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To cite this article: E. Fouksman (2016): Civil society knowledge networks: how international development institutions reshape the geography of knowledge, Third World Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2016.1233490](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1233490)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1233490>



Published online: 20 Oct 2016.



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## Civil society knowledge networks: how international development institutions reshape the geography of knowledge

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### ABSTRACT

What role have the processes and institutions of international development played in creating and propagating ideas around the world? This paper demonstrates that networks of development-focused civil society institutions can form global epistemic bridges even where communication technology, global markets, infrastructure, or state services do not reach. Given the penetration of these 'civil society knowledge networks' throughout the world, it is crucial to understand how these networks form, and how they create and spread ideas, mediating between global discourses and local needs. This paper builds on a multi-sited case study of one such civil society knowledge network, which includes an international foundation, its partner non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Kenya, and one village where these NGOs run a forest conservation project. The case study provides a closely textured analysis of the mechanisms of knowledge production and consumption in the network, including personality politics, language, technology, political connections and the power dynamics of knowledge flows. It demonstrates the ways remoteness and disconnection are overcome through the epistemic reach of institutional networks involved in development interventions.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 November 2015  
Accepted 4 September 2016

### KEYWORDS

Knowledge production  
knowledge flows  
global civil society  
network society  
environmental knowledge  
development institutions  
NGOs  
globalisation  
epistemic communities

## Introduction

This paper is a tale of four offices. It is also the tale of the bridges – in particular bridges of knowledge – between them.<sup>1</sup> One is a spacious open-plan office taking up half a floor in a San Francisco high-rise, filled with over a dozen staff members. Home to a private charitable foundation called the Christensen Fund, the views of the city from the floor-to-ceiling windows are in competition with the eye-catching art on the walls. These tapestries and paintings are all indigenous or aboriginal, pointing to the funding interests of the foundation. The Christensen Fund's focus is not only on indigenous culture, but combines this with ecology and the environment. They have adopted and promoted the idea of biocultural diversity, the view that cultural diversity is crucial to maintaining biological diversity and the ecological wellbeing of the planet. The fund gives money to non-governmental organisations

(NGOs) and other non-profit organisations in the developing world that work with problems that are ecological, cultural or, better yet, a combination of both.<sup>2</sup>

One such NGO is the Kivulini Trust, a small non-profit crammed into two tiny rooms in Nairobi, run almost single-handedly by the charismatic Dr Hussein,<sup>3</sup> a Kenyan academic who does this as a side-line to his job at the National Museum. The purpose of Kivulini echoes that of the Christensen Fund: it works with local communities in northern Kenya on issues of ecological and cultural importance. One of Kivulini's partner organisations in the north of the country is the grassroots non-profit Waso Trustland. Waso Trustland is located about a day's journey by mini-bus from Nairobi in the small frontier town of Isiolo, perched on the cusp of Kenya's dry and more sparsely populated north,<sup>4</sup> where the paved road ends.<sup>5</sup> Waso Trustland is run out of another two-room office by Hassan Shano, a local elder known and respected in both the town and the surrounding communities, together with Liban, his right-hand man. Their organisation fights for the land and resource rights of the village communities in the region, and is intimately interlinked with both the Christensen Fund and Kivulini, receiving most of their budget from the coffers of the former, but through the connection with the latter.

This same money – and, even more importantly, ideas and advice – flows onward to a number of village communities in the region. The one that particularly interests us here is the small village of Beliqo, another half-day's drive along a series of rutted and unpaved roads north from Isiolo. The village is a base for semi-nomadic pastoralist Borana people, who often face food insecurity from the frequent droughts that decimate their herds, and violence from the cattle-raiding of surrounding ethnic groups. The site of the last of our four offices is a room in a small mud-walled house with a dirt floor on the central village street, with some chairs, a desk and a few posters about forests on the walls. These are the quarters of the Beliqo's Community Forest Association, a local organisation started on the impetus and advice of Waso Trustland to conserve the riverine forest – so rare in this dry region of scrub and bush – that lies between the village and the Ewaso Niro River a few kilometres away.

What connects these four offices? In particular, what connects a pastoralist people in the remote north of Kenya, struggling in the face of increasing drought, violent resource-based ethnic conflict, food insecurity and aid dependence, to the people sitting in the bright offices of a foundation on the other side of the globe? Though the people in Beliqo village often shrugged or shook their heads at such a question, those in the Christensen Fund are quick to answer – Beliqo residents have shown an interest in conserving their riverine forest and reviving the traditional knowledge and customs that surround forest and river use, an interest expressed in grant applications to the foundation, and one that aligns with its broad aims. Thus, resources – in the form of thousands of dollars – flow every year from the foundation to the village.

But this is too simple a story. It ignores the technological, geographical and linguistic barriers around Beliqo that could not have been overcome without intermediaries – in this case, the Kivulini Trust in Nairobi and Waso Trustland in Isiolo. How would a village even have heard of such a foundation? How could it have composed and sent in a grant application without electricity, cell phones, or internet, not to mention the knowledge of the language, concepts and rhetoric needed to write a grant application successfully? And how do all of the organisations involved align themselves behind the idea of protecting this particular riverine forest?

## Epistemic bridges and civil society

In exploring these questions, this article pieces together a geography of knowledge centred around the relationships between the organisations (and the individuals within them) described above. In particular, this work explores the way that development institutions like the Christensen Fund, Kivulini Trust, Waso Trustland, and Beliqo's Community Forest Association link together various spatial categories, from the local to the transnational. It builds on immersive fieldwork in Kenya, the UK and the USA, consisting of over a hundred extended semi-structured interviews, as well as participant observation at Kivulini, Waso Trustland and Beliqo. The data that emerged out of this fieldwork demonstrates the formation and effects of complex relationships between these organisations. The argument that unfolds conceptualises development-focused civil society institutions as a mechanism of epistemic connections, connections that are formed through discursive, financial and epistemic flows. These flows both connect and reshape the categories of local and global, expert and traditional, developed and developing.

These categories are themselves contested – as Geertz has pointed out, not only is 'local' a highly relative term, but while little is purely local, even less is entirely global or universal.<sup>6</sup> Ferguson has argued that understanding the global as 'an enveloping level of coverage' and the local as representative of 'grounded authenticity' is misleading: the local is well integrated into and often savvy in its use of the global, and indeed the topography of the global somehow superseding the local in power and reach can be problematic.<sup>7</sup> This paper wades into the midst of these critiques, as one of its goals is to analyse the mechanisms through which the local and global are interconnected and interpenetrated. Indeed, though this paper uses the terms global and local to denote spatial categories because of their common usage and descriptive utility, it responds to Burawoy's and Ferguson's call for a deeper and richer exploration of the way that the local is being woven into a tapestry of the global,<sup>8</sup> and the processes and means by which the global is constituted, understood and instrumentalised. It does so by focusing on the way development-focused organisations and the communities they work in form ties between each other – in particular ties of knowledge. These organisations thus becomes a way to understand the 'glocal': the localisation of the global, the globalisation of the local, and the hybridity between the two,<sup>9</sup> illustrating some of 'the concrete forms in which the two-way traffic between globalisation and localization takes place'.<sup>10</sup>

Through an exploration of the relationships between the organisations and people in the multi-sited case study described above, I argue that these relationships form *civil society knowledge networks*: collections of institutions varying in scale, goals, reach and geography, but connected through flows of resources, rhetoric and, most importantly, ideas. Civil society itself is a term that is 'essentially contestable'<sup>11</sup> – the term's definition and use are varied, popular and conceptually loose enough that some theorists such as Kumar deplore the use of the term altogether.<sup>12</sup> Yet its very popularity leads us to adopt it here. In the words of Jean and John Comaroff, 'to bemoan the lack of coherence and specificity of the concept of civil society ... seems rather to miss the point. So too does the effort to pin it down, to wrestle away its inherent ambiguities'.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of civil society used within this work is based on the history of the term traced by Habermas and the way the term has been situated within the global by Mary Kaldor and John Keane. It is taken to be the space outside of (though often engaged with) the formal mechanisms of the state, the private realm of the family and the economic realm

of the market where individuals form movements, institutions, and groups to engage with social issues of collective concern.<sup>14</sup> Kumar separates uses of the term between the generalists, who define the term broadly, often including the economic realm, and the minimalists, who follow a more precisely defined view of civil society in excluding the state and the market entirely.<sup>15</sup> My use of the term fits more neatly into the latter category, but sits on the more generalist side of the minimalist spectrum – excluding the economic realm from civil society, but including a wide range of institutions and practices, from church groups to grassroots activist movements to international charities to NGOs.

Defining the term does not eliminate its internal controversies, in particular those related to what David Rieff has described as a ‘prescriptive’ idealisation of the political utility of civil society.<sup>16</sup> Civil society can reproduce ‘dominations and segmentations, hegemonies and exclusions’.<sup>17</sup> While this work makes no claim that civil society is necessarily useful, egalitarian or democratic, its aim is not to engage with such normative debates beyond acknowledging them, but rather to construct a descriptive model of one of the effects of organisational networks. Civil society organisations and institutions vary widely, particularly in the scope of their mandates and the level of their reach.<sup>18</sup> I have no interest in limiting the idea of civil society to ‘a narrowly defined institutional arena’,<sup>19</sup> but I knowingly focus this work on a particular type of civil society: the diversity of individuals and institutions that are not driven by profit and that in some way engage with international development.

The argument here thus deliberately centres on development organisations (though it could be extended to other categories, for instance to networks of religious institutions), and engages with their variety, examining the connections between NGOs, the charitable foundations that fund them, and the grassroots movements and community-based organisations (CBOs) they encourage and support. As will be argued below, the diversity in spatial reach and power of such organisations facilitates the formation of institutional civil society networks through their relationships of practice and discourse. Of course, within development institutions the meaning of civil society (and their own place within the term) is itself contested, ranging from what Howell and Pearce term consensual mainstream views to more conflictual alternative visions.<sup>20</sup> This paper will illustrate precisely this diversity and contestation of roles and meanings.

It is worth noting that I am interested above all in the ways knowledge is created, spread and contested across a range of scales via development institutions. This work does not operate within the instrumental view of development, with its pragmatic managerial and policy concerns and its aspirational ‘will to improve’ the human condition.<sup>21</sup> The aim here is not normative: I do not set out to criticise or evaluate the efficacy of these organisations or their work, or to critique ‘aidland’, ‘aidchains’ or the project of development as a whole. There is plenty of work to this effect already.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, neither is this work aiming to analytically deconstruct the development project by critically demonstrating its inherent contradictions, hegemonies and hierarchies,<sup>23</sup> nor is it attempting to trace the relationship between development policy and development practice.<sup>24</sup> And while this paper adds to the ethnography of aid which has emerged over the last two decades, again, that is not its main purpose.

While this paper contributes to the growing ethnographic literature development and ‘aidland’, much of this literature is focused on policy – the ways that policy is produced, maintained and transmitted.<sup>25</sup> This paper, on the other hand, does not focus exclusively on

'development's travelling rationality',<sup>26</sup> but takes a much broader view of what constitutes knowledge in development. This knowledge includes ideas that are far removed from actual policy, that are heterogeneous and varied, and include knowledge of how to access state resources, how to communicate with global aid donors, and how to translate concrete livelihood or political concerns into ecological or cultural ones. Most crucially, this work is bringing together the ethnographic approaches of this 'aidland' literature with theorisations of the way that the global and local are connected, the way globalisation occurs, within the realm of the epistemic and the social.

The goal is, then, to understand the role of development institutions within the globalisation of knowledge. The theories around the globalisation of knowledge that I engage with here have largely failed to consider the development project as a crucial agent in the spread of ideas around the globe. Scholars of globalisation have looked at the way economics, media and technology forge links between the global and local – but rarely is the focus on the way epistemic networks are formed, and formed specifically through the development project. This is precisely the gap this paper aims to fill. The overall aim is to look at development and the actors involved in it as a set of social processes, one amongst many, that are crucial to knitting together a diversity of ideas, perspectives, values and aims across a variety of spaces and places into a tangled web of meaning. It is the structure and functioning of such a web that forms the crux of this inquiry.

Building off of Manuel Castells' argument for the recent expansion of a *network society* that is increasingly integrated via information technology, this article extends and reworks the network society concept into the realm of development-focused civil society institutions.<sup>27</sup> Such institutional networks spread discourse, knowledge and practice, as well as resources, and not only connect the global and local, but also the local, regional and national. The argument that the world is growing increasingly integrated is not new.<sup>28</sup> Nor is the idea of civil society organisations expanding beyond the national to the transnational or even the global.<sup>29</sup> What this article explores are the ways in which development institutions and organisations form relationships and networks that create a knowledge geography encompassing and connecting a range of spatial categories.

If 'the project cycle ... insures the separation of planners and implementers',<sup>30</sup> then this work brings the two together, along with the communities where the implementers work. The case study examines how all three are nodes in a network, integrated to some degree but also with discrete individual levels where knowledge is generated and transmitted. In this way they are a means to examine forces of cultural and social globalisation 'from the standpoint of participants located at the intersection of the most remote forces, connections and imaginations'.<sup>31</sup> Thus connections and flows (along with disconnections and tensions) are as much a part of the case study as the individual nodes themselves.<sup>32</sup> Marcus has argued that a research 'site' need not be geographically defined, writing that 'multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions or juxtapositions of locations ... with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument [of the project]'.<sup>33</sup> Such multi-sited research is the foundation of this project; the chains and threads (such as individual relationships, old friendships, universities and conferences) connecting different tiers of the case are as central here as each individual organisation.

To demonstrate the way that the four offices of our case study come together into a *civil society knowledge network*, this work builds off and weaves together three theoretical

perspectives. These are ideas around global civil society (also enhanced by writings on the politics of civil society more broadly, as well as transnational activism networks), epistemic communities, and the network society (as well as networks more broadly). By integrating and furthering these concepts, this paper argues that civil society-based knowledge circuits create political, technological and epistemic connections that can overcome barriers of spatial distance, technological disconnect and political marginalisation such as those that characterise the village of Beliqo.

### **Building civil society knowledge networks: the role of intermediaries**

If networks are systems of interconnected nodes, where nodes are points of connection or intersection of whatever constitutes the network,<sup>34</sup> then in our case study it is the Christensen Fund in San Francisco, Kivulini Trust in Nairobi, Waso Trustland in Isiolo and the Community Forest Association in Beliqo that constitute the nodes of a civil society knowledge network, with resources, people, information and knowledge flowing between them. The transformative power of networks of knowledge and ideas has already been explored by Manuel Castells in the idea of a global 'network society': a social structure 'based on networks ... that generate, process, and distribute information on the basis of the knowledge accumulated in the nodes of the networks'.<sup>35</sup> While networks are a very old form of social organisation, Castells focuses on the way that new information technology has enabled networks to overcome limits to their scope and capacity. Castells too imagines such networks crossing traditional state boundaries, and creating global connections and flows of information and knowledge.

While Castells' work focuses on the recent transformative effect of information technology, this paper extends the conceptual category of the network society beyond the impact of information technology. Though technology is an important part of the network society, this work proposes that other social structures – such as development institutions – effectively enable the functioning of such a network society, even when, as will be demonstrated later, technological connectivity fails. Indeed, Castells himself acknowledges that the network society is highly limited due to the partial penetration of information technology. While the effects of the network society might be diffused over the whole globe, it does not include most of the people on the planet, though it does affect them. Our case study extends the network society model beyond technological penetration, arguing that civil society networks enable knowledge networks to encompass parts of the globe where information technology might not reach or be easily accessible.

It is not information technology that enables knowledge to flow between San Francisco, Nairobi, Isiolo and Beliqo in our case study. Information technology such as internet connectivity certainly makes the functioning of the network more convenient, as much as do other tools of connectivity for the network, such as a shared language (English). Yet this is not what *constitutes* the network – as will be discussed in further detail below, Beliqo does not even have access to electricity or phone service, much less internet. What forms civil society knowledge networks such as the one in our case study and enables them to function are personal and institutional relationships. It is these relationships – often formed and nurtured in person – that set and spread the discursive content of the network, which in turn facilitates the creation and sharing of knowledge through the network.



Spaces of academic and professional interaction – in particular conferences and universities – play an integral role in creating connections between geographically dispersed civil society agents, but also in creating and disseminating the knowledge and discourse within the case study network. Such spaces function as knowledge commons – spaces where knowledge is pooled and shared in this civil society network.<sup>36</sup> Such spaces both connect nodes – particularly global nodes such as the Christensen Fund with NGO ‘intermediaries’ such as Kivulini and Waso Trustland – but also privilege and spread particular types of knowledge. These spaces facilitate not only the exchange of ideas and knowledge and the creation of values, but also the creation of *personal* relationships between the leading figures at each of the nodes of the network, which come to play a key role in the way that institutional relationships unfold – and the way that both people and organisations influence one another. In other words, formalised institutions of knowledge exchange such as universities and conferences not only play a key role in knowledge sharing for many of the organisations in the network, but also serve as sites for personal interface, which in turn facilitate continued interaction and knowledge sharing beyond the formalised spaces of the knowledge commons.

For instance, universities play a key part in the Kivulini creation narrative, according to Dr Hussein (Kivulini’s founder and director) and Ken Wilson (until 2016 the executive director of the Christensen Fund) – narratives that were echoed by the staff of Waso Trustland as well. Dr Hussein and Ken Wilson were friends at Oxford in the mid 1980s.<sup>37</sup> After falling out of touch, they reconnected at a conference in Europe, at a time when Wilson was working for the Christensen Fund and Dr Hussein was working for the National Museum of Kenya. It was at this conference that Wilson urged Dr Hussein to become directly involved with the communities in the north of Kenya. Though this first led Dr Hussein to work for the Christensen Fund in East Africa, Wilson urged him to start his own organisation to engage directly with communities, and Kivulini was born. What is particularly interesting about this story is that Dr Hussein himself is not only Kenyan, but originally from the very same village of Beliqo that is part of our case study, and the fact that he ended up studying at Oxford is itself an exceptional and extremely rare circumstance. Thus it becomes a story of exceptional circumstances and coincidences, of rare access and chance encounters building personal relationships that link together people, places and institutions in our network. Not only Dr Hussein and Ken Wilson, but also Wolde Tadasse (then the Christensen Fund’s East Africa Programme Manager, himself based in Oxford), Hassan Shano (the director of Waso Trustland) and Hassan Roba (a local consultant at Kivulini) told me this ‘birthing’ story, with reference to the shared experience at Oxford and reconnection at an international conference. It illustrates the role that such mechanisms play in forging the links in this knowledge network, creating the kind of connections that enable certain actors, such as Ken Wilson, to influence the values and actions of others, such as Dr Hussein, and to provide them structural support. Yet the role of formalised spaces for knowledge sharing in creating values, spreading knowledge and influencing action is perhaps even more clearly illustrated in the case of Hassan Shano and the work and relationships of Waso Trustland Project.

Unlike Kivulini, Waso Trustland Project was founded long before it formed a relationship with the Christensen Fund or Kivulini. Indeed, Waso Trustland was founded as a land advocacy NGO, fighting for the land rights of the pastoralist peoples of Kenya’s north. Yet in their relationship with the Christensen Fund (which gives them funding) and Kivulini (which helps



them create programmes and apply for funding to the Christensen Fund), Hassan Shano presents his organisation as concerned with and working towards environmental and cultural diversity: the project Waso Trustland set up in Beliqo is after all a forest conservation programme, with a few cultural diversity aspects thrown in. Indeed, though Hassan Shano is still locally known as a political activist,<sup>38</sup> he remarked to me that the Christensen Fund was steering him away from the political, and explicitly refuses to fund any of his political activism or direct work on land rights. The pivotal moment in Shano's narrative of how he came to consider environmental issues was the 2005 World Conference on Ecological Restoration held in Zaragoza, Spain. Dr Hussein brought him to this conference to speak as an 'indigenous elder' on the role of indigenous knowledge in environmental restoration. Hassan Shano credited this conference with two vital occurrences: the start of his interest in the environment, and the beginning of Waso Trustland's relationship with the Christensen Fund (Shano, 26 July 2011).

This relationship began with an in-person meeting between Hassan Shano and Ken Wilson at the conference, facilitated by Dr Hussein. Gira Huka, the chairman of the board of Waso Trustland, credited the conference with the start of the 'connection' between Waso Trustland and the Christensen Fund, specifically referencing the personal interaction that this space enabled. Gira described the event as an opportunity to generate the 'interest' from which Waso Trustland's relationship with the Christensen Fund emerged (Gira Huka, 29 August 2011). Thus conferences act as spaces where different levels of knowledge networks meet, and where the relationships on which the network is built are formed, outside of the formal mechanisms of grant applications and funding agreements. They are also where a seemingly bidirectional – but unequal – exchange of knowledge takes place. Hassan Shano attended the conference with the intention of sharing indigenous knowledge and perspectives, but his own knowledge expanded there; he admitted that attending the conference changed his values and actions, bringing his attention to the environmental priorities and knowledge lauded and privileged by the conference.

Hassan Shano has also attended four of the United Nations (UN) Conferences on Indigenous Peoples in Geneva, and his experience there illustrates the role knowledge commons such as conferences play in spreading and creating discourse and ideas. When I questioned Hassan Shano as to *why* a rights-focused organisation such as Waso Trustland is interested in indigenous knowledge (as portrayed in their grant proposals to the Christensen Fund, who require an emphasis on indigenous knowledge to align their grant-making with their mission and interests), Shano credited these conferences for making him realise the centrality of culture as 'another resource' to protect. Hassan Shano described the first time he attended the conference in Geneva, where during a day of cultural sharing the Maasai, another ethnic group from Kenya, came with 'marvellous' traditional dress and performances. Hassan Shano described how he felt 'embarrassed' that he did not have the same cultural artefacts to share, asking himself, 'What about our Borana culture?' (Shano, 26 July 2011).<sup>39</sup> Shano credited this moment of shame, brought about by the exposure afforded by an international conference, with awakening his awareness of the significance of culture in the global realm, strengthened in turn by the Christensen Fund's emphasis on biocultural diversity.

Particularly startling in this story is the fact that Shano had to travel all the way to Switzerland in order to be exposed to the culture of another Kenyan ethnic group and to realise the value (globally) ascribed to such cultural expression. International conferences

act as an avenue for exposure not only to knowledge – such as seeing Maasai culture presented – but also to the value and uses ascribed to such knowledge by the international community. Conferences are in themselves an aspect of the global node of the network, helping to forge the interpersonal connections that then create the institutional relationships upon which the network is based while also privileging certain types of knowledge and discourse that then become an integral part of the over-arching discourse of the network.

Thus, relationships and the spaces – such as conferences and universities – where personal and institutional relationships are built and knowledge is shared are crucial in building civil society knowledge networks. These spaces are not just mediated by powerful Western-based actors (such as the University of Oxford, or the UN). Personal relationships between ‘middlemen’ such as Kivulini and Waso Trustland and the people of Beliqo are also crucial – Hassan Shano hosts an annual ‘partners meeting’ in Isiolo, to connect the grassroots communities and organisations Waso Trustland works with. Indeed, Waso Trustland pays for the expenses of these partners to attend the meeting,<sup>40</sup> much the way the Christensen Fund pays for the expenses of intermediary NGOs to attend conferences and meetings in the West. At the same time, personal relationships and histories also play a major part – it is no coincidence that Kivulini’s director Dr Hussein is originally from Beliqo, and is well-known and remembered there. Indeed, personality politics play a major role in the functioning of such a network – both Dr Hussein and Hassan Shano are ‘big men’ well known in Beliqo for personal characteristics as much as their role in creating the Community Forest Association.

Understanding knowledge transmission through a network can have a flattening effect: Castells’ network society fails to take into account the power disparities and structural inequalities that affect both the creation and transmission of knowledge in the network. Indeed, civil society itself is subject to this critique, being prone to the reproduction of ‘dominations and segmentations, hegemonies and exclusions.’<sup>41</sup> This work reconceptualises knowledge networks as including dimensions of power and inequality. The very points of relationship-building and knowledge-spreading discussed above point to the network’s skew towards the resource-rich and Western-based ‘global’ node, the Christensen Fund, as well as other institutions such as Western universities and development organisations that facilitate meetings and create knowledge commons. Both Western universities such as Oxford and large international conferences are elite ‘invited spaces,’<sup>42</sup> closed off to those not considered worthy of contributing to these epistemic communities, with ‘rules pre-established by others.’<sup>43</sup> Yet their power is not monolithic or simply exclusionary – spaces like these are increasingly seeking legitimacy by including (certain) minority or non-Western voices. Hassan Shano was invited to speak at the conference as an ‘indigenous elder’ because without such voices these conferences would no longer be seen as having any legitimate authority to speak on issues pertaining to the developing world – even if Shano’s actual power to affect the agenda at the conferences is limited. Even Oxford is paying increasing attention to diversity in its admissions. This does not mean that these spaces do not hold power – they remain closed or invited spaces for many. And yet they also seek legitimacy from, and thus grant power to, actors such as Dr. Hussein and Hassan Shano.<sup>44</sup> In the words of Massey,

local places are not simply always the victims of the global; nor are they always politically defensible redoubts *against* the global. For places are also the moments through which the global is constituted, invented, coordinated, produced. They are ‘agents’ *in* globalisation.<sup>45</sup>

As will be demonstrated below, it is far too simplistic to simply state that the Christensen Fund wields unbridled power over the network because of its control of resources and its

location in the West. As Lewis and Mosse have argued, development shapes people's lives not through repression, Western hegemony, or bureaucratic or military control. Instead, it does so via far subtler methods, through norms, values and ideas within which 'people constitute their aspirations and interests'.<sup>46</sup>

Though the Christensen Fund, by being resource-rich, is able to deeply influence the rhetoric and some of the epistemic content of the network, each node remains in many ways independent, holding on to its individual goals and perspective. While a large swathe of the discourse and ideas of these organisations are, as argued by David Mosse, representational and focused on building relationships,<sup>47</sup> others reflect the inner values, interests and knowledge of the institutions and actors involved. Indeed, it is not only organisations, but also actors and individual personalities that play a large role in the network. Hassan Shano and Dr Hussein are not just institutional pawns. While they are institutionally constrained and influenced, they are citizens and actors in their own rights, themselves pursuing a mix of pragmatic and ideal goals, influenced by their personal understandings, ideas and aims. The civil society knowledge network they find themselves in gives them scope to do so, while also influencing the values and norms they choose to adopt and pursue.

For instance, while Waso Trustland wrote about preserving cultural heritage in its grant application to the Christensen Fund, and even internalised such ideas (as evidenced by Hassan Shano's discussions of the importance of indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity and his attendance and experience at indigenous peoples' conferences), their project in Beliqo remained focused on ecological rights and ownership. During a visit by Waso Trustland to Beliqo, Liban (Waso Trustland's administrator and jack-of-all-trades) spent a day collecting stories from the village elders about the local river that ran through the forest that the Community Forest Association was trying to conserve and protect from loggers. This was the part of the grant application that was meant to incorporate ideas of indigenous knowledge and cultural preservation, but the actual exercise was perfunctory and rushed, with Liban trying to get through the chore so that he could get down to real business – working with the Community Forest Association to secure ecological rights.<sup>48</sup>

Waso Trustland plays the crucial role in ensuring that the individual aims of each node in this case study network are reformatted to fit within the discourse of the network as a whole. Waso Trustland is adept at doing this, particularly in addressing its own interest in land rights and, as will be discussed in more detail in the following section, the Community Forest Association's interest in livelihood, by creating a link between the two and the conservation and biocultural diversity values of the Christensen Fund. Waso Trustland forges this link by both spreading information – 'sensitisation' in the words of Shano (25 July 2011) – and by gathering information from the local. It thus becomes a mediator between its own interests, local village concerns, and the broader discourses of conservation and local knowledge.

Though Hassan Shano has a past as a fiery land rights activist, he is clear about wanting to engage with the environment and with conservation. From a concern with land rights, he explained, it is a short leap to a concern with what's *on* and *in* the land – in other words, resource rights. In the words of Hassan Shano, 'one can't eat the land' (26 July 2011). A focus on land is not enough, one must also focus on 'resources that come out of the land', and the environment is 'another resource', one that was 'very fragile in Isiolo' (Liban, 25 July 2011). Hassan Shano and Liban linked this view with community involvement and the spread of information. They spoke of wanting to 'sensitise' and 'inform' (Shano and Liban, 25 July 2011) communities about the conservation of the environment, and of vegetation in particular,

but at the same time *not* privilege wildlife or the natural world over human life and livelihood. Thus, though WTL has expanded its work into the realm of conservation, its focus has remained on humans. They pointed out that humans and livestock have long co-existed successfully with wildlife, and Shano stated that it is 'traditional knowledge' that enables such co-existence, that 'Borana always had indigenous knowledge to co-exist with nature' and have been 'doing it from time immemorial' (Shano, 21 August 2011). This is a perfect echo of biocultural diversity discourse.

Though Liban and Shano utilised the words 'conservation' and 'biodiversity', they see the end goal of conservation as 'benefiting the community' in an immediate, material sense (Shano and Liban, 25 July 2011), and this contrasts with the broader emphasis of global environmental movements upon long-term benefits of maintaining biodiversity or mitigating climate change. These more immediate benefits included the possibility of ecological and cultural tourism that would 'bring in resources', as well as the ability to continue and profit from pastoralist methods of livestock rearing. Shano mentioned that what they needed was 'information on how it is possible to have both livestock and wildlife and tourism *together*' (Shano, 21 August 2011). Thus, Waso Trustland's discursive focus on 'conservation' is both narrower and broader than that of the global biocultural diversity movement: narrower in terms of the location and time scale of expected benefits, and broader in the sense that they spoke of conserving not only the environment and 'culture', but also any other 'resources that benefit communities' (Shano and Liban, 27 August 2011).

The Waso Trustland Project is primarily funded by the Christensen Fund, and to receive funding it must facilitate projects that fit within the particular vision and understanding of the Christensen Fund, and, equally importantly, it must be able to utilise discourse and rhetoric within its grant applications that shows enough familiarity and overlap with the Fund's mission. The way that Waso Trustland worded their initial grant application demonstrates their awareness of the need to use a particular rhetoric or discourse to fit their imagined project into the global discourse of biocultural diversity. The grant application refers to global environmental goals, standards and mechanisms, including the Convention of Biological Diversity, the Forest Principles of the Earth Summit, Millennium Development Goal 7, and International Labour Organization Convention 169. It also speaks of 'endangered indigenous tree species highly valued ... at international levels.'<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the proposal states that 'the project intends to address the issue of universal changes of climatic patterns', demonstrating a calculated decision to link the project with the global climate change movement. All of these quotes show a developed awareness, perhaps surprising of a tiny land rights-focused NGO, of international legal instruments and standards relating to environmentalism.

Not only did the grant application purposefully tie the proposal to the rhetoric of the global environmental concerns, it also tailored the project to fit into the more niche concern of biocultural diversity. In the grant application, Waso Trustland writes about the 'traditional community system of managing and regulating resource use.'<sup>50</sup> Several of the activities outlined for the project link traditional cultural practices with conservation, including collecting oral histories of the ecosystem, as well as identifying 'culturally important' and 'culturally useful' plants. Indeed, the application emphasises that many of the plants in the forest have medicinal and ceremonial uses, and states that the project seeks to 'incorporate the vast knowledge of the indigenous people',<sup>51</sup> in a direct echo of the indigenous knowledge rhetoric of Kivulini and the Christensen Fund.

Yet when switching focus to ecological concerns, Shano held on to his activist approach. The north of Kenya was experiencing a particularly heavy drought during my fieldwork there in the summer of 2011, and Shano agitated for a government response. During my time at the Waso Trustland office, Shano called up a TV station and argued passionately about the lack of appropriate state action (28 July 2011). He also told me that ‘everyone *must stand and fight* [climate change], climate must be protected at any expense’ (28 July 2011, my emphasis). Even with a change in focus, Shano did not become entirely de-politicised, and the Christensen Fund is unable to fully succeed in ‘rendering contentious issues technical’.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the power differentials between the Christensen Fund and Waso Trustland, the links between the global and the regional/local are not entirely monolithic or unidirectional. Shano stated that he planned to continue to recommend to the Christensen Fund that they expand their focus (and funding) to advocacy, and not just cultural and environmental projects. Though this is unlikely to happen, Hassan Shano’s description of why the Christensen Fund agreed to fund a project that still engaged with resource rights is telling: Shano described it as a product of the Funds respect for the organisation. In Shano’s words, ‘the [Christensen Fund] has recognised our efforts, seen for themselves our problems’ (26 July 2011). Thus personal (and organisational) relationships become vital in the way that projects are negotiated and values become formed. This civil society knowledge network is thus not a simple hierarchy of power (and subversion); rather, it includes power that is ‘productive rather than repressive, that comes from below as well as above, that is heterogeneous, diffuse, immanent and unstable’.<sup>53</sup>

Each organisation in the network thus has its own individual role in contributing to the creation and spread of knowledge and ideas through the network, with individual organisational cultures, goals and scales of operation. This diversity and heterogeneity is precisely what is ignored in alternative conceptualisations of civil society operating on a global scale or forming transnational networks, such as Mary Kaldor’s ‘global civil society’.<sup>54</sup> Kaldor reapplies the idea of civil society in the context of the global: *global civil society* consists of ‘the groups, networks and movements which comprise the mechanisms through which individuals negotiate and renegotiate social contracts or political bargains on a global level’.<sup>55</sup> This is very much what civil society knowledge networks do as a whole. However, what is missing in the idea of a global civil society is the level of complexity and diversity that civil society knowledge networks embody.

The organisations in our case study are not entirely global themselves – it is by being connected into transnational civic networks that the Community Forest Association in Beliqo or Waso Trustland in Isiolo connect to the global. Indeed, the case study network functions in many ways like a transnational advocacy network, which Keck and Sikkink define as ‘actors working internationally on an issue ... bound together by shared values, a common discourse and dense exchanges of information and services’.<sup>56</sup> Yet the actors in civil society knowledge networks are not necessarily all working internationally, and may not even be working on the same issue (though they do learn a common discourse). Instead, it is the network as a whole which has both international and local reach. Linking to other civil society organisations, which in turn link to other organisations with global reach (such as the Christensen Fund), allows local concerns (such as Beliqo residents’ concern with forest conservation, or Waso Trustland’s concern with ecological rights) to receive global attention and support (from the likes of the Christensen Fund), and global knowledge and campaigns (such as biocultural diversity) to influence what happens at the village level. What our case study

demonstrates is that these inter-spatial networks need not only serve to connect individuals to political bargaining on the global level – indeed, they could connect local actors with the state (more on that below), or regional actors with the global (exemplified by Hassan Shano and Dr Hussein travelling to, learning, and speaking at international conferences).

Intermediary organisations in this network are essential in not only accessing, selecting and reshaping the ideas of the global node, but – as we will see in the next section – also in having privileged access to the knowledge and the needs of the grassroots nodes. NGOs thus act as *idea intermediaries* (which could also be termed ‘mediators’<sup>57</sup> or ‘interlocutors’<sup>58</sup>), connecting the global and local scales of knowledge and action while filtering and reshaping the ideas of both. The word ‘intermediary’ does not mean that these organisations are ‘mere conduits or tools’<sup>59</sup> – they are intermediary in their position between the global and the local, but they are ‘mediators’ in their ability to ‘transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning ... they are supposed to carry.’<sup>60</sup> As argued above, these intermediaries are heterogeneous in their aims and interests, and they both filter and reformulate ideas into their own ideologies and worldviews, which then influence the functioning of the network as a whole.

This is precisely where the model of civil society knowledge networks diverges from the idea of epistemic communities. Epistemic communities is a concept that emerged in the 1990s, and refers to ‘a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge’<sup>61</sup> who use their ‘negotiations of meanings, understandings and beliefs’ to shape a ‘moral vision’ that is then used to advise state actors and to direct policy.<sup>62</sup> For example, scientific experts in multiple Western countries might form an epistemic community that comes to a shared conclusion on climate change mitigation, and advises a variety of policymakers based on this shared knowledge. While the idea of a community of knowledge is descriptively useful in understanding the way networks of civil society organisations formulate and share a common knowledge base, what is missing in the epistemic community model is a critique of what (and who) constitutes an expert – and what knowledge can constitute an epistemic community. The civil society knowledge network model broadens the definition of an epistemic community to be literal ‘communities of knowledge’, peopled not by recognised professionals (a culturally biased and elitist vision of epistemic authority), but by any agents involved in generating a cohesive transnational discourse around a particular issue.<sup>63</sup> In our case study, this was Hassan Shano while speaking in the role of an ‘indigenous elder’ in Spain, but also Kivulini when helping Waso Trustland shape a new programme. All transmit knowledge not only to policymakers outside the network but also to each other, to the knowledge network as a whole, and, as will be examined in more detail below, to those living in Beliqo at whom the aims of the network are focused. This knowledge need not be about ecological concerns, thought that might be the overt interest of the network – it is also knowledge of how to interest and involve the global aid community in local concerns (in our case, by reformatting livelihood concerns into ecological issues), as well as how to access the resources of the state.

Yet the underlying point is not only that civil society organisations such as the four discussed here come together to facilitate epistemic exchange, building on personality politics and institutional and personal histories and relationships to forge a network that can function as a whole despite the diversity of actors involved, but also that this network creates and spreads knowledge from and through a variety of spatial levels. This extends Castell’s network



society beyond the reach of information technology, linking actors and organisations through epistemic bridges facilitated by institutions and the people that run them. This is particularly visible in our case study in the village of Beliqo.

### Civil society geographies: shrinking space in Northern Kenya

The village of Beliqo is an especially effective prism for examining the inner workings of civil society knowledge networks because of the way it demonstrates simultaneous remoteness and connection – in particular the ways that spatial, technological and political connections emerge out of the knowledge network. At first glance, Beliqo seems in many ways isolated, be it through geographic remoteness, technological disconnection or political isolation. The nearest major town is Isiolo, and to reach Beliqo one must either endure a crowded seven-hour bus ride over a boulder-strewn unpaved road, timing the journey to coincide with the fact that the bus travels only every other day, or, if like for most of Beliqo's residents the journey is far too expensive, pay less to hop on top of a lorry carrying cattle – an option appropriate only for young men. The journey is not undertaken lightly, even by local residents. To get to other villages or small towns in the area, one can crowd into a flatbed pick-up truck, which is notoriously prone to accidents. This option is also only available to men – riding the trucks is considered inappropriate for women, though the bus is fine.<sup>64</sup> Ease of mobility in Beliqo is linked to disposable income and a higher level of education – in fact, most who are able to leave for other cities or villages (as opposed to those that leave to herd animals) either hold government jobs or leadership positions in active civil society organisations. These include the village chiefs, the chairman of the Community Forest Association and (to a much smaller extent) other members of the Community Forest Association's executive committee. When these members of the community left the village the expense of it was largely underwritten by government or civil society institutions – for instance, Waso Trustland paid for three members of the Community Forest Association to come to Isiolo to attend Waso Trustland's partners meeting. The vast majority of Beliqo residents who were able to overcome its geographic remoteness and physical disconnectedness from other urban centres were enabled to do so by their connections to government or civil society – a fact that points to not only Beliqo's physical isolation, but also the central role of civil society in the ways that it *is* connected to the outside world.

This isolation is not simply physical; it is also technological. Without a cell phone network and electricity, Beliqo is outside of the technologically based 'network society', largely removed from exposure to the media and to what Castells describes as 'self-directed mass communication' through 'virtuality' and 'new forms of socialised communication'.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the lack of a cell phone network was a recurring complaint. Amina Isaac, a busy middle-aged woman running a small shop, discussed out-migration from the village and the draw of town life, part of which was 'stimulation' in the form of 'TV, radio and phones' (4 August 2011). Dima, one of the two chiefs of the village, repeatedly brought up the lack of a mobile network and the many schemes he was considering to bring a network to the village (06 August 2011). Asana, one of the few young women in the village pursuing secondary education, spoke vehemently about leaving the village so that she could have access to television and phones and be aware of events in the outside world (16 August 2011). The centrality of technological connectedness and its lack was felt by many in the village, particularly those with a slightly higher level of education and those involved in the civil or political life of



Beliqo. This ties into Castells' own assertion that the communications technology-based network society, while spreading across the globe, is uneven and more people are excluded from it than are included. For Castells this is a question of 'penetration' rather than the breadth of a global network society. In Castells' view, Beliqo would be a part of the globe that has not yet been penetrated by the social, political and cultural networks made possible by new technology.

The people of Beliqo understand themselves to be isolated from broader national and transnational communities not only technologically and geographically, but also politically and historically. The residents of the village are Borana, an ethnic group which was involved in the Shifta War that occurred between the Kenyan state and the secessionist movements in the north of the country in the 1960s.<sup>66</sup> Many in the village had parents or grandparents interned in the camps set up by the Kenyan government during the war, and had a living memory of having their cattle, the Borana's only form of wealth, confiscated or slaughtered by the state. Ibrahim Boru, a pastoralist herder in his 30s, stated that the Borana people who live in the north are not recognised by the government as Kenyan – that the government 'doesn't bother with us' (14 August 2011). He argued that it was the government that was to blame for Borana impoverishment – that the Borana once had plenty of animals and that they were either killed by the government during the Shifta War or killed by the lack of good grazing, which Ibrahim also attributed to the government. Ibrahim's grievance with the state was both historical and contemporary, both with the larger Kenyan state and at the same time the local county council, which he saw as complicit with the current state. His sense that Northern Kenya was not simply neglected but actually robbed by the Kenyan state was echoed repeatedly by other residents of Beliqo. Guracha Sirman, a young livestock owner and youth activist, stated that the Borana of the region have been 'marginalised, left behind since the 1960s', when people were put in camps and their livestock taken. In his view, since then 'we have been neglected, and schools have passed us by' and it is due to state marginalisation that the community does not have money to collect rain water in a cistern. Abdi Abkula, a middle-aged herder whose livestock had been wiped out by the 2011 drought, stated that for the past five decades the people of the region have been forgotten, and that the poverty of the region was brought about by the government, starting in the 1960s (11 August 2011). This is a powerful collective narrative of victimhood, one that emerges out of very real grievances but also presents the Borana as people in need and aids in conveying these grievances to and attracting attention from civil society institutions.<sup>67</sup>

Coupled with this perceived marginalisation seems to be a feeling that the state is failing at any attempt to rectify the situation, or indeed to control what happens in the north. This was evident when people in Beliqo spoke with derision of the role and work of the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) and the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), who have a mandate to care for the region's forest and wildlife – the very gap that the civil society knowledge network was ultimately filling by creating and funding a community forest association. An elder named Galgalo Jarso said that KFS and KWS cannot reach a remote area like Beliqo, and thus need the help of the community to do their job (1 August 2011). Dabaso Godo, another elder, stated more strongly that 'KFS and KWS are never seen in the region, and don't seem to exist in the area' (1 August 2011). Others were more embittered, telling me that KFS 'doesn't care about us' (Hussein Buke, 4 August 2011) and 'abandoned the area' (Asana Wario, 14 August 2011). The perceived neglect by KFS and KWS is not only a reflection of the neglect by the state of the region and the Borana people, but also demonstrates the response to such state

neglect – the ever more prevalent role of civil societies organisations, both local and external.

Indeed, despite the many ways in which Beliqo is understood both by its residents and by outsiders as isolated, it is in many ways part of larger circuits – particularly the knowledge circuits engendered by the civil society knowledge network discussed here. It is precisely this civil society network that in fact bridges spatial, technological and political isolation. Beliqo has a rich civil society landscape with multiple connections to organisations outside the village, not only regional organisations (such as Waso Trustland) but also national and international organisations and funding sources. Being part of this civil society network, and having a project funded by the Christensen Fund and mentored by Waso Trustland and through it Kivulini, influences all of the ways in which Beliqo appears disconnected, and undermines the three realms of isolation discussed above.

As noted earlier, amongst the strata of people actively involved in civil society groups in the village, a number travelled outside the village, including a handful from the Community Forest Association whose travel expenses were underwritten by the Community Forest Association's budget or Waso Trustland (for a partners meeting). Others who leave the village seem to be largely government workers such as the chiefs, or involved in other civil society organisations with outside sponsorship. Not only does civil society involvement provide the resources needed to overcome the geographic and physical barriers to leaving the village, but it also provides a legitimate reason to leave – such as to attend a meeting or planning session. Personal reasons often piggy-backed on the so-called 'official' trips – Habiba, the secretary of the Community Forest Association, used the Waso Trustland partners' meeting as a reason to also visit her relatives in a nearby town. Civil society was also a major reason outsiders (non-family members) came to the village. Because Beliqo has such a rich landscape of civil society connections, a variety of civil society actors from without – ranging from workshop leaders to project initiators to funders – visited the village, including staff from Waso Trustland, who spent a few days organising and running a meeting with the Community Forest Association. The previous spring, the head of Kivulini along with several staff members from the Christensen Fund (including Ken Wilson, the executive director) visited the village to see the work of the Community Forest Association that they were funding.

In the same way, civil society was the most frequent antidote to the technological and thus informational and media isolation in the village. Indeed, as a result of these networks, the people of Beliqo were far from technologically ignorant. Many owned cell phones, useless though they were in the village, and many were well aware of the internet, and some, like the chief or some of the secondary school-educated youths, even had email addresses. They utilise this technology when they are able to leave the village, often on civil-society related (and funded) business. Thus utilisation of communication technology is interlinked with geographic mobility, which as discussed above is facilitated by civil society involvement. Internet use is even more strongly tied to civil society participation, as outsider civil society organisations like Waso Trustland did a lot of internet research and emailing on behalf of grassroots groups in the village to help them search and apply for funds. As Halkano, a young man who worked as a forest scout for the CFA, stated, 'we have no access to internet, but via Waso Trustland we can be heard elsewhere' (12 August 2011).

More generally, civil society networks connected the village with broader news, happenings and events and brought the possibility of involvement in the wider political and economic processes of the nation. Indeed, this is one of Waso Trustland's mandates – to hold

workshops in remote communities regarding both national and regional news around resource and land rights and general political developments. Crucially, the civil society connections are also the way that Beliqo is able to get information about what is happening locally, be it news of 'drilling for oil by Chinese nearby' (Halkano, 12 August 2011) or 'tree logging' (Mohammed Adan, 2 August 2011). Indeed, much of the local news around resource use in Beliqo was an echo of what I heard discussed at WTL's office – for instance, Shano mentioned the drilling of oil by a Chinese firm (25 July 2011). Such information exchange is how the partnership between the Community Forest Association and Waso Trustland sprang up. Indeed, this was how the Community Forest Association was formed, through several such information-exchange meetings held in Beliqo, during which an already existing grass-roots group voiced concerns about the forest, and Waso Trustland shared information regarding the possibility of forming a community forest association under the 2005 Kenya Forest Act, and found funding via Kivulini and the Christensen Fund for the project. In Beliqo, it is not directly 'the unprecedented possibilities unleashed by new information and communication technologies have further accelerated the "globalisation" of [its] civil society', but rather connections to intermediaries such as Waso Trustland, which have allowed Beliqo residents to 'discover the power of international support, resources, and intervention'.<sup>68</sup>

Of course, civil society is not the only source of connection – people do occasionally travel, a couple of the wealthier people in the village have petrol-powered generators, and it is also possible to use hand-held radios (though these were almost non-existent in the village). Despite the difficulties, residents make the expensive and exhausting (and to some even dangerous) trip to Isiolo and other urban centres. Yet it is still civil society networks that in the bulk both provide reasons and ways for people to leave the village and utilise communication technology. It is civil society organisations like Waso Trustland that bring to Beliqo the news and developments that they are able to access via information technology and media, and to bring out local concerns onto the global arena, facilitated by their own access to communication technology.

This case study demonstrates that even pockets of the world like Beliqo, that are outside of the reach of electricity grids and mobile networks, are at least somewhat drawn into 'horizontal' self-directed mass communication.<sup>69</sup> This is precisely because civil society networks, though they cannot take the place of electricity and cell phone signals, *can* allow people access to such virtual socialised communication either directly or through an intermediary acting on their behalf. This points to a *widening* of Castells' network society, from a technologically based network affecting but not *penetrating* the majority of the globe, to a network that is technologically facilitated, but is based on social structures in which the interlinking geographies of civil society networks play a vital role, particularly in those parts of the world not yet penetrated by technological diffusion. In these pockets of the network, civil society organisations are crucial in linking the local with the national and global – not only through the dispersal of knowledge and information, but also through creating forms of connections that overcome geographical, technological, and even, as discussed below, political isolation.

Despite the almost universal feelings of abandonment and marginalisation by the state in Beliqo, the civil society landscape of the village brings in the mechanisms and institutions of the state. Perhaps the most obvious example is the use of the 2005 Kenya Forest Act by the Community Forest Association. The Forest Act devolves the protection of Kenya's forests to local communities, and gives communities the legal mandate to set up local organisations

to protect forests from unsustainable exploitation by both outsiders and community members. It is on the back of this very act that the Community Forest Association was created by Waso Trustland in Beliqo. Without Waso Trustland being aware of changes in national laws and opportunities afforded by such legislation, and without their staff integrating this awareness into their work with the Community Forest Association, Beliqo residents could not have known about the legal mandate provided by the state to protect the local forest from logging.

Besides the village school and the two chiefs, it is the civil society organisations in the village that utilise the state most heavily. This includes not simply state legal mechanisms, but also having the know-how to tap various state agencies for resources. For instance, the chairman of the Community Forest Association spent over a month away from the village, trying to receive funds for the Community Forest Association from regional government offices. It was these same offices that gave the Community Forest Association roots and seedlings for its tree nursery, and has given a farming group in the village tools and a water pump. This sort of government aid came not to individuals or even the local government of the village. Instead, it went to formalised, registered civil society groups, often through the help of other civil society intermediaries like Waso Trustland.

When people in the village reflected on why it was that Beliqo had so many civil society organisations (more than 20 in a village of around a thousand people) and why people chose to join them (the majority, through certainly not all, of the five dozen interviewees in the village study were members of two or more civil society groups), Beliqo residents stated that outside assistance, government or civil society sourced, was always aimed at recognised groups, not individuals. Malicha, a herder who lived in a neighbouring hut to me in the village and who himself was not a member of any group because he had no time to spare from herding, stated that Beliqo had many groups as a way to seek outside aid (17 August 2011). Circulating knowledge of how to deploy CBOs to access resources of the state and international donors thus is as important in the network as knowledge of forest conservation. This knowledge might be instrumental – it might be motivated by the desire to access resources – but it is still knowledge that was acquired by the village because of civil society knowledge networks. This civil society knowledge network thus forms an epistemic community based around a knowledge of praxis, whose content concerns the ‘how’ of development: knowledge of what rhetoric to use, what values to link to, what grantors are accepting applications on what topics, and what laws afford, all of which contribute to accessing support. This is a deliberate challenge to the narrow view of knowledge generally taken by the epistemic community literature, with its emphasis on expert, ‘scientific expert’ knowledge.

Thus the knowledge of utilising state mechanisms and resources is brought by civil society network to Beliqo – despite Waso Trustland’s own overt distrust of and antagonistic position towards the state. Having shared knowledge of state mechanisms and resources – and how to access them – is a key part of forming a civil society knowledge network. The knowledge circulated does not have to be the same knowledge that the global nodes in the network intended to share – by being part of the network Beliqo gains as much knowledge about the Kenyan state as it does about environmentalism, but this is still a demonstration of knowledge flows through the network.

Of course, the Community Forest Association and its connections to Waso Trustland and the Christensen Fund also spread ecological knowledge in the village. The Community Forest Association and Waso Trustland together came up with a plan to set up a tree nursery, hire

scouts to catch loggers in the forest and advocate for better forest management through informing community members about the importance of conserving the forest. Hadija Jillo Shane, a shopkeeper, livestock trader, widow and sole provider for six children, who is a member of Bismilahi Women's Self-Help Group, highlighted the importance of the Community Forest Association's role as a knowledge-provider:

If we only knew deeply the importance of trees, we wouldn't cut them down. But circumstances force us to some extent. [To reconcile this] I'm against taking the whole tree – should take a branch, not the whole tree ... CFA [Community Forest Association] brought this knowledge and ideas to many ... CFA educated us by giving seedlings to plant, by caring [for the forest]. (my emphasis)

Dabaso Godo, a village elder in his 60s and a part of a farming group called Befi, echoed Hadija: 'we were cutting trees, and [the Community Forest Association] told us not to. We explained our problems to them, we combined [organisations], and now we plant more trees together' (1 August 2011). Even this ecologically focused knowledge is still a knowledge of praxis, knowledge that bears directly on action. Thus, ecological knowledge sits side by side with pragmatic, resource-oriented knowledge – and both are equally important in this particular civil society knowledge network. Beliqo residents make use of knowledge gained through the Community Forest Association and Waso Trustland to engage in civic-driven change<sup>70</sup> – both in their interaction with the environment, and to facilitate more active engagement with both the state and with civil society outside the village. Ecological knowledge has become the 'translator' needed to connect all of the nodes into one network<sup>71</sup> – a central concern they all adopt and get behind. Yet each node in our network also pursues its individual concerns, be they political or pragmatic.

By being part of a node of the civil society knowledge network, the people living in Beliqo become actors that are deeply embedded in a rich institutional environment of development-focused civil society institutions. Indeed, the case of Beliqo demonstrates that even places that seem initially lacking of institutions in fact have complex institutional environments – more specifically, a development-focused civil society which connects the village to other organisations on the regional, national and global level. As John Meyer argues in *World Society, Institutional Theories, and the Actor*, such a rich institutional environment creates systems of culture or meaning that penetrate the actors beyond their boundaries, 'constructing agency, identity and activity'.<sup>72</sup> This is precisely what happens in Beliqo – it is not simply the members of the Community Forest Association that are deeply impacted by participating in the network, but many of the residents of the village are as well, and in ways that are well beyond the Community Forest Association's mandate to protect the riverine forest around the village. Meyer argues that 'modern world society generates institutionalised models of proper human actors'.<sup>73</sup> Here, it is not 'modern world society' (a term whose enormity makes it rather difficult to handle) but rather civil society and the transnational knowledge networks it forms that enable, empower and shape the opportunities of human actors by providing linkages to political, technological, financial and information resources.

## Conclusion

The core inquiry of this work is into the ways in which development institutions function as networks that create, spread and modify ideas. This article makes the case that networks of development institutions create connections that can be as profoundly transformative as

technology, media, the state, economic transformation, and the like. Resources flow through such networks, but so do ideas, knowledge and values. Yet despite the complex and unequal dynamics of power within such networks of institutions, no one organisation or individual is able to control or streamline the various goals and ideas of the agents involved in the network. These knowledge networks weave together a variety of knowledges, and are far from dominated by the discourse of their global nodes. Even each node is not fully in control of the knowledge and ideas it transmits to the others. This is reflected in the relationship of both global foundations with NGO intermediaries, and of these NGOs with local communities. These organisations not only deliberately strive to transfer information, expertise, values and knowledge (for instance, through the ‘sensitisation’ workshops Waso Trustland holds in Beliqo), but also inadvertently spread more than that – for instance, knowledge of the state and of the interests of international aid organisations. As a result, such links and networks not only spread information about the environment (though they do transmit some of this), but also spread ways of understanding the concept of the environment and how it can be used to gain access to resources (be they state or non-profit resources).

The civil society knowledge network examined here functions in large part through the personal and institutional relationships between such agents. It is these relationships – often formed and nurtured in person – that set and spread the discursive content of the network, which in turn facilitates the creation and sharing of knowledge through the network. While every node is able, within constraints, to pursue its own aims and generate its own ideas, there are particular points of connection and alignment in the networks that forge epistemic cohesion. These are conferences, universities, workshops, and meetings. It is at these points of connection and knowledge transfer that many of the power dynamics within the case study network emerge. Civil society knowledge networks are not flat – each node in the network must be understood to possess varying degrees of power relative to its neighbours. But the network model demonstrates the way power resides not only in resource-rich and Western-based ‘global’ nodes. Power also lies in the middlemen and local nodes too, as they are essential for constituting, participating in and legitimising such a network – for the global’s very reason for being.

The four offices in our tale are separated by wide gaps of distance, culture, resources, scale and goals. Yet they are able to build bridges that span San Francisco, Nairobi, Isiolo and Beliqo. These are bridges not simply of resources or even aims or rhetoric: they are bridges of knowledge and ideas, of epistemic connections and intellectual influence. They create what Appadurai calls ‘ideoscapes’: the epistemic landscape which emerges out of flows and interconnections of ideas, terms and concepts.<sup>74</sup> These connections form in uneven and complex ways, through personal and institutional relationships, at spaces that serve as knowledge commons and through chains of circumstances, personal histories and connections. Often, the knowledge that is spread and created is not what one would expect from the stated aims of the development interventions that take place in these networks, reflecting instead the interests of the actors and communities involved. Civil society knowledge networks spatially and conceptually extend Castells’ network society, reaching via civil society organisations and intermediary actors into parts of the world like Beliqo where information technology is still uncommon. Such networks also nuance the concept of global civil society, demonstrating the way organisations which are not at all global in scope can become part of institutional networks with global reach. They expand on the epistemic community literature, demonstrating the fluidity of the label of ‘expert’ and what can constitute such a



community. These networks overcome spatial, technological and political barriers around local geographies such as Beliqo by providing access to resources, connections and information. In short, this work is a first step towards understanding the ways in which civil society organisations create their own geography of knowledge, building bridges between local and global through the creation, contestation and spread of ideas.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on Contributor

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## Notes

1. This work is based on interviews and participant observation conducted in Kenya and the US between 2011 and 2014. Interviews in San Francisco, Nairobi and Isiolo were conducted in English. Interviews in Beliqo were conducted in a mixture of English and Borana, and translated by Salad Choki. Unless otherwise noted, the quotes and observations are drawn from the author's interview notes, recordings and field notes.
2. The Christensen Fund was founded in 1957 with a focus on the acquisition and promotion of 'non-European' art. Since the 1980s its mission has expanded to include the preservation of not only artistic expression but also the landscapes that play a key role in artistic production. Starting with the 2002 hire of Ken Wilson as its executive director, the fund has focused on promoting biocultural diversity. This focus was brought to the foundation by Wilson, and he believes that the fund has played a key role since the early 2000s in putting biocultural diversity on the global development and funding map (Wilson, 3 October 2013). The arguments around biodiversity were first formalised in The Declaration of Belém in 1988, and the term 'biocultural diversity' was brought into use by Posey in 1996. Posey, "Protecting Indigenous Peoples' Rights"; and Members of the International Society of Ethnobiology, *Declaration of Belem*. The idea of linking cultural and ecological concerns has gained increasing traction over the past decades, not only with the increasing prominence of climate change and other environmental concerns for big funders and with the increasing prominence of indigenous and local knowledge in both development practice and scholarship, but with the rise of research and programming that links local knowledge and climate change. Cocks, "Biocultural Diversity"; Speranza et al., "Indigenous Knowledge," 296; and Green and Raygorodetsky, "Indigenous Knowledge of a Changing Climate," 242.
3. The names and titles in this article are those most commonly used within the local context of the research. They have not been changed or anonymised unless requested by research participants.
4. Kenya's northern districts have some of the highest rates of poverty, infrastructural underdevelopment and inter-ethnic violence in the country, and are viewed by many Kenyans as the wild and ungovernable 'upcountry'.



5. The paved road is now being extended farther north, reaching towards the Ethiopian border – but until the last few years Isiolo was literally where the pavement ends.
6. Geertz, “‘Local Knowledge’ and Its Limits.”
7. Ferguson, *Global Shadows*, 42.
8. Burawoy, “Public Sociologies”; Ferguson, *Global Shadows*.
9. Dirljik, “Place-based Imagination,” 156.
10. Escobar, “Culture Sits in Place,” 156.
11. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts.”
12. Kumar, “Further Note on Civil Society.”
13. Comaroff and Comaroff, “Introduction,” 7–8.
14. Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*; Kaldor, *Global Civil Society*; Keane, *Global Civil Society?*
15. Kumar, “Further Note on Civil Society”; Lewis, “Civil Society in African Contexts.”
16. Rieff, “False Dawn of Civil Society.”
17. Burawoy, “Public Sociologies,” 1616.
18. Toulmin, *Role of Transnational NGOs*.
19. Comaroff and Comaroff, “Introduction,” 22.
20. Howell and Pearce use the term ‘mainstream’ to designate development organisations (usually international institutions) that see civil society working in tandem with the market and the state to promote development through policy-focused solutions; ‘alternative’ institutions (often grassroots or advocacy NGOs) see the role of civil society as more conflictual in pointing out the power dynamics and inequalities of markets; both approaches are thus normative: they prescribe what civil society is and should be. Neither approach is necessarily ‘coherent or unified’, but strands of both will be reflected by different institutions and individuals within the case study discussed here. Howell and Pearce, “Civil Society and Development,” 17.
21. Li, *Will to Improve*.
22. See for instance Bano, “Dangerous Correlations”; Cooley and Ron, “NGO Scramble”; Escobar, *Encountering Development*; Fisher, “Doing Good?”; Matanga, “NGOs and the Politics of Development”; Reimann, “Up to No Good?”
23. For that, see amongst others Cowen and Shenton, “Development Doctrine in Africa”; Cowen and Shenton, “Invention of Development”; Easterly, *Tyranny of Experts*; Ferguson, *Anti-Politics Machine*; Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.
24. Which has been explored by Mosse, *Cultivating Development*.
25. Mosse, “Introduction.”
26. *Ibid.*, 5.
27. Castells, “Network Society.”
28. Castells and Cardoso, *Network Society*; Held and McGrew, “Great Globalisation Debate.”
29. Kaldor, *Global Civil Society*; Keck and Sikkink, “Transnational Advocacy Networks”; Batliwala, “Grassroots Movements as Transnational Actors.”
30. Mosse, *Cultivating Development*, 4.
31. Burawoy, “Manufacturing the Global,” 148.
32. Urry, “Mobile Sociology”; Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System.”
33. Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System,” 105.
34. Bruggeman, *Social Networks*.
35. Castells, “Network Society,” 7.
36. Joranson, “Indigenous Knowledge and the Knowledge Commons.”
37. Indeed, the University of Oxford plays a key role in the formation of this research – the project was conceived and carried out while the author was based at Oxford between 2010 and 2015. Both Ken Wilson and Wolde Tadasse (the Christensen Fund’s East Africa Programme Manager at the time) have personal and scholarly connections to faculty members in the Department of International Development and the African Studies Centre at Oxford, and it is these faculty members who initially connected me with TCF (namely Wolde, who lives in Oxford because his wife works there), who in turn introduced me to both Ken Wilson, and to Dr Hussein.
38. Hassan Shano has been gaoled for his part in several land-rights demonstrations.

39. Borana is Hassan Shano's ethnic group, but is also the ethnic group of Dr Hussein from Kivulini as well as the vast majority of the population in Beliqo – another connecting fact that is significant, but outside of the analytical scope of this work.
40. Many have to travel a long way, contending with terrible roads, insecure conditions and a lack of public transit in the region.
41. Burawoy, "Public Sociologies," 1616.
42. Gaventa, "Finding Space for Change," 26.
43. Fowler, "Change Actors and Civic Innovators," 41.
44. This impulse to seek legitimacy opening up previously closed spaces is echoed in development more broadly with the rise of participatory and community-based approaches. Chambers, *Rural Development*.
45. Massey, "Geographies of responsibility," 11, original emphases.
46. Lewis and Mosse, "Encountering Order and Disjuncture," 3.
47. Mosse, *Cultivating Development*; Mosse, "Anti-Social Anthropology?"
48. This is a subjective observation, and is based on the brevity of the interviews, the types of questions asked (most focused on memories of the river and forest and ecological degradation over time, rather than the relationship between people, culture and river), the lack of follow-up questions, and the lack of communication of the contents of these interviews to other village residents.
49. Waso Trustland Project, *Proposal of Participatory Management of Ewaso Nyiro Ecosystem*.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Li, *Will to Improve*, 10.
53. Lewis and Mosse, "Encountering Order and Disjuncture," 19.
54. Kaldor, *Global Civil Society*.
55. Ibid., 74.
56. Keck and Sikkink, "Transnational Advocacy Networks," 89.
57. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 37.
58. Fowler, "Innovation in Institutional Collaboration," 14.
59. Fechter and Hindman, *Everyday Lives of Development Workers*, 4.
60. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 39.
61. Haas, "Introduction," 3.
62. Adler and Haas, "Conclusion," 389.
63. Toke, "Epistemic Communities and Environmental Groups."
64. It is notable that most of the key players in the network are men, and that gender plays a role in multiple ways in forging or blocking individual relationships and connections. It is worth noting, however, that Habiba, the female secretary of the CFA, does play a key role in the network, and was the CFA representative who travelled to WTL's partners' meeting. Indeed, many civically involved community members in Beliqo are female, as well as many of the students who leave Beliqo to go to high schools in the surrounding areas. To understand the gender dynamics at play here would thus take fine-grained analysis – one that is important, but unfortunately outside the scope of this paper.
65. Castells, "Network Society," 13.
66. Whittaker, "Pursuing Pastoralists."
67. Dahl, *Suffering Grass*; Wario Arero, "Coming to Kenya."
68. Batliwala, "Grassroots Movements as Transnational Actors," 395, 394.
69. Castells, "Network Society," 13.
70. Fowler and Biekart, "Relocating Civil Society."
71. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.
72. Meyer, "World Society," 4.
73. Ibid., 2.
74. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

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