, a woman with immense academic knowledge in anthropology, community health, participatory development and adult education, as well as decades of practical experience. This informed the NGO's action research approach. I also agreed with its political agenda, which was to support and realise the priorities of community members as much as the priorities of their donor at the time, which reflected dominant development agendas. I have continued to work for and with this NGO to this day. Through my work with it, I have had further opportunities to work with larger international development organisations who are larger "players" in the field of gender and development.
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> I do different kinds of work for these organisations. My tasks have included undertaking literature reviews, or informing the search for literature when the review is conducted by someone else. Here, I always try to draw attention to relevant anthropological literature, including in book chapters, which might be missed through database searches. I have also been involved in researching theoretical models and concepts to make sense of and analyse the practical work the organisations are doing. I have designed pilot studies using qualitative and participatory methods to inform the development of programme activities. Finally, I have co-developed behaviour change tools in the form of guides for practitioners or templates for workshop activities or discussions. All of my activities are informed by ethnographic evidence – usually produced by anthropologists – relating to the cultural contexts in question, but also by theories and approaches from other disciplines – namely adult education and participatory development – that are more oriented towards bringing about change.
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> Being directly involved in doing development as an anthropologist has led me to see that much of the "pure" academic knowledge produced by anthropologists is relevant to development, but is wasted because it does not result in improving practice. In my field of work – gender and development – anthropologists have been making the same critiques of dominant development programmes for decades, and yet relatively little has changed. For instance, to take the specific issue of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), anthropologists have been critiquing the dominant approaches used by programmes to end the practice for as many as forty years for being ineffective and culturally insensitive (see, for example, Shell-Duncan and Hernlund, 2000), and yet these approaches remain prevalent (Newman and 28 Too Many, 2019). My impression is that one of the key reasons for this is that anthropologists tend to critique programmes without necessarily suggesting alternative processes that might overcome the problems they have identified. I believe that the reason for this is that anthropologists doing "pure" research rarely undertake applied work, and do not engage with theories of behavioural change – whether generated by academics in more applied disciplines, or by anthropologists and other practitioners working on the ground.

Indeed, J.-P. Olivier de Sardan (2004) has identified the problem of the "missing link" (*chaînon manquant*) between the findings generated by rigorous anthropological research and their translation into reforms in development actors' operational practice. We would argue that it is precisely anthropologists who "wear both hats" and regularly "do" development and social change projects who have acquired valuable expertise in "translating" anthropological knowledge into action. In our view, this "translation" work is both of wider value to our discipline and is what ignites the passion in our hearts (we are speaking for ourselves of course; other Apadians may not agree!). It is applied anthropologists like ourselves who can push forward and help set up the standards for critical, reflective applied work, including consultancy research, based on rigorous scientific

protocols, and who are also brave enough, and have the skills or knowledge, to propose solutions.

The question remains, therefore, of how APAD might create and maintain a productive dialogue between academic anthropologists *of* development and anthropologists working *in* development? Similarly, what kinds of sustained contacts, if any, does APAD have with social movements or collectives working towards social justice on the ground in its members' home countries? In short, has the association's work become too tied to instrumentalist logics of neoliberal academia – write and cite, publish or perish? Have we lost sight of what development and social change really mean and what fundamentally motivates many of those who work in this field – which is surely contributing to a more just world? Could it be that this situation has contributed to the loss of passion within the association? How as members of an association can we contribute to these goals in more practical terms and regain some momentum? Or is it perhaps that people join APAD for a variety of reasons, and that we scholar-activists assume shared ideals based on our personal values, when in fact there exists a diversity of motivations among members? Either way, a survey of APAD members would be useful in the current moment to establish what the needs are and how they can best be addressed. In the next section, we introduce resonance as a concept for theorising the passion we feel when activities really inspire us, followed by practical ideas that APAD might follow in order to reignite this passion.

Relationship-building and dialogue

Close your eyes for a moment and remember the last time you felt "in touch with the world", whether you were standing on top of a mountain or talking with someone who inspired you and provided you with a new perspective on something. H. Rosa (2020a, 2020b) uses the term "resonance" to refer to an image taken from physics of a subject-object relationship characterised by mutually stimulating vibrations, but where subject and object speak with their own voices, with their own resonance bodies, like musical instruments. Resonance does not just describe your personal experience or the emotional state you have just remembered; it describes a type of relationship that can be defined by four features (Rosa, 2020b: 38-44):

> 1) the moment of being touched, of being moved, of feeling intrinsically – and not instrumentally – addressed on the inside by someone or something (*Affizierung*);
> 2) the moment of self-efficacy, of actively answering to that call;
> 3) the moment of transformation (*Anverwandlung*) through the resonant encounter;
> 4) the moment of unavailability (*Unverfügbarkeit*), meaning that resonance cannot be produced instrumentally, and cannot be forced or controlled.

Resonance is, above all, a relational connection to the world, as opposed to treating it as a resource. It refers to what touches you in the world, what makes your eyes glow, what motivates you – and what ultimately changes you. It encourages us to shift our focus towards relationship-building, especially with those with whom we might at first disagree. Resonance asks that we be open to new forms of dialogue without knowing the outcome.

In our case, this would involve providing different platforms for encounters and capacity-building that bridge the divide between academics, consultants and practitioners (which already splits some of us, figuratively speaking, into multiple personalities). This would mean reaching out to the field we are working in – and thus being reachable for calls from the field – in a way that might lead to social, personal and interpersonal change. In the next paragraphs, we make some concrete suggestions, inspired by the concept of resonance, that APAD might consider in the future.

Conferences and networking

At the moment, the main opportunities for exchanges between APAD members arise during the APAD Conference every two years, but this is a very limited opportunity – especially given the challenges involved in travelling between Africa and Europe and vice versa. Hence, APAD could potentially do more to become a platform for enabling exchange, including between more strictly academic anthropologists and members who are doing engaged or applied anthropology. For instance, could the membership database enable networking across members, like a "researcher dating base", in a non-romantic yet passionate sense? Could members search for other members on a virtual map, whether by country or keywords of interest, as the basis for potential collaborations or exchanges?

Another observation we have made is that APAD conferences tend to follow a traditional panel format with presentations, or roundtables of established (usually academic) experts, followed by questions and answers. First, academic researchers tend to be privileged in these encounters, which leaves little space for contributions by non-academic members who are doing engaged/applied anthropology of development and social change in ways that are both inspiring and methodologically rigorous. Second, these formats do not often lead to in-depth dialogue around topics of interest, by which we mean an ongoing conversation in which the participants start out from different horizons and through repeated questioning to uncover the other's perspective and active listening, all move towards taking that perspective on board, to a place where their horizons are closer to one another's understanding (Gadamer, 1975, 2001). There are alternative formats for conference activities that can enable more dialogue and generate new forms of knowledge, such as:

– The Solution Room: 3-4 presenters present 15-minute papers, but end them with 1-3 questions that are troubling them that they would like to receive input on from the audience. The audience divides into as many groups as there are presenters (or groups of maximum 6-8 people, if there are many of them) and the presenters spend 10 minutes in a group, who help them to solve their problem by suggesting literature or ideas. After 10 minutes, the presenters rotate to another group. In this way, instead of a standard 45-minute question-and-answer session during which each presenter is asked no more than 3 or 4 unidirectional questions, each presenter has 4 x 10 minutes of focused dialogue around their paper. This is much more productive for the presenters, and helps audience members and presenters become better acquainted.

– The World Café: this is a workshop-style activity that encourages group dialogue on a specific topic such as “Encouraging knowledge exchange between anthropologists working ‘on’ and ‘in’ development: developing a guide for best practice”. Participants sit at tables of 4-6 people, and there are 3 or so rounds of 15-minutes discussions, with each round prefaced by a specific question on the broader topic, for instance “What kind of spaces/events best facilitate knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners?”, or “How do knowledge/power hierarchies manifest themselves in these spaces, and how can they be overcome?”. The group discusses these issues for 15 minutes and then moves to a different table for another round. One person at each table is the “host” and does not move, and takes notes. At the end of the rounds of questions, the hosts summarise the points raised at each table. The notes could be made on flipchart paper and stuck to the wall as a record, and ultimately written up in a report.

– Message Board: a large message board or whiteboard is provided in the conference’s main socialising space. It can be divided into categories like “questions/help sought”, “promotions of events/publications” or “expertise sought”. Participants can post questions or comments and others can respond, including by providing contact details. This permits participants to identify and connect with people with common interests.

In this manner, inviting anthropologists working outside of academia into the APAD conference space to engage in these kinds of dialogues, and to exchange, argue and learn about qualitative and collaborative tools and “best practices”, could be a way of appreciating them and promoting their visibility. It could also act against the reductionist stereotypes that consultancy research is “quick and dirty” and unscientific. It should be seen as another way of fostering connections, allowing for resonance, and engaging in capacity-building inside the association.

Opening APAD’s publications to a wider range of voices

On the topic of creating spaces within APAD for a wider range of voices to be heard beyond strictly academic anthropologists, we have become concerned that the association’s journal has moved beyond its activist roots to become more strictly academic. As its reputation has grown, we are rejecting more articles, and a worrying number of these articles are submitted by scholars based in Africa. The writing seminar/*atelier d’écriture* APAD organises every four years linked to its conference in Africa is a good move to support junior scholars from African countries acquire the skills needed to draft an abstract and a manuscript that is based on a rigorous empirical case study but also talks to wider theoretical debates. In recent years, however, APAD has struggled to find members willing to give this workshop, whether due to a lack of passion or availability. We suggest that an additional solution could be to convert some of the workshop content to an online format accessible on the APAD website. The board should discuss and address this issue. Because it requires time and resources, it could be part of a North-South research application that would promote these activities within a capacity-building perspective that would bring together scholars from Africa and Europe (and elsewhere) to provide workshops such as these.

In addition, the association might want to consider creating alternative routes to publication other than the strictly academic journal, such as a blog, which would also be hosted on the website. The blog could publish shorter articles or working papers, including political commentary characteristic of outlets such as *The Conversation,* or *African Arguments* hosted by the UK's Royal African Society. A blog such as this could also make space for more reflexive and creative pieces. One such example is *OtherwiseMag*, a recently-founded online magazine publishing testimonies, graphic essays and poetry informed by ethnographic research, activism and applied work for the purpose of generating empathy and solidarity. Another example is the multilingual, anthropologically inspired *encounter-blog.* Setting up a similar publication platform on the APAD website would be another way of creatively translating insights from anthropology (whether of or in development) for a broader audience.

Concluding remarks

This piece was inspired by our observation that there seems to be a loss of passion for APAD's activities, especially among "younger" members of the association and those based in Africa, and our motivation to remedy this situation. We believe that what is needed is more openness, creativity and adventurousness in order to connect with (or enable connections with) the world of knowledge production outside academia. For us, this is especially important because it is what enables us to experience resonance. Resonance refers to the feeling of being inspired, of being sparked by something new, and of being enriched through learning and reaching out, and being open to the unpredictable outcomes that result from such encounters.

However, we also acknowledge that there could be alternative or additional reasons for the problems we have identified (and others might not even define them as problems at all!). We therefore believe that we need to gain a better sense of members' ambitions, and therefore what they expect from APAD. This information could be acquired through a survey. Only with this evidence would we be in a strong position to discuss what these insights would mean for APAD in terms of its vision and strategy for the future.

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