

# Seeing Through the Template: Colonial Affordances in Development Documentation

DAVID SCOTT\*   
Karlstad University, Sweden

International development practice has increasingly been shaped by professionalization and managerialization. This trend has intensified in the last decades, driven by a governance paradigm centered on results and evidence. As a consequence, standardized planning tools, monitoring mechanisms, and evaluation methods have become prevalent. Foundational for these practices is documentation—especially *templates* which provide instructions and guidelines for documenting development work. Drawing on insights from anthropological scholarship on the transformative capacities of documents, this article denaturalizes templates as neutral forms of documentation, and examines how they shape development practice. Using templates and interviews with development professionals working in Swedish-funded peacebuilding projects, I mobilize the concept of affordance to analyze the possibilities for action rendered possible and impossible by templates. The analysis demonstrates how templates enable an affordance of visibility, making development interventions visible as projects composed of separate, discrete components. Moreover, templates carry colonial affordances, functioning as vehicles for the perpetual problematization and categorization of the developing world as an object of improvement. The article concludes that templates subtly sustain coloniality as a structure of power that outlives formal colonialism, and calls for greater attention to the colonial affordances embedded in everyday bureaucratic objects and artifacts in international development.

La pratique du développement international est de plus en plus façonnée par la professionnalisation et la managérialisation. Cette tendance se renforce ces dernières décennies, grâce à un paradigme de la gouvernance centré sur les résultats et les données probantes. Par conséquent, les outils de planification, les mécanismes de suivi et les méthodes d'évaluation standardisés sont aujourd'hui prédominants. La documentation, notamment les modèles qui fournissent des instructions et des lignes directrices pour la documentation du travail de développement, est fondamentale pour ces pratiques. Se fondant sur des enseignements issus de la recherche anthropologique relative aux capacités de transformation des documents, cet article dénaturalise les modèles en tant que formes neutres de documentation, et s'intéresse à la manière dont ils façonnent la pratique de développement. À l'aide de modèles et d'entretiens avec des professionnels du développement impliqués dans des projets de consolidation de la paix financés par la Suède, je mobilise le concept d'affordance pour analyser les possibilités d'action permises ou non par ces modèles. L'analyse démontre que les modèles favorisent une affordance de visibilité, faisant apparaître les interventions de développement comme projets aux composants distincts et séparés. De plus, les modèles présentent des affordances coloniales, et font office de vecteurs pour la problématisation et la catégorisation perpétuelles du monde en développement comme objet d'amélioration. L'article conclut que les modèles entretiennent

subtilement la colonialité comme structure du pouvoir qui survit au colonialisme formel, et appelle à prêter davantage attention aux affordances coloniales intégrées dans les objets et artefacts administratifs du quotidien en développement international.

Cada vez con mayor frecuencia, la práctica del desarrollo internacional se ha visto moldeada por la profesionalización y la gerencialización. Esta tendencia se ha intensificado en las últimas décadas, impulsada por un paradigma de gobernanza centrado en los resultados y en la evidencia. En consecuencia, las herramientas de planificación estandarizadas, los mecanismos de seguimiento y los métodos de evaluación se han convertido en algo frecuente. En este sentido, la documentación resulta fundamental para estas prácticas, especialmente las plantillas que proporcionan instrucciones y pautas para documentar el trabajo en materia de desarrollo. Este artículo se basa en los conocimientos de la investigación antropológica sobre las capacidades transformadoras de los documentos, desnaturaliza las plantillas como formas neutrales de documentación y analiza cómo estas moldean la práctica del desarrollo. Utilizamos plantillas y entrevistas con profesionales del desarrollo que trabajan en proyectos de construcción de paz financiados por Suecia y movilizamos el concepto de «ofrecimiento» con el fin de analizar las posibilidades de acción que las plantillas hacen posibles o imposibles. El análisis demuestra cómo las plantillas permiten un ofrecimiento en materia de visibilidad, que provoca que las intervenciones de desarrollo resulten visibles como proyectos compuestos por componentes separados y discretos. Además, las plantillas poseen ofrecimientos coloniales, y funcionan como vehículos para la perpetua problematización y categorización del mundo en desarrollo como un objeto de mejora. El artículo concluye que las plantillas sostienen, de forma sutil, la colonialidad como una estructura de poder que perdura más allá del colonialismo formal y llama a prestar mayor atención a las facilidades coloniales contenidas en los objetos y aparatos burocráticos cotidianos en el desarrollo internacional.

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### Introduction

One of the major changes that occurred after World War II, argues Arturo [Escobar \(2012\)](#), was that large-scale poverty began to be problematized and constructed into an actionable concern. As a response to this problematization, development emerged as a delimited and specialized field. [Escobar \(2012, 45\)](#) notes that this field soon became professionalized, leading to the invention of scientific disciplines, specialized vocabularies, and managerial tools that brought “the Third World into the politics of expert knowledge and Western science [. . .],” effectively permitting poor countries to be “known, specified, and intervened upon.” Escobar’s interventions formed part of a broader post-development scholarship that began to criticize development as a hegemonic project imposing standardized improvement schemes rooted in Western ideas of progress and modernity (e.g., [Esteva 1992](#)). The so-called developing world increasingly became subject to the operations of the “anti-politics machine,” which referred to the conglomerate of international organizations, governments, and non-governmental organizations that deployed their uniform and standardized development expertise in a multitude of contexts ([Ferguson 1994](#)).

The observations of early post-development scholarship anticipated the emergence of an even more sophisticated form of development management that characterizes the contemporary development landscape. In order to act upon the problematization of poverty, the development industry that emerged in the 1960s increasingly adopted ideas and tools originating in the management sciences that developed during the early 1900s to make factory production more effective

(Scott 2023b). Gradually, project management techniques, developed in the military sector, gained traction, making *the project* the dominant organizational form for delivering aid (Kerr 2008; Scott 2023b). While tools associated with project management are still persistent features of international development, the turn in the 1990s and early 2000s towards “New Public Management” (NPM) and evidence-based policymaking promoting results and aid efficiency has contributed to the addition of a myriad of managerial practices and techniques to the development management catalogue (Donovan 2018; Eyben 2015; Scott 2023b). Thus, techniques and artifacts such as performance measurement indicators, randomized controlled trials, theories of change, results reporting, systematic reviews, and cost-effectiveness analysis, have emerged during the recent decades. These “results and evidence artifacts,” as Eyben (2015, 21) calls them, have allowed for an even more sophisticated mapping and problematization of the developing world.

The backbone of these managerial techniques is various forms of *documentation*. Results and evidence artifacts leave a substantial paper trail in the form of, for example, project proposals, charts, results reports, reviews, and evaluations. These types of development documentation can be seen as a continuation of colonial documentation and archiving that did not record the colonized world objectively but rather produced and made it legible through meticulous practices of mapping, categorization, and quantification (Appadurai 1996; Stoler 2002). Indeed, contemporary development documentation functions in a similar way. It provides the discursive resources to produce the developing world as a uniform space whose political and social complexities can be simplified, aggregated, and standardized so as to make it susceptible to “improvement” (Bakonyi 2018; Li 2007). As such, documentation becomes a continuation and expansion of a broader colonial project through which the development industry can continue to problematize and make the developing world legible through other technical means. Thus, development documentation signals a shift from colonialism as overt domination to indirect “colonization by bureaucratization” (Scott 2023a, 215), or, with another concept, “coloniality,” as decolonial scholars call the enduring discursive power structures outliving formal colonialism (Maldonado-Torres 2007).

The production of development documentation has become significantly standardized, prompting development professionals to resort increasingly to the use of *templates* which can be defined as “generic descriptions with universal categories that can be revised to fit any organizational setting” (Qu and Cooper 2011, 358). Thus, in order to structure all aspects of development project design—proposal writing, project planning, report writing, evaluation designs etc.—there is a broad supply of generic templates that provide instructions and guidelines on how to complete these tasks in practice (cf. Scott 2021). Templates have particularly strong capacities to shape, order, and make the developing world legible for purposes of improvement, making them not neutral technical artifacts but objects imbued with political power. Hence, templates are mobilized within a context characterized by “imperial durabilities” (Stoler 2016), referring to the persistent character of colonial and epistemic hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South. While templates are indeed widespread in the Global North, making citizens legible for improvement purposes, their role and effects differ when being deployed within North–South development interventions where they can become vehicles for further colonial ordering. Thus, when installed in a (post)colonial context, templates can reactivate colonial thought categories, concepts, and imaginaries, reinforcing political and longstanding North–South hierarchies. Accordingly, their particular capacity to order (post)colonial spaces and subjects should be deconstructed.

Inspired by Foucault (see O’Leary and Falzon 2010, 240) this article aims to de-naturalize and “render strange” templates as neutral forms of documentation, and examine how they shape what kind of development can be imagined. The role of documents as instrumental in shaping realities has not gone unnoticed in either

development research (e.g., [Dar 2008](#); [Mosse 2005](#)) nor in anthropologically oriented scholarship (e.g., [Hull 2012](#); [Riles 2006](#)) but templates and how they contribute to perpetuating and expanding colonial power relations have, hitherto, been understudied.

To analyze how templates shape what kind of development can be imagined, especially how they enable and constrain development practices and actions, I turn to the concept of *affordance*, which is used to examine the possibilities for action offered by objects. Particularly, I use affordance as a relational concept, meaning that the analytical lens is focused on how the possibilities of action of templates depend on user interaction and engagement, rather than being “locked” into them as essential properties. More specifically, the notion of affordance is used on empirical material consisting of templates used by a Swedish state funder, and on interviews with development professionals in a civil society organization engaging with these templates. The analysis reveals that templates offer two specific possibilities for action. First, templates enable an *affordance of visibility* which refers to the ability to make development interventions visible as *projects* with discrete component parts. Second, they carry a *colonial affordance*, working as vehicles for imposing a colonial “grid of intelligibility” through which peripheral regions and subjects can be “seen,” mapped and problematized, reinforcing historically entrenched colonial power relations. This approach offers new insights into how practices of documentation contribute to technocratization and the perpetuation of colonial power dynamics in contemporary development practice.

This article is structured as follows. First, I situate the article in relation to existing research on the role of documentation in modern society in general and in the development industry in particular. Next, I develop the notion of *affordance* as an analytical lens. This section is followed by a presentation of the methodology and the empirical material. Next, the analysis of the affordances of templates in Swedish development aid is presented. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion on how this article contributes to pushing critical analysis on documents, and their broader political effects, further in development studies.

### The Generative Aspects of Documentation in International Development

My initial characterization of templates as having significant capacities to shape and order the world relates to a broader discussion within anthropological literature on the generative character of documentation. In this section, I situate the article in relation to this literature. Moreover, I expand the discussion on the central role of documentation in a development industry that has opened up to managerial techniques of governing.

Scholarly interest in the role of documentation was initially spurred by historical processes of statecraft and bureaucratization. Scholars like [Scott \(1998\)](#) and [Appadurai \(1996\)](#) have demonstrated how different forms of documentation—maps, forms with numerical data etc.—enabled the state to make territories and their populations legible and amenable to governing.

Documentation has remained central to bureaucratic statecraft, and, paradoxically, has intensified in the contemporary neoliberal era. Despite building on anti-bureaucratic principles, neoliberalism has led to an intensified form of bureaucratization which has been decoupled from the state ([Bakonyi 2018](#)), and contributed to the invasion of everyday life by “formalities” in the form of norms, procedures, rules, and processes of coding and categorization ([Hibou 2015](#), vii). [Graeber \(2015\)](#) argues that this is due to the operations of the “iron law of liberalism” which stipulates that all attempts at neoliberal marketization lead to the intensification of bureaucratization and regulation, often including an increased reliance on documentation and paperwork.

Despite documentation being an integral part of modern society, it has long been under-problematized. Often, documentation has been treated as “merely [an] output of human intentionality and practice, emerging as [a] passive instrument for (human) agents to shape our social worlds” (Saglam 2025, 121). In the last decade, this view has been challenged by anthropological scholarship that emphasizes the capacity of documents to structure and order the world, and to create orders of inclusion and exclusion as a consequence. As Asdal (2015, 74) argues, “paperwork does not simply *describe* an external reality ‘out there’: documents also take part in working upon, modifying and transforming that reality.” Thus, this research has refrained from studying documents as containers of discourse in favor of examining them as artifacts that do “modifying work” (Asdal 2015, 74) in the sense that they enable and constrain particular interpretations, categorizations, actions, and behaviors.

Taking this point of departure, research has shown the capacity of documents to bring people separated by both organizational and geographical boundaries into alignment (Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019; Harper 1998), and the role of documents in enabling the production of governable subjects. Here, a critical literature within migration and humanitarian studies has taken a particular interest in the various certificates and forms used to document the physical and mental suffering of migrants and refugees in order to render them manageable (Andretta and Borrelli 2024; Fassin 2012). If this research points to the crucial role that documents play in ordering and rendering subjects and reality governable, a more classical strand of anthropological scholarship has turned to the visual imagery that facilitates such actions. This research has focused on the graphical resources associated with standardized documents, such as spaces, boxes, and headings, and their “self-contextualizing” character (Riles 2006, 20), referring to their capacity to provide clues and frameworks for how to respond to queries in a coherent and orderly fashion (Brenneis 2006).

The generative role of documentation has spurred increased interest among scholars specifically examining the impacts of development managerialism. As touched upon in the introduction, development has undergone a process of managerialization through which practices such as standardized planning tools, monitoring mechanisms, and evaluation methods have been deployed to reduce complexity and uncertainty, and increase control over “people, resources, and values” (Scott 2023a, 216; Alexius and Vähämäki 2024). A key driver of this trend is the projectification of development, through which project management techniques have reshaped development practice (Krause 2014; Scott 2021; Scott 2023b). Through project management, a range of different artifacts that structure the delivery of aid have been introduced. One such artifact is the so-called “logframe” which permits the transformation of aid interventions into tangible projects with clearly stated goals, activities, expected results, and indicators. Thus, the logframe enables the translation of complex realities into components of a project (Martinez and Cooper 2020). Logframes, therefore, do not provide neutral categories through which users can describe the world objectively, but they “shape what people get to see and know about the world, and people’s ideas about what the task before them is” (Krause 2014, 76).

The logframe is characteristic of a wider documentary regime in international development where documents do not merely record existing realities but shape them, enabling and constraining particular development practices and interventions. Here, research examining reporting practices has shown the crucial role of documentation in translating messy information into coherent pieces of knowledge. Drawing on how NGOs use reports, Dar (2008) shows how these compile and present information in such a way that reality can be made coherent and homogeneous. Similarly, Mosse (2005) demonstrates that project reports are instrumental in creating a coherent representation of reality. The structuring of the reports

according to a cause-effect logic enable placing a “technical and deductive grid onto unruly practices and events” (Mosse 2005, 164).

Moreover, research on “aid chains,” that is the form of development occurring in complex chains of collaboration between funders and development organizations, demonstrates that this form of translation into coherent reporting formats crowds out alternative forms of seeing the world. Wallace et al. (2006) provide an empirically grounded example of this in their study on aid chains in Africa, showing how NGOs, in order to respond to requirements higher up in the chain, adapt their documentation and reporting through various steps of abstraction. By reporting against predefined managerial frameworks, such as logframes, NGOs can reduce information but risk “burying” possible tensions and contradictions.

While these examples demonstrate that documents can reduce complex realities, Rottenburg (2009) notes that as reports travel in aid chains, the information they contain is not only reduced, but also amplified, meaning that reports enable making comprehensive statements and painting “overall pictures” about multiple individual projects. Thus, the way documentation can be used offers various ways of shaping reality, reducing it or amplifying it.

To summarize, the broader anthropological literature and specific strands of development research have contributed to understanding the generative character of documents. However, I observe two gaps that I intend to address in this article. The first is empirical. Despite the existing research on documentation, the role of the *template* in shaping development practice remains understudied. The template represents a specific document that is not synonymous with other forms of development documentation. Rather, templates come equipped with resources that guide the user in producing, for instance, project plans and reports, organizational overviews, budgets, risk assessments, and monitoring frameworks. Templates are not reducible to, for example, the logframe but are composite in character, combining visual imagery, textual instructions, and inscriptions that offer particular possibilities for action. Thus, focusing on the template in depth enables an investigation of its specific impacts on how development can be imagined, and its role in perpetuating colonial power dynamics.

The second gap is theoretical. While the research reviewed here draws on a general critical anthropological approach to analyzing documents, it rarely engages with specific, analytically operational concepts from the anthropological scholarship on documentation. Consequently, I propose a theoretical framework based on the concept of *affordance*. Inspired by work in science and technology studies (STS) emphasizing how objects and artifacts permit and restrict various forms of usage (Gibson 1979), and by recent work in international studies on the role of technology in enabling diplomatic documentation (Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019), this article mobilizes the notion of affordance to analyze the practices and actions rendered possible, or impossible, by templates. By engaging with the affordance concept, I also aim to push the analysis beyond visual imagery to focus on user engagement and interaction.

### Theoretical Framework

The concept of *affordance* originates in the work of cognitive psychologist Gibson (1979) who explores how humans and animals interact with objects in their environment. Gibson (1979) argues that these objects offer various *possibilities for action*, known as *affordances*. For example, elements in nature such as rocks, trees, and rivers provide animals with different affordances such as shelter or nourishment. Gibson (1979) stresses that affordance is a *relational* concept, meaning that an affordance exists independently of humans but needs human action to be materialized. Thus, objects or natural elements do not possess immutable properties that causally determine human action, nor can humans shape the meaning of objects at will. Rather,

the concept draws attention to the myriad of potential object-human interactions which cannot be reduced to any of them alone. [Scarlett and Zeilinger \(2019\)](#) illustrate this with the example of a teapot: its physical characteristics suggest certain uses, such as pouring hot liquid, but these affordances only materialize when a human recognizes it as teapot. Thus, the affordances of a teapot lie not in its physical attributes but in the actual interaction with the user.

This relational view of affordance has been adopted in the social sciences more generally, particularly among scholars interested in the possibilities for action offered by information technologies. [Zammuto et al. \(2007\)](#) argue that these technologies enable particular actions as users interact with them, such as visualization of work processes and virtual collaboration. As digitalization and algorithmic life have advanced, media and communication scholarship has argued for a more rigorous use of the relational dimension, emphasizing that although the digital and algorithmic landscape presents the user with a myriad of possibilities, it is easy to mistake them as essential parts of the digital and communication technologies themselves, when they, in practice, cannot be “predetermined outside of their situated everyday actions and habits of usage” ([Costa 2018](#), 3643). While the relational aspect of affordance has been put forward as offering a “third way” between understanding technology as either deterministic or as a tool that can be freely shaped by users ([Hutchby 2001](#), 444), it still tends to be overlooked in research ([Evans et al. 2017](#)). The concept of affordance and its relational dimension has also begun to be adopted more widely in international studies to examine the affordances of technologies and documents. Mainly practice-oriented research on diplomacy has drawn on the concept to study the role of written protocols in enabling and restricting particular behaviors and actions during credential ceremonies ([Berkowitz, Heimann, and Kampf 2024](#)) and the role of information and communication technology in enabling the drafting, editing, and negotiating of diplomatic documents ([Adler-Nissen and Drieschova 2019](#)).

The concept of affordance is useful for studying the generative dimension of documentation in international development. Particularly, it provides a focused analytical lens on the possibilities for action offered by templates. When analyzing the affordances of templates in international development, I mobilize the relational dimension as it is the situated use of templates that is analytically interesting, and not their ostensibly material and immutable properties. The mobilization of this relational dimension enables an analysis of how the affordances of templates do not lie in their material constitution as such but in the interactions and engagements they make possible or render impossible. Although not using the term affordance explicitly, this echoes [Höhn’s \(2013, 105\)](#) understanding of the role of documents in international development which draws on [Heidegger \(1993\)](#):

People not only use documents for particular goals but they engage in a dialogue with them that shapes their social reality. Documents are *zuhanden* (interacting with people to create new and unexpected outcomes), instead of only being *vorhanden* (tools to be handled by actors).

Moreover, besides this relational aspect, I mobilize an under-explored aspect of the concept: its sensitivity to power. The concept harbors a possibility to study how the possibilities for action provided by objects and technologies reproduce relations of power. [Hutchby \(2001, 447, emphasis in original\)](#), although not addressing power explicitly, argues that the affordances of technologies “*constrain the ways that they can possibly be ‘written’ or ‘read’*”. Thus, objects and technologies render particular affordances possible while rendering others impossible. [Davis and Chouinard \(2016, 242\)](#) point to the power-laden aspects of affordances when they argue that they have the power to “request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage, and refuse.” Thus, the affordances provided by templates harbor the possibility of intensifying, but also contesting, power relations. While the relational aspect of affordances has been thoroughly examined in the literature, I want to explore further the

possibilities the concept offers for analyzing the power-laden dimensions of templates in international development. Particularly, I want to explore the concept's potential for unveiling how templates enable actions and analytical operations that reproduce colonial power dynamics.

### Methodological Approach

To investigate the affordances of templates in development practice, I draw on interviews and documents collected within a broader study on the so-called “projectification” of Swedish development aid conducted between 2017 and 2021. This study examined how development actors in the form of public funding agencies, civil society organizations, and private consultants engaged with the project format and its associated managerial tools and practices. During the course of the study, I noted how these actors used standardized templates to produce project-related documentation, such as applications, risk assessments, results reports, and various forms of appraisals and audits. I selected one civil society organization from the collected material in order to conduct a deeper study of the role of templates in development practice. The organization—a Swedish-based women's organization working with feminist peacebuilding—was chosen because of its extensive experience working with templates. Their experience stemmed from engaging with templates provided by one of their most important funders, the “Folke Bernadotte Academy” (FBA), a Swedish government agency specializing in funding projects aimed at promoting peace- and state building in conflict and post-conflict countries.

For analytical purposes, I collected three examples of application and reporting templates used frequently by the women's organization during the studied period. As such, they represented two distinct types of templates with slightly different structures, allowing me to capture how they enable and constrain action and analytical operations in different ways. I did not focus on collecting the funder's “blank” templates, but on gathering those that the women's organization had completed with information. The collection of a limited number of templates was justified by the fact that I wanted to approach them as artifacts with aesthetic dimensions that guide and instruct the user in various ways. This decision can be seen as an answer to the call made by anthropologists to look “*at* rather than *through* documents” (Hull 2012, 13). By approaching templates as artifacts, I was able to study what they *do* rather than what they contain.

The same line of reasoning lies behind the selection of informants. For the study, I selected four informants who had in-depth experience using templates in their daily work as project managers: the General Secretary of the organization, the Communications Officer, the International Desk Officer, and the Political Desk Officer (see Appendix). This smaller sample was justified by the desire to conduct in-depth conversations about the role of templates and form-filling in processes of project-making. This strategy made it possible to go deeper into the intricacies of templates and how informants engaged with them. The informants represent a Northern perspective in a significantly longer aid chain which also includes partner organizations in the Global South. The perspectives of these partners are not part of the empirical material. This makes it somewhat uniform, but I argue that the selected informants, having not only a significant experience working with templates themselves but also in cooperation with their Southern counterparts, are well-suited for the analytical task that this article addresses.

The combination of templates and interviews serves a dual methodological purpose. Using interviews as well as templates that have been completed with information by the women's organization, allows for a deeper exploration of relational dynamics, highlighting how users engage with and respond to the templates' guidance in practice. This approach aligns with Costa's (2018, 3651) concept of “affordance-in-practice” which emphasizes the importance of studying affordances as “results

of the repeated interactions” between humans and objects. Thus, the concept of “affordance-in-practice” enables a more focused lens on how users engage with templates and the way this engagement possibly leads to unexpected outcomes. Through this exploration of interactions and engagement, it is also possible to zoom in on the power relations being reproduced, particularly colonial power dynamics.

By analyzing extracts from templates and quotes from interviews, I show how the affordances of templates are realized through interaction and engagement. Drawing on recent methodological interventions (Hansen and Triantafyllou 2022; Öjehag-Pettersson and Mitander 2020), I treat this material as providing focused empirical illustrations of broader themes and problematics, allowing me to avoid “totalizing societal diagnoses” in favor of “pointy” examples (Hansen and Triantafyllou 2022, 571). Hence, the templates and the interviews serve as examples of how affordances operate in practice as well as the power effects they generate.

The material has been analyzed using an ethnographic approach. In examining the templates, I have avoided approaching them solely as containers of text whose discursive content should be decoded. Rather, I have treated them as combinations of text and visual imagery (such as headings, boxes, and layout features) which, together, shape the way users interact and engage with them. The analysis of the interviews was guided by an effort to find rich examples of how the informants interacted with templates, both explicitly in their descriptions and implicitly when reflecting on everyday documentation practices.

### Exploring the Affordances of Templates in Swedish Development Aid

In the following, I analyze the affordances—the possibilities for action—provided by templates in development practice. The first section of the analysis focuses on how templates afford different forms of visibility and legibility. Drawing on James Scott (1998, 2–3), I argue that legibility refers to the act of reducing complexity in order to make the world “known” and governable. The second section analyzes how templates afford colonial problematizations that create “peripheral” regions and subjects as objects of improvement.

#### Enabling Visibility and Legibility

A first form of visibility afforded by templates is *organizational legibility* which refers to making the inner bureaucratic workings of the organization visible and susceptible to external control. One template used for project application purposes includes a section in which the applicant organization is expected to answer questions about its inner structures, skills, and experiences. This section takes the form of brief questions which the applicant organization is expected to answer by ticking a “yes/no” box. Questions asked in the template concern whether the organization has a democratic foundation (a solid base of members, procedures for elections and representation, formal statutes etc.), if it is registered at local authorities, and whether it has any tax debts. Another round of questions focuses on examining whether the applicant organization possesses the necessary skills and experiences. Here, questions revolve around experiences of working in conflict/post-conflict countries, experiences from working in the specific target country, and the existence of established contacts with local partner organizations. This section contributes to accomplishing organizational legibility in the sense that the organization can present itself as a transparent entity with verifiable procedures and relevant skills and experiences.

A second form of visibility afforded by templates is *project legibility*. With the help of templates, a particular thematic content can be translated into a project logic and become “read” from the outside as an isolated *project* with logically interconnected parts. The project logic is made visible in a particular section called “project implementation” of an application template. Under this section, there are multiple

sub-headings where the applicant is expected to describe the structure of a planned project. Under the sub-heading “background,” the applicant is expected to describe the problems the project seeks to remedy, and provide adequate justifications for it. Next, the applicant is expected to outline the overall project goal, the so-called “theory of change” (the logic through which the applicant imagines a particular trajectory of change), the project’s indirect target groups, and the possible contributions of the project in relation to similar projects. Under a following sub-heading, the applicant is asked to list a set of “specific objectives” with associated indicators, outcomes, activities, direct target groups, and time frame. Throughout these sections, the template relies on boxes with a brief instruction and a corresponding box in which the user is to give the desired response. The following is an excerpt from a completed application template describing a specific objective and its associated indicators (Women’s organization 2017b, 7):

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**4.3.1 Specific objective 1** (shall be specific, measurable, accepted, realistic, time bound and shall contribute to the fulfillment of the project goal).

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1. Women activists in Nigeria, DR Congo and Cameroon have increased knowledge about mediation processes and improved capacity to influence these processes at the local and international level.

**4.3.2 Indicators** (shall be concrete and used in order to measure or describe if the specific objective has been reached.)

- Women activists have received information and tools for participation and influence in local mediation processes (*\*meetings attendance registry, surveys and evaluation interviews with participants*).
  - Women mediators have been registered in a women mediation registry and are thus willing and able to participate in mediation processes (*\*women mediation registry*).
  - Key representatives working with the Swedish mediation network have increased knowledge about women peace activists’ work in conflict settings and are thus able to bring this perspective into existing or future mediation processes at the international level (*\*meetings attendance registry, surveys and evaluation interviews with participants*).
  - Women activists from conflict settings have received information and tools on how to participate in and influence international mediation processes through networking with prominent experts within the Swedish mediation network. (*\*meetings attendance registry, surveys and evaluation interviews with participants*).
  - Key local and national stakeholders have increased knowledge and recognition of the importance of including women as mediators, in order to change attitudes and behavior that is hindering women’s participation. (*\*meetings attendance registry, surveys and evaluation interviews with participants*).
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The excerpt shows the various resources that the template provides the user. Through the instruction in the first box, the user is encouraged to formulate an objective according to the “SMART” model (specific, measurable, accepted, realistic, and time bound). Similarly, through a short instruction, the user is also encouraged to list a set of indicators, and the data sources intended to verify particular results. The numbering promotes project legibility. The template instructs the user to formulate a specific objective (4.3.1) followed by a list of indicators (4.3.2). This numbering does not only separate the boxes but encourages the user to imagine a linear and hierarchical relationship between objectives and indicators. The visual resources such as boxes, instructions, and numbers, thus, give the template a “self-contextualizing” character (Riles 2006) in the sense that it provides clues on how the project’s intended causality should be described.

Templates also afford making the future visible. Although inherently uncertain, templates encourage users to make a possible future, into which a project is supposed to intervene, knowable. One informant argues that

partly it is expected that you should know, very well in advance, what your own activities look like but also how the political reality will look like because often... when you submit your applications it is still a year and a half left until you sit there working on your projects. So, that's how it is, it is expected that one and half year in advance [...] you will be able to say: "this will happen in the world" [and] "this is how we will work with this". That's a challenge. And [this] forces you sometimes to write rather vague applications in order to be able to adapt to reality and your own conditions. (Interview Informant 1, my translation and emphasis)

Here, the application process, which is steered by templates, opens up the possibility to "conjecture [. . .] about hidden opaque realities," as [Barry and Gambino \(2024, 7\)](#) argue is central for the making of projects. The future is essentially unknown but as the user engages with the application template, s/he is encouraged to actively think and conjecture about it in order to make it somewhat knowable for application purposes.

Moreover, templates are effective instruments for producing visibility in a complex aid chain comprising both the women's organization which operates in the North, and its partners in the Global South. The following quote illustrates how users are oriented to use templates as instruments of data collection in the aid chain:

They have only sent us documentation on... first what they want to do, then we produce a project plan with intermediate goals [...] in which the wishes of all three project countries involved in the project are framed in some way, and then they are sent out again and they complete it with activities that they can do under these intermediate goals, and with a budget for that and then it comes back to us and all these activities must be re-worked and budgeted [...]. (Interview Informant 3, my translation)

Here, templates enable gathering the information needed to make a complex multi-stakeholder project visible to funders. Plural "wishes" from distant stakeholders are abstracted and compiled into a standardized application template, filtering out potential discrepancies in the process. This is a common effect of working in "aid chains" where applications and reports are "doctored up" to secure funding and donor confidence ([Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 2006, 167](#)).

Templates specifically used for application purposes, then, enable making a neat project logic visible. By offering a managerial project planning vocabulary (objectives in "smart" form, outcomes, activities, and target groups), users are oriented to use the template to impose a "project grid" onto the particular initiative they want to implement and make it visible as a coherent future-oriented project for the funder. Moreover, templates are useful instruments for absorbing and abstracting the views and wishes from multiple stakeholders so as to make a project visible to funders. The "project grid" that templates help to instantiate, then, enables making the world legible by offering a vocabulary with which the world can be disaggregated into separate parts that can be displayed in various inscriptions. Indeed, templates enable defining a delimited and actionable domain of reality, as argued by [Li \(2007\)](#).

However, when users engage with the project grid, it is far from a frictionless process. Several informants talk about the difficulties in deciphering template instructions, specifically pointing to the intricacies of project-related vocabulary (Interview Informant 3; Interview Informant 4). Particularly, the meaning of certain terms necessitates collective interpretation. For example, one informant argues that a recurring problem is to decipher the meaning of "effect" versus "result" in instructions, making it necessary to recruit support from one another:

It happens very often that we go to each other's rooms and sit there, a group of us, and go: "ok, what do they mean?" [...] When I write my application, I always discuss it with a colleague and every time we say "yeah, but isn't this an effect or a result, what do they mean?" (Interview Informant 4, my translation)

Another informant contends that the disaggregation of the world demanded by templates makes it difficult to maintain the bigger picture of a project. A project

application which has been written in a template becomes almost indecipherable when it is returned from the funder's assessment:

[...] We wrote these applications, then they're gone for six months when someone sits and assesses them and then, when they are granted, and you have to read through your application to see what it is you're supposed to do, you can almost feel: "what are we supposed to do"? What is the project about? *Because you almost don't understand it yourself when you read it broken down into these different parts. So absolutely, the templates are a problem.* (Interview Informant 1, my translation and emphasis)

Returning to the above quote on the capacity of templates to assist in the collection of information so that multi-stakeholder projects can be made visible, there are also potential problems beyond complexity and disaggregation. Rather, templates contribute to a filtering process through which Northern stakeholders can retain a privilege of interpretation, collecting and doctoring up information from their Southern counterparts (cf. Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman 2006).

Besides application templates, FBA also provides reporting templates into which organizations are expected to document the results of projects. These templates enable other forms of visibility. Firstly, as users engage with the report template, a broader quest for visibility-making is put in motion. As reporting templates require the reporting of results, users have dedicated time and resources to collect the necessary information beforehand. As one informant argues:

For most of us, we have kind of a log book when we do the projects, with all the different activities, articles, blogs, and how many meetings, with whom, how many we met and so on, and then you have to take this log book and put it back in the template [...] and justify, well, that it has somehow produced results. (Interview Informant 2)

Templates, thus, encourage "self-documentation" through which users collect the necessary information so it can be translated into the reporting format at a later stage.

Secondly, reporting templates enable making visible a narrative of achieved change. Reporting templates are not only documents for registering implemented activities, but also allow for making comprehensive statements about the broader impacts of a project. The formulation of these comprehensive statements is encouraged through a brief instruction in the beginning of one of the reporting templates:

For projects funded by FBA, the main focus of the final reports should be on the changes that the project has led to. There is always a risk that too much focus is put on what has been done instead of the change that has been achieved. (*Women's organization 2017a*, 1).

As users engage with the template, they are configured to adapt to this instruction by creating broader narratives of change. Projects have not only resulted in a particular number of participants being able to participate in particular activities, but broader results have been achieved. In a report detailing the results of a project aiming to strengthen women's organizations' capacity to implement the UNSCR 1325 in three African countries, the impacts are described as broader than merely accomplishing the implementation of particular activities. Rather, the project has resulted in that participants have "increased their capacity and influence and been strengthened in collective power outreach" (*Women's organization 2017a*, 7). Furthermore, participants are reported as having increased their "understanding and knowledge of conflict prevention on individual, local and national level" (*Women's organization 2017a*, 7). These descriptions are illustrative of how templates enable making comprehensive statements on how broader change has been achieved, suggesting an "amplification" of results (*Rottenburg 2009*, 183). As such, templates offer the possibility to produce success. As argued by *Mosse (2005*, 158), project reports are not neutral vessels for the objective registration of implemented activities, but are tools for linking objectives with outputs and creating "compelling interpretation[s]

of events.” This, [Mosse \(2005\)](#) argues, is a way of producing “development success.” Reporting templates, thus, enable making visible how achieved change is related to previously stated objectives, thereby creating a consistent *story of success*.

In conclusion, templates afford both possibilities and constraints. On the one hand, they enable a reduction of complexity by simplifying and disaggregating the world in order to align it to a project logic, indeed placing a “technical and deductive grid onto unruly practices and events” ([Mosse 2005](#), 164). On the other hand, this very reduction entails a form of erasure through which the complexities of development are rendered invisible.

#### “Seeing” the Developing World Through the Bureaucratic form—The Colonial Affordances of Templates

As described in the previous section, templates are instrumental in simplifying and disaggregating the world. In this second part of the analysis, I argue that this should also be understood as a mode of *colonial ordering* through which the developing world can be “seen,” problematized, and categorized for the sake of accomplishing its continuous improvement. Templates, thus, function as colonial artifacts that orient users to place a colonial “grid of intelligibility” on the developing world. In the following, I demonstrate how templates position users to perform different analytical operations that standardize and reconfigure regions and subjects into categories fit for improvement.

The rational and universal vocabulary of templates orients users toward analytical operations that stabilize the developing world as a homogeneous space with common problems and shortcomings. A first analytical operation enabled by the template is *problematization*. The templates under study often require a problem background in which the user should identify particular deficiencies and “lacks” that a project should remedy. For example, in one completed application template in which the studied women’s organization describes a peacebuilding project in three African countries, it is stated that an identified problem which the project intends to address is the fact that women groups feel “ill-informed and inadequately prepared for how to prevent and act against the gendered impacts of militarized violence” ([Women’s organization 2016](#), 6). Thus, the template enables a problematization that builds on portraying women’s organizations as “lacking,” effectively creating a legitimate ground for intervention.

This problematization is a condition for a second analytical operation: the identification of *target groups*. The template instructs the user to specify a set of groups that should be targeted by particular project activities. For example, in the same completed application template, five target groups are identified: women activists that are part of the project and members of the women’s organization and its sister organizations; women and men in selected communities; local and national decision makers in the three African countries; women and girls with special needs living in refugee camps; and women candidates for an election in one of the target countries ([Women’s organization 2016](#), 7). Thus, the template affords the classification of a heterogeneous population into enclosed categories of governable subjects (cf. [Andreetta and Borrelli 2024](#)). The target groups highlighted in the example suggest that the classification process is gendered and racialized as primarily women of color are positioned as needing improvement.

Templates, thus, enable the activation of common colonial tropes and problematizations—communities are labelled as “lacking” in either knowledge or capacity, and, as a consequence, a set of delineated, but simplified, “target groups” are constructed. I argue that this problematization of lack and identification of communities in need of “targeting” is enabled by the “colonial library.” Coined by [Mudimbe \(1988\)](#), the colonial library can be understood as the repertoire of categories, representations, and dichotomies through which the Western world makes

meaning about the “Third World” as its alterity. This colonial library is built into the template, providing users with the discursive resources through which peripheral subjects and regions can be problematized and rendered manageable. Here, the template harbors the colonial library and allows it to be reactivated in order to make peripheral zones and subjects into perpetual objects of improvement.

Templates also work as instruments for imposing universal values and beliefs onto peripheral regions and subjects. A common aspect of planning projects with templates involves discussing how a project aims to integrate particular “thematic priorities” which often refer to generic human rights issues. One informant tells a story about the need to explain explicitly how a project application aims to incorporate three specific thematic priorities:

[...] Most recently, FBA had added another page with three questions where you were supposed to develop how different aspects played into the project... I think it was sustainability, gender equality and a third one, and it is like this... the way I interpreted it, it was because they are subject to increased pressure [...] *that we must be able to describe how we work with sustainability and gender equality and conflict sensitivity which was the third one [...] so all of a sudden you are supposed to write half a page more on each aspect which can feel a little bit superfluous when you work...* we don't have a single project that doesn't deal with gender equality, conflict and sustainability [...]. (Interview Informant 1, my translation and emphasis)

The thematic priorities referred to here—sustainability, gender equality, and conflict sensitivity—can be understood as *transcendental* values in the form of essential and homogeneous categories (Teschfahuney 2005) that are taken for granted as universally “good” and worthy of imposing on peripheral regions and subjects through projects. However, these categories, although perhaps seen as unproblematic, do not recognize their own particularity as values rooted in a Western tradition of thought, where certain values and beliefs are considered as having a universal content. Thus, by requiring the incorporation of thematic priorities, templates afford the possibility to impose universal and transcendental values onto peripheral regions where such values can rarely be subject to adaptation and renegotiation.

To conclude, templates offer the possibility to activate a colonial “grid of intelligibility” through which peripheral regions and subjects can be “seen,” problematized, and made into targets of Westernized and standardized solutions. However, this visibility hinges on the production of silences. Templates afford analytical operations drawing from a colonial library, including the problematization of target groups in need of support and the imposition of transcendental values in the form of thematic priorities. These operations privilege Westernized patterns of thinking and knowing rooted in logic, rationality, and universalism, while, simultaneously, rendering non-Western ways of thinking unintelligible.

### Concluding Discussion

The aim of this article has been to denaturalize templates as neutral forms of documentation, and examine how they shape the practice of development and set limits for what type of development can be imagined. Drawing on the concept of *affordance*, the article demonstrates how templates afford and constrain particular forms of action and analytical operations in development practice.

This article offers two key findings. First, templates enable various forms of visibility and legibility. Through templates, *organizational legibility* can be accomplished, meaning that civil society organizations can make themselves legible as delimited entities with controllable inner processes and procedures. In addition, templates enable *project legibility* which refers to the translation of development initiatives into isolated *projects* whose component parts can be made visible and assessable. Moreover, templates afford the possibility to create comprehensive statements of achieved change, thereby crafting stories of project success.

Second, the analysis demonstrates how visibility-making also carries *colonial affordances*. Templates build on a historically entrenched “colonial library” (Mudimbe 1988) which provides the categories, representations, and dichotomies through which peripheral regions and subjects can be “seen,” problematized, and targeted with schemes of improvement.

Engaging with the concept of affordance, and especially “affordance-in-practice” as developed by Costa (2018, 3651), has enabled an analysis that accounts for users’ interactions and engagements with templates. This approach moves beyond focusing solely on the visual and material characteristics of templates which risks overemphasizing how these supposedly immutable properties result in predictable actions from users. Instead, I show how the notion of affordance can be used to capture the effects of users’ engagements. Thus, applying an affordance lens has made it possible to analyze the unpredictable engagements that cannot be seen as results of users blindly obeying template instructions. The affordances of visibility and colonial categorization are not the results of users mechanically decoding instructions of templates, but rather outcomes of interpretation and meaning-making which enable particular actions and analytical operations, exceeding the modes of use imagined by template producers. The analysis, therefore, contributes new insights to discussions on the applicability of the affordance concept. By taking seriously the calls made to account for the relational dimension, this article provides an empirically grounded example to the broader literature on affordances.

This article also contributes to discussions in other scholarly literatures. While the empirical findings in this article support earlier claims made by anthropological scholars on the capacity of documents to order and shape the world and its subjects (Andretta and Borrelli 2024; Asdal 2015; Fassin 2012; Saglam 2025), they also bring new insights to this discussion. Anthropological scholarship has been pivotal for advancing work on the role of visual imagery in providing frameworks for action (Brenneis 2006; Riles 2006). However, it tends to overlook how documents “configure the user” (Cozza 2021, 66), both enabling and constraining the ways users interact with them. While the analysis has focused partially on how the visual imagery of templates guides the user in various ways, user engagements and interactions have been put more in the center. The applied methodology, focusing on how users respond to and make sense out of instructions and visual imagery, has enabled a more thorough focus on the effects of user interactions.

Moreover, I contribute to research on development managerialism by focusing exclusively on the template as a specific governmental technology that regulates development practice. Certainly, previous research has not left the governmental technologies pervading development practice unexamined, for example by studying project management techniques in the form of logframes (Krause 2014; Scott 2021; Scott 2023b) or general documentation practices (Dar 2008; Mosse 2005; Rottenburg 2009). However, this article demonstrates how templates work as central vehicles of technocratization and managerialization, extending previous research on logframes. This article’s focus on templates expands our understanding of how they offer varied possibilities of action, such as the narrative and storytelling affordances of reporting templates, that go beyond the structuring logic that logframes provide.

As this article has argued for the role of templates in sustaining and expanding colonial power relations, I also want to describe how I contribute to the broader discussion on the status of colonialism as a contemporary—and not only historical—project of domination. Indeed, as decolonial scholars argue, the dismantling of formal colonial administrations through juridical-political liberation was only decolonization by name. Rather, we live in an era of “global coloniality” which is a persistent form of colonial power that is maintained alive through knowledge regimes, cultural practices, philosophical thought categories, and social relations (Grosfoguel 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007). I would like to conceptualize development

documentation in the form of templates as an instrument of coloniality. Templates become vessels of coloniality by imposing what Santos (2004) calls Westernized “monocultures” of scientific thinking, linear temporality, and universal and transcendental values. Consequently, templates, although enveloped in a positive language of improvement, are instruments of colonial silencing as they make little room for non-Western ways of thinking about development and human prosperity. Rather, templates are, as Escobar (2018, 68), argues, complicit in the “production of nonexistence” which refers to how alternatives to Western modes of thinking are erased through active production. Thus, templates used in daily development practice contribute to the perpetuation of a broader colonial project but in a subtle and non-overt way. Decolonial scholarship, therefore, is important as a theoretical resource to analyze the colonial effects of bureaucratic tools and artifacts in international development. While previous research has successfully created a bridge between development research and decolonial scholarship (see Scott 2021; Scott 2023a), I argue that there is a need to further examine how development documentation sustains coloniality.

However, it is important to emphasize that templates are not necessarily totalizing in their reach. A limitation of the analysis presented in this article is that templates may appear as relentless vessels for transforming the world according to universal and colonial thinking; indeed as instruments for the production of non-existence. While the significance of tools such as templates should not be understated, it is important to emphasize their fragile character. Although not always in the center of my analysis, it touches upon the fact that templates give rise to moments of friction—instances where users struggle to decipher the meaning of instructions or try to adapt rigid formats to complex realities. These instances suggest that while templates have a universalizing character, their effects are not monolithic. Indeed, as Anna Tsing (2005, 1) reminds us, “universal claims do not actually make everything everywhere the same” but generate “friction” through which these very claims are renegotiated and subverted. Thus, future research on documents—and bureaucratic tools generally—in international development could pay more attention to the fact that bureaucratic instruments with universal claims “don’t take over the world” (Tsing 2005, 8) but are engaged with and reformulated.

In conclusion, this article underscores the need to maintain a critical attitude towards the use of documents in international development as they contribute to technocratization and “colonization by bureaucratization” (Scott 2023a, 215). Documents should, then, be understood as forming part of a development landscape that is increasingly “object-dominated.” Alongside documents, this landscape is characterized by the use of digital technologies and different forms of technical devices and tools which are instrumental in rendering subjects and regions manageable and governable. As this article has demonstrated, artifacts can quietly sustain coloniality in development practice. A crucial task for future research is, then, to open up a research agenda for examining the myriad of everyday bureaucratic tools and objects—both “low-tech” documents and paperwork, and “high-tech” digital technologies and devices—and their role in carrying colonial affordances. In order to pursue a more “object-oriented” research agenda, development research can incorporate insights from STS and IR scholarship taking an interest in how objects and technologies—knowledge artifacts, metrics, logistical infrastructures—are mobilized to govern and tame the unruliness of global politics (see Littoz-Monnet 2024 for a recent example). Such an agenda would not only make it possible to direct a more focused lens onto the generative role of artifacts and objects in international development. It would also enable an analysis of how they carry increasingly sophisticated abilities to problematize, map, and analyze the developing world.

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### Conflicts of interest

No conflicts of interest to be declared.

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The data underlying this article (interviews and documents) will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Appendix. List of Interviewees

Interview	Date
Informant 1, General Secretary, Women's organization	15 March 2018
Informant 2, Communications Officer, Women's organization	15 March 2018
Informant 3, International Desk Officer, Women's organization	12 April 2018
Informant 4, Political Desk Officer, Women's organization	12 April 2018

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