

# Human Sciences Encounters in Phnom-Penh: Past Presentations: 'Living well' while 'doing good' - Debates on altruism and professionalism in aid work

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## **'Living well' while 'doing good'? (Missing) debates on altruism and professionalism in aid work**

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This paper takes at its starting point public criticism of international aid workers who appear to be 'doing well out of poverty'. This is perceived to be in contrast to the poor populations in developing countries whom they are meant to help, and more broadly in moral contradiction to their stated mission to reduce poverty. Based on fieldwork with aid workers in Cambodia, I suggest that such public perceptions are mirrored by some aid workers' uncertainty and unease concerning the moral dimensions of their own and others' lifestyles. Such concerns are voiced alongside aid workers' expressly stated 'mixed motivations' - including a desire to 'make a difference' as well as to establish a career - for undertaking aid work, and in the context of their everyday practices of crafting comfortable lives for themselves and their families. On the level of aid policy, such issues are addressed most notably through 'immersion' programmes for aid workers, as well as in debates about appropriate remuneration strategies. Significantly, though, pertinent analyses of such public and private unease are notably absent from development ethics. This seems hard to fathom, since other 'helping professions' such as nursing or social work have produced comprehensive studies on altruism and professionalism among their practitioners, including their implications for training and career sustainability. I argue that the absence of equivalent research in development studies is partly due to a pervasive and highly political tendency to foreground the 'other' -the world's poor- while rendering those who deliver aid largely invisible. Placing 'aid recipients' and 'aid givers' in separate categories, together with an emphasis on collective rather than individual moral responsibilities, not only makes it difficult to conduct debates on the role of altruism and professionalism among aid workers, but also exemplifies how practices of orientalist 'othering' continue to inform aspects of development theory and practice.