

Struggle for Justice and the Right to Justification

A Constructivist Study of Ecumenical Diakonia
in a Global Context of Power Relations

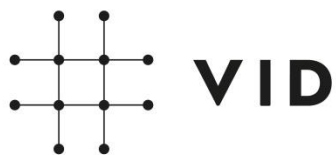
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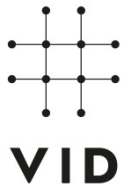
Mirjam Syltebø Endalew

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VID Specialized University

post@vid.no

www.vid.no

Dear Simon and Liban,

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The thesis is a story about my encounters with the participants in the study. The confidence and trust that you have granted me is a great responsibility. My whole thesis rests on your willingness to share your stories and your struggles. I apologise for any misinterpretations and misrepresentations I may have created.

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Abstract

Ecumenical diakonia is a concept that churches use in descriptions of, and discussions about, their social ministries. Recent publications describe ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice with reference to systematic theological reflections. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice based on empirical study of a case of ecumenical diakonia. The study asks: How is ecumenical diakonia a struggle for justice?

The theoretical framework of the study is Rainer Forst's critical theory of justice as the right to justification in dialogue with Achille Mbembe's critique of Black reason and Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler's discussion about the power of recognition. The right to justification is a constructivist theory of justice that recognises that concepts and their meanings, including the concept of justice, are constructed in social processes. While Forst constructs a normative idea of what justice could look like in a just world, Mbembe provides a critical description of the unjust realities in the real world.

The findings of the study are presented as a thick description developed based on participant observation of a case of ecumenical diakonia and interviews with actors predominantly from Africa and Madagascar. The study describes how power relations condition ecumenical diakonia and participate in the reproduction of injustice.

The study identifies two kinds of ecumenical diakonia. The first kind of ecumenical diakonia is the kind of ecumenical diakonia where theologians and development donors construct norms and social orders for how actors should think and act. The second kind of ecumenical diakonia is the kind of ecumenical diakonia where actors themselves construct their own norms and social orders. Both these kinds of ecumenical diakonia are part of a complex system of power relations where economic inequalities reproduce unjust social and normative orders.

Sammendrag

Økumenisk diakoni er et begrep kirker bruker i beskrivelser av og diskusjoner om de sosiale tjenestene sine. Nyere publikasjoner beskriver økumenisk diakoni som kamp for rettferdighet med henvisning til systematisk teologiske refleksjoner. Formålet med dette studiet er å bidra til forståelsen av økumenisk diakoni som kamp for rettferdighet på grunnlag av en empirisk case-studie av økumenisk diakoni. Problemstillingen spør: Hvordan er økumenisk diakoni kamp for rettferdighet?

Det teoretiske rammeverket i studiet er Rainer Forst sin kritiske teori om rettferdighet som retten til rettferdiggjørelse i dialog med Achille Mbembe's kritikk av Svart fornuft og Athena Athanasiou og Judith Butler's samtale om makten i anerkjennelse eller bekreftelse. Retten til rettferdiggjørelse bygger på en konstruktivistisk kunnskapsforståelse som anerkjenner at begreper og begrepers innhold, inkludert rettferdighetsbegrepet, blir til gjennom sosiale prosesser. Mens Forst konstruerer en normativ ide om hva rettferdighet kunne bety i en rettferdig verden, beskriver Mbembe konsekvensene av urettferdigheten i den virkelige verden.

Funnene presenteres som en fylldig beskrivelse av økumenisk diakoni basert på deltakende observasjon av et tilfelle av økumenisk diakoni og intervjuer med aktører, hovedsakelig fra Afrika og Madagaskar. Studiet beskriver hvordan økumenisk diakoni betinges av maktforhold som bidrar til å reproducere urettferdighet.

Studiet identifiserer to typer økumenisk diakoni. Den første typen økumenisk diakoni er den typen økumenisk diakoni hvor teologer og bistandsdonorer konstruerer normer og sosiale ordninger for hvordan aktører skal tenke og handle. Den andre typen økumenisk diakoni er den typen økumenisk diakoni hvor aktørene selv konstruerer sine egne normer og sosiale ordninger. Begge disse typene økumenisk diakoni er en del av komplekse maktforhold hvor økonomisk ulikhet bidrar til å reproducere urettferdige normer og sosiale ordninger.

1. Introduction

Since the day I arrived in Ethiopia as a young nurse more than 20 years ago, I have been struggling to manoeuvre my whiteness. On the road towards the village that would be my home for the next four years, children's voices shouting "Ferenji! Ferenji!" blended with the cloud of dust behind the Landcruiser, and I realised that I would not escape the privilege that follows me. My Ethiopian colleagues included me in their fellowships and welcomed me with hospitality. Their ambiguity towards foreigners and their acts of resistance were only visible to those who understood the meanings behind their words. Years later, my privilege had become a blind spot. Teaching a class on diakonia, I was confronted by my ignorance. Explaining how liberation theologians have argued that the church consists of the poor, I uttered: "We are all poor." The moment the words crossed my lips, I felt unease. These words did not sound right coming from the mouth of a Norwegian woman to a group of African students. When one of the students raised his voice and emotionally expressed his disagreement with the idea that poverty is a condition human beings share, I shamefully realised that my words had revealed my own ignorance of my own privileged position in a world characterised by injustice.

This study is motivated by a longing for justice.

1.1. Ecumenical Diakonia as a Struggle for Justice

Diakonia is a concept that is used in churches discussions about, and descriptions of, their social ministries.¹ The concept has many meanings that include both normative and descriptive aspects. Struggle for justice has become a central term in construction of the normative meanings of diakonia over the last decade,² particularly in the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement is the global fellowship of different denominations working together for common witness and an inclusive and just fellowship of unity in diversity.³

Ecumenical diakonia is an emerging concept in the global ecumenical fellowship of churches. The concept is actualised and promoted internationally through the document 'Called to Transformation, Ecumenical Diakonia' that was presented to the World Council of Churches (WCC) General Assembly

¹ Godwin Ampony et al., eds., *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diakonia, Contextual Theologies and Practice of Diakonia and Christian Social Services - Resources for Study and Intercultural Learning* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2021).

² Stephanie Dietrich, "'Mercy and Truth Are Met Together; Righteousness and Peace Have Kissed Each Other' (Psalm 85:10): Biblical and Systematic Theological Perspectives on Diakonia as Advocacy and Fight for Justice.' in *Diakonia as Christian Social Practice, An Introduction*, ed. Stephanie Dietrich et al., Regnum Studies in Mission (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 28–45.

³ Olav Fykse Tveit, 'Diakonia: An Ecumenical Perspective', in *The Diaconal Church*, ed. Stephanie Dietrich et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2019), 236–45.

2022.⁴ The document may be described as an attempt to integrate insights from different denominations and different parts of the world. The document sketches three dimensions of what is described as a new paradigm of diakonia. First, what is presented as the ecclesiological dimension. The ecclesiological dimension connects ecumenical diakonia to the life of the church as the body of Christ. The ecclesiological dimension emphasises the role of local congregations as actors in ecumenical diakonia as “both a visible sign and an effective instrument of the church’s vocation in the world”.⁵ The second dimension of ecumenical diakonia is the prophetic dimension. This dimension describes ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice. The document argues that ecumenical diakonia “recognizes the political context in which it is embedded and develops forms of action that denounce injustice and support processes towards a more just society”.⁶ The prophetic dimension is further explained with reference to how the Old Testament prophets and Jesus “defended the dignity and rights of the excluded and announced the values of God’s reign, among which are justice and peace”.⁷ Third, the document promotes a holistic approach that integrates spiritual, social and material aspects of life. This dimension argues that working for a more just society must include all aspects of human reality. The holistic dimension is described as a response to critique of diaconal agencies promotion of a Western worldview raised by “those representing the churches in the global South”.⁸

The three aspects of ecumenical diakonia are presented as struggles to overcome dimensions of diakonia that have been subject to criticism. The ecclesiological nature of ecumenical diakonia stressing that ecumenical diakonia belongs to, and is the responsibility of, local congregations is presented as a response to institutionalised understandings of the church. The ecclesiological dimension promotes a normative understanding of the church as a sharing and healing fellowship. The ecclesiological dimension is presented with reference to the Orthodox understanding of diakonia, as a “liturgy after the liturgy” and “an integral part of a living Christian community’s concern and pastoral care for all those who come within the range of its knowledge and loving care”.⁹ The document refers to the Orthodox understanding of the eucharist as the heart of ecumenical diakonia and describes ecumenical diakonia as essential for the life and well-being of the church. The document further suggests that a practical implication of the ecclesiological nature of ecumenical diakonia is that ecumenical diakonia springs out of local congregations as concrete healing and sharing fellowships. The prophetic dimension of ecumenical diakonia that describes ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for

⁴ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, ‘Called to Transformation, Ecumenical Diakonia’ (WCC Publications, 2022).

⁵ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, 32.

⁶ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, 32.

⁷ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, 32.

⁸ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, 32.

⁹ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, 31.

justice is presented as a response to diaconal agents who present their work as charity and humble service. The document is critical of diaconal services that have become oblivious to the impacts of the suppressing powers of unjust political and economic systems, such as capitalism and colonialism. The prophetic dimension is an influence from liberation theology rooted in the encounters between theologians from the Roman Catholic tradition and local communities in Latin America. The document describes ecumenical diakonia as a rights-based practice and promotes political aspects of ecumenical diakonia that denounce injustice. The holistic dimension of ecumenical diakonia integrating material, social and spiritual aspects of human life is presented as a response to secularisation of diaconal agencies. The document refers to how externally funded projects have been separated from other church-related work and describes this separation as promotion of “a Western worldview”. The document stresses that the three dimensions of ecumenical diakonia are interrelated and mutually justify each other.¹⁰

The documents presentation of these three dimensions reflects how the global community of Christians is struggling to navigate tensions between normative understanding of what it means to be church, and the empirical reality of the church as a fellowship of human beings located in a world of power relations. While the concept is presented as a new emerging paradigm, the struggle is situated in the history of the church.

The document promotes a concept of ecumenical diakonia that finds its normative point of reference in theology. The authors of ‘Called to Transformation’ argue that the theological aspects of ecumenical diakonia comprises ecumenical diakonia’s normative foundation that expresses something essential to the identity of the church and participation in the mission of God.¹¹ The document’s understanding of theology as ecumenical diakonia’s normative foundation is reflected in the document’s presentation of systematic theological reflections grounded in a trinitarian understanding of ecumenical diakonia and the many references to the Bible throughout the document.¹²

The document presents practical examples of diaconal practice from around the world. However, the practical examples described in the document are not based on systematic empirical studies, and there is a risk that such superficial descriptions may contribute to occlude the tensions, complexities, power relations and injustice characteristic for the social world in which ecumenical diakonia is located. This study aims to contribute a description of ecumenical diakonia based on empirical study of ecumenical

¹⁰ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, 31–33.

¹¹ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, 15–16.

¹² World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, 16–17, 19, 23–25, 43–52, 59–61, 69, 70, 71, 73, 88, 91–92, 98, 105, 110.

diakonia. The main question the study seeks to answer is, **“How is ecumenical diakonia a struggle for justice?”**

1.2. The Location of Concepts

The study rests on a constructivist epistemology that attempts to account for how concepts and their meanings are constructed by human beings and located in human beings’ experiences and perceptions of the world. A struggle for justice must recognise that human beings experience the world differently and use different concepts to describe their experiences, their actions and the world.

The interdisciplinary field of diaconal studies, in which the study is located has, until recently, largely been located in Western Europe. Dominating Western voices in recent decades, are however influenced by theologies arising from Latin American struggles for justice and liberation.¹³ In Africa, the field is often referred to as theology and development. Many of the studies to which I refer in the study belong to the field of development studies¹⁴, and the study could have been described as a study in the field of theology and development or religion and development. Building coherence across the different concepts used by actors and researchers in different parts of the world, has been one of the challenges in the study. Ecumenical diakonia is a concept that seems to be gaining momentum in the global ecumenical movement¹⁵, and to make clear the relevance of the study for the wider discussions in the field, I landed on using the term ecumenical diakonia in the main question.

While the study is a study of ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice, the study may also be described as a study of Use Your Talents. The actors in the study describe their struggles for justice as acts of doing Use Your Talents. They contrast their acts of doing Use Your Talents to Western churches mission endeavours and to development. For the actors, the concept Use Your Talents represents a break with Western churches mission endeavours and with development. Use Your Talents is a new concept that invites the actors to participate in the construction of its meaning based on their own experiences of the world. While the actors describe Use Your Talents as a break with experiences of domination and suppression located in history, the concept and the social processes in which the concept is constructed, is at the same time located in the history of Western churches mission endeavours and of development.

¹³ See chapter 2.1

¹⁴ See chapter 2.2. – 2.5.

¹⁵ A recent major publication on this concept contains contributions from different parts of the world and a diversity of denominations. See Ampony et al., *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diakonia, Contextual Theologies and Practice of Diakonia and Christian Social Services - Resources for Study and Intercultural Learning*.

1.3. A Concept Located in Power Relations

The empirical material in the study was produced in connection to the Use Your Talents Innovation Project (UYT-IP). The purpose of the UYT-IP was to promote and develop the Use Your Talents approach among churches and academic institutions. The book *Use Your Talents – The Congregation as Primary Development Agent* presents the Use Your Talents approach as a new and different approach to development that is contrasted to “a traditional project approach”. In this book Use Your Talents is described as an approach to community development that seeks to utilise the congregation as a primary development agent.¹⁶ The project leader of the UYT-IP, who is also the editor of the book, identifies seven characteristics of the Use Your Talents approach. First, he argues that in contrast to needs- or rights-based approaches that, in his understanding, focus on what is lacking in the community, Use Your Talents starts with the identification of available resources and talents in the community. Second, he describes the participants in Use Your Talents as actors, as opposed to “a target group”. Third, he explains that in Use Your Talents, the congregation is the primary development agent, while in “normal church development work”, projects are often organised in a department for development. Fourth, he explains that the Use Your Talents approach is built around volunteerism. Fifth, he emphasises that experience sharing and learning from each other is central in the approach. Sixth, he argues that as the actors are volunteers who do not receive salaries from any external source, the approach is sustainable. Last, he summarises by arguing that together these elements answer “one of the main challenges within development, namely, ownership”, by enabling people to “break out of the helplessness that is very often the crucial part of poverty”.¹⁷

The UYT-IP was implemented through the organisation of conferences, workshops, trainings and study trips where participants were invited to share experiences and learn about the Use Your Talents approach from each other.¹⁸ The project had three part-time employees: the Use Your Talents Co-ordinator for French-Speaking Africa, the Use Your Talents Co-ordinator for Eastern Africa and the Norwegian project leader living in Norway. All three employees were men. The project’s total budget for the three-year period was 4, 250, 000 NOK.¹⁹

UYT-IP was commissioned by the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS). NMS was established in 1842 as part of the modern missionary movement. NMS’ first missionary Hans Paludan Smith Schreuder was

¹⁶ Lena Boberg, Beatrice Juma Johansson, and Maël Andriamisarisoa, ‘Use Your Talents Evaluation Report, What Can We Do with What We Have Here and Now?’ (In Tune Learning and Development Consultancy, May 2020), 1–2.

¹⁷ Haus, “‘Use Your Talents’ Knowledge Development Project – Introduction Article’, 20–21.

¹⁸ Boberg, Johansson, and Andriamisarisoa, ‘Use Your Talents Evaluation Report, What Can We Do with What We Have Here and Now?’, 7.

¹⁹ Sigurd Haus and Dag Rune Sameien, ‘Use Your Talents Innovation Project 2017–2019 Project Document III’, n.d., 21–22.

working among the Zulus in South Africa.²⁰ In 1866, NMS extended their work to Madagascar, and the *Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy (FLM)* was formally established in 1950.²¹ In 1925, missionaries from NMS arrived in Cameroon, and in 1965, the *L’Eglise Evangélique Luthérienne au Cameroun (EELC)* was formally registered.²² Today, NMS is presented as a voluntary organisation, rooted in the Church of Norway. The organisation is, according to their website, “made up of volunteers and congregations who volunteer, pray, donate and collect money for our work. In addition, NMS has staff in Norway and abroad who work to give people a dignified life and lasting hope.”²³ According to the organisations’ constitution, the purpose of NMS is “to witness in word and deed about God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and to contribute to growth of the worldwide church and the extension of God’s kingdom among all peoples.”²⁴ UYT-IP has been instrumental in NMS’ struggle to maintain credibility among partner churches, as well as in Norway, in the midst of declining budgets, reductions of financial support to partner churches and struggles to combat corruption.

UYT-IP was funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development cooperation (Norad). Norad is a professional body under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to their presentation on their website, Norad’s “main purpose is to ensure that Norwegian development funds are spent in the best possible way, and to report on what works and what does not work”.²⁵ The funding and the reports of the UYT-IP were channelled through the umbrella organisation Digni. Digni is an umbrella organisation for Norwegian mission organisations and churches engaged in long-term development cooperation.²⁶ Digni receives 186 million Norwegian kroner from Norad annually that is distributed to more than 100 development projects through Digni’s member organisations.²⁷ Digni works actively and systematically to fight corruption and build solid organisations and competent management at all levels. According to their website, Digni “ensures that the money is well spent and that the projects are performing well.”²⁸ For Digni, the organisation’s Christian foundation means that “creation should be managed with care, and all people are equally valuable and should be treated with respect”.^{29 30}

²⁰ Torstein Jørgensen, ‘De Første 100 År’, in *I Tro og Tjeneste: Det Norske Misjonsselskap 1842 - 1992* (Stavanger: Misjonshøgskolen, 1992), 11–146.

²¹ Sigmund Edland and Aano Kjetil, ‘Madagaskar’, in *I Tro og Tjeneste: Det Norske Misjonsselskap 1842-1992* (Stavanger: Misjonshøgskolen, 1992), 372.

²² Kåre Lode, ‘Kamerun’, in *I Tro og Tjeneste: Det Norske Misjonsselskap 1842 - 1992* (Misjonshøgskolen, 1992), 7–35.

²³ ‘The Norwegian Mission Society - NMS - NMS’, accessed 29 December 2022, <https://nms.no/the-norwegian-mission-society-2-2/>.

²⁴ ‘NMS’ Constitution and Bylaws, Adopted by NMS’ General Assembly June 2017’, §2.

²⁵ ‘Norad.no’, accessed 23 February 2018, <https://norad.no/en/front/about-norad>.

²⁶ ‘What Is Digni? |’, accessed 6 March 2023, <https://digni.no/en/digni-what-is-this/>.

²⁷ ‘Digni | 20 Christian Organizations Against Poverty’, accessed 23 February 2018, <https://digni.no/en/>.

²⁸ ‘Digni | 20 Christian Organizations Against Poverty’.

²⁹ ‘What Is Digni? |’.

³⁰ For a model of the flow of funds and reports between Norad, Digni, NMS and UYT-IP, see the attachment.

This study explores ecumenical diakonia based on interviews with actors and participant observation of a conference organised by the UYT-IP. Approaching UYT-IP as a case of ecumenical diakonia through the lens of justice and power the study unpacks the meanings of Use Your Talents based on actors' descriptions of their actions and experiences. A major challenge in the study has been finding a way to study and describe Use Your Talents as a struggle for justice without contributing to preserving, maintaining or re-creating the power relations in which the actors' descriptions, experiences and actions are located. In the development of my description, it has been important to account for the power dynamics between the different actors. I wanted to describe ecumenical diakonia based on the actors' own descriptions, experiences and actions, while it was necessary to account for the fact that the actors' descriptions, experiences and actions are located in power relations, in which I also partake.

1.4. Constructing a Critical Study of a Struggle for Justice

Researchers depend on existing concepts and theories that can enable us to describe the phenomenon of study. Using such concepts and theories to describe phenomena may however contribute to reinforce existing values, structures and institutions. According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg, "(r)esearchers are themselves prisoners of their own society and it's taken-for-granted concepts, thus helping to reproduce the status quo."³¹ Concepts and theories are located in socio-political processes, and knowledge production may contribute to reproduce power relations. Donna Haraway describes scientific practice as a creative practice of production performed by actors who, by studying and naming a phenomenon, contribute to maintaining and re-creating the phenomenon.³² Alvesson and Sköldbberg suggest that critical theory may have a role of counteracting such reinforcements by questioning the underlying pre-suppositions and reasoning that a certain field rests on. Studies that question the foundational premises of a field are however difficult.³³ The researcher must first liberate her own reasoning from the normative ideas the concepts in the field constitute and then she must find ways to communicate the findings, using the concepts that are familiar in the field while at the same time challenging the normative ideas attached to the concepts. Liberation is an ambitious aim for a process of knowledge production and the validity of the process rests on researchers' acceptance of their own and others' limitations and imperfection. Human beings' capacity to liberate themselves and each other is limited.

The complex conscious and unconscious processes which critical theory seeks to reveal may not be easily accessible or directly available through empirical methods. In critical empirical studies "(t)he

³¹ Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2018), 201.

³² Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1–15.

³³ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 201–2.

focus shifts away from the empirical work itself and the data towards the interpretation and reasoned appraisal of the empirical material which is further complemented by observations and interpretations of the surrounding societal context”³⁴. In this process of analysis, theories play a prominent role. Through examination of the empirical material located in a theoretical field of research such studies may reveal unconscious processes in the concrete empirical context in which the material was produced as well as what is taken for granted in dominating theories in the research field.³⁵ The demand for careful analysis and extensive theoretical knowledge makes critical empirical studies demanding. The laborious demand of critical theory may be navigated by limiting the empirical material. Close reading and careful critical-interpretive analysis of a limited empirical material from a specifically defined situation may reveal how dominating actors consciously or unconsciously define reality in ways that contribute to reproduce injustice.³⁶

Justice is a complex concept that may have different meanings. Rainer Forst’s theory of justice as the right to justification serves as a foundational framework for the study’s description of ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice. The theory of justice as the right to justification is described as one of the latest contributions in the philosophical tradition of the Frankfurter School. The critical tradition of the Frankfurter school is developed based on Immanuel Kant’s insistence that justice cannot rest on or serve any purpose other than human beings themselves. In critical theory, knowledge production is an attempt to reveal how social structures, norms and institutions condition human beings’ lives and to develop a critical stance that may enable the researcher to critically interrogate the reasoning that contribute to reproduce taken for granted social orders, structures and institutions.³⁷ Rainer Forst’s theory of justice as the right to justification constructs a normative idea of justice that serves to invalidate social orders and norms that participate in the reproduction of injustice.

Forst argues that to serve the purpose of justice, a theory of justice must rest only on an understanding of the meaning of being human. He proposes that to be human means to be a vulnerable³⁸ and relational being who reason. Forst suggests that as vulnerable and relational beings who reason, all human beings are entitled to justifications of actions that affect them, and all human beings have the duty to justify their actions to those who are affected by their actions.³⁹ Such a concept of justice, justice as the right to justification, rests on processes of practical reasoning in which the justifications

³⁴ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 205.

³⁵ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 207–8.

³⁶ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 215.

³⁷ Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2018), 179–81.

³⁸ Forst’s understanding of vulnerability is presented in chapter 3.1.

³⁹ Rainer Forst, *The Right to Justification – Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 38–42.

of actions are validated by those affected by the actions. Justice is in this understanding an intersubjective concept where a question of justice can only be determined through processes of practical reasoning.⁴⁰ The first question of justice is in this understanding the question of power, where power is a relational concept that works in people's minds when actors provide justifications for actions, influencing others' thinking.⁴¹ By changing others' ways of thinking, justifications may serve to make others accept their own actions and/or to change others' choice of action. The theory promotes human recognition of each other's vulnerability and capacity to reason as the road towards justice. The right to justification may be described as an attempt to account for the effects of power on processes of practical reasoning and a development of Jürgen Habermas' thinking.⁴²

The choice of a theory in the tradition of the Frankfurter school in a study that seeks to strengthen African and Malagasy voices and perspectives may perhaps seem contradictory. Achille Mbembe suggests that slave trade and colonialism may be explained in Westerners' faith in the superiority of their reasoning. With the concept of Black reason, Mbembe describes the detrimental and devastating effects of certain human beings' faith in the inferiority of their reasoning. Mbembe argues that the construction of the meaning of being Black has contributed to a dehumanisation of human beings that participate in the reproduction of suppression and domination that continues today. Mbembe warns that such processes of dehumanisation continue to reproduce a general acceptance and normalisation of precarious life situations for the purpose of furthering economic growth.⁴³ By promoting the understanding that reasoning is characteristic for humanity, hence not a Western or gendered trait, the right to justification addresses Western and gendered domination and dehumanisation. Critics of Forst who argue that reason is a Western or male concept, may be accused of participation in the reproduction of the injustice produced by such lies,⁴⁴ while human beings who believe that their ability to reason is superior to others' ability to reason continue to dominate and suppress others.

1.5. Induction and the Role of Theory

This study's research approach is qualitative. A qualitative approach is suitable for studies that seek to explore and describe complexities and diversities of meanings based on interpretations of actors' descriptions of their experiences and actions. The approach refers to a constructivist understanding of the social world in which the construction of meaning is understood as a social process located in a

⁴⁰ Rainer Forst, *Normativity and Power, Analyzing Social Orders of Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

⁴¹ Forst, 51.

⁴² Alvesson and Skoldberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 190–94.

⁴³ Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁴⁴ Rainer Forst, 'Navigating a World of Conflict and Power, Reply to Critics', in *Justification and Emancipation, The Critical Theory of Rainer Forst*, ed. Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 182.

specific context of relations and structures. Focusing on the actors' descriptions of their experiences and actions, the study favours an inductive analytical approach. Induction describes a process of analysis in which the researcher approaches the case through the descriptions of the actors as they appear in the data, asking open-ended research questions.⁴⁵ In correspondence with the inductive approach, the research questions focus on the actors' descriptions and actions located in the specific context where the material was produced.

Working inductively is not opposed to using theories and concepts. Concepts and theories are necessary to make sense of the world. The theory of justice as the right to justification is a constructivist theory of justice that deconstructs the authority of concept and theories in a way that may help researchers to approach the material with an open mind. The selection of the theory of the right to justification as a theoretical lens corresponds with the inductive approach,⁴⁶ since justice, according to this theory, is located in the experiences and meaning making of the actors in a specific context. The theory of justice as the right to justification provides a starting point for exploring the actors' struggles for justice where the concepts of justification and of noumenal power enable the researcher to recognise and describe the actors' struggles for justice. Like other concepts and theories, Rainer Forst's theory of justice and his corresponding concept of noumenal power are constructed and the researcher must be open to the possibility that her understanding of justice may change as the study develops.

The research questions are developed to explore the actors' struggles for justice located in a socio-political context of power relations. The actors in the study use the term "doing Use Your Talents" to describe their struggles for justice, and I landed on using the concept Use Your Talents in the research questions.

The first research question approaches the actors' struggles for justice from the perspectives of the actors' descriptions:

1. How do actors in Use Your Talents describe their struggles for justice?

Since the actors' understandings and acceptance of social orders are located in socio-political contexts of power, a study of struggles for justice must attempt to account for the impact of power on actors' descriptions. Justice is a question of power.⁴⁷ Focusing power is essential in a study of struggles for justice, and three of the research questions seek to reveal the role of power in the actors' descriptions

⁴⁵ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2018), 4.

⁴⁶ Creswell and Creswell describe how theory may serve as an analytical lens in inductive qualitative studies. See Creswell and Creswell, 62–63.

⁴⁷ Rainer Forst's understanding of the relation between justice and power is elaborated in chapter 3.2.

of their struggles for justice. The second research question approaches power relations from the perspectives of the actors' descriptions:

2. How do actors in Use Your Talents describe power relations?

The third research question approaches sources of power from the perspectives of the actors' descriptions:

3. Which sources of power do actors in Use Your Talents describe?

The fourth research question approaches power from the perspective of the actors' descriptions of their actions:

4. How do actors in Use Your Talents negotiate power?

In line with an inductive approach, the findings of the study are presented as a thick description of the actors' descriptions, reasoning and actions. The description of the findings is divided in four chapters that are part of a whole that together answer the research questions.

1.6. Aims and Contributions of the Study

With reference to Alvesson and Deetz, Alvesson and Sköldbberg identify three major elements of critical research: insight, critique and transformative redefinition. Insight describes hidden or less obvious aspects and meanings of a social phenomenon, critique reveals the problematic nature of these aspects and meanings, while transformative redefinitions point to possible solutions to the problematic reality. Most critical studies do not reach the point of transformative redefinition.⁴⁸ This study aims to offer insight into hidden or less obvious aspects and meanings of ecumenical diakonia. The study analyses such hidden aspects and meanings to expose the complex impact of power relations on ecumenical diakonia and the potentially detrimental effects of such power relations on actors' struggles for justice. The study breaks with the traditional evaluative purpose of empirical studies that seek to identify pragmatic solutions to complex situations. A demand for solutions to the problems one exposes may limit the space for critique and construct false harmonies and simplistic solutions to complex situations.⁴⁹ The study highlights the need for critical awareness and self-reflexivity in ecumenical diakonia.

Providing a description of ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice based on empirical study of ecumenical diakonia in Africa, the study seeks to strengthen the influence of African and Malagasy actors' perspectives and experiences in ecumenical diakonia. The study describes how actors negotiate and navigate relations and structures and reveals how ecumenical diakonia is situated in, and

⁴⁸ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 212.

⁴⁹ Judith Butler, 'What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', in *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Judith Butler and Sarah Salih (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 302–22.

conditioned by, existing injustice, thereby revealing tensions, and contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexity of ecumenical diakonia. The study further describes how actors in ecumenical diakonia integrate their faith into their lives, identities and lived world, contributing to the understanding of the role of faith in actors' struggles for justice of relevance to discussions around the role of religion in development.

1.7. Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

The actors' stories about how they are doing Use Your Talents refer to, and are situated in, social processes located at historically and geographically different and distant places in the world. Use Your Talents is located in a global context and the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context of the phenomenon are not clear. This is not unusual. A case or phenomenon is always located in a context,⁵⁰ and the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context in a case-study are often unclear.⁵¹ Alvesson and Sköldbberg suggest that the challenge of accounting for context and complexity can be navigated by limiting the empirical material. They argue that careful and critical analysis of a limited empirical material from a specifically defined situation has capacity to reveal complexity and tensions that may contribute awareness of how power relations condition human beings' struggles for justice.⁵² The empirical material in this study focus a specifically defined situation based on the descriptions of a limited selection of actors.⁵³ The limited focus and material has enabled me to analyse the material carefully and critically and the delimitation could be considered a strength. The material is thick and rich and there is almost no limit to the amount of historical and theoretical perspectives that could have contributed to the analysis. Choosing methods and theories that all have their own opportunities and challenges means letting go of other opportunities and challenges.⁵⁴ The case and the studies and theories I have chosen to engage reveal complexities and tensions in ecumenical diakonia. Revelation of complexities and tensions may be a valuable and convincing contribution to a dialogue.⁵⁵

1.8. Outline of the Thesis

In this chapter, I have presented the design of the study. Ecumenical diakonia is an emerging concept in the global ecumenical movement developing in an attempt to address the power relations in which

⁵⁰ Eugene Matusov, 'In Search for "the Appropriate" Unit of Analysis for Sociocultural Research', *Culture and Psychology* 13, no. 3 (2007): 307–33.

⁵¹ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications, Design and Methods*, 6th edition (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018), 15.

⁵² Alvesson and Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 215.

⁵³ The material is presented in chapter 4.3.

⁵⁴ Bent Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (2006): 219–45.

⁵⁵ Matusov, 'In Search for "the Appropriate" Unit of Analysis for Sociocultural Research', 326–29.

churches' social ministries are located. With reference to systematic theological reflections, ecumenical diakonia is described as a struggle for justice. This study offers an empirical contribution to the understanding of ecumenical diakonia. The study asks: How is ecumenical diakonia a struggle for justice? Based on empirical study and inductive analysis of a case of ecumenical diakonia through the lens of critical theory, the study contributes a description of the complexities and tensions of ecumenical diakonia and the power relations in which ecumenical diakonia is located and participate.

The next chapter is the literature review. Here I review studies that describe the power relations in which ecumenical diakonia is located, and studies that describe different attempts to address such power relations. The study is interdisciplinary, and the studies I review belong to different disciplines and use different concepts and methods. The literature review is divided in five parts. In the first part of the literature review, I describe how the normative role of theology in social practices that seek to address marginalisation in church and society at the same time participate in the reproduction of power relations. In the second part of the literature review, I describe how the entanglements of economic development and human development construct power relations. In the third part of the literature review, I describe how the field of mission studies struggles to address the understanding of mission as a project of civilisation. The fourth part of the literature review presents studies that address the role of power relations in development. The last part of the chapter presents the latest developments in studies on the role of religion and religious power in development.

In chapter three, I present the theoretical framework of the study. Rainer Forst's constructivist theory of justice as the right to justification is chosen as a main theoretical lens. Forst belongs to the tradition of the Frankfurter school arguing that critique, revealing complexities and tensions, is an essential element of a struggle for justice. Forst's idea of justice rests on human being's recognition of each other's ability to reason and each other's vulnerability, and Achille Mbembe's description of the detrimental consequences when human beings fail to recognise each other's ability to reason, and Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler's discussion of the power of recognition, offer valuable perspectives on this understanding of justice. Analysis of norms and social orders must attempt to account for the pre-existing power relations in which justifications for such norms and social orders are located and reproduced.

Chapter four describes and discusses the methods of the study. The chapter describes how the process of producing the material was an attempt to favour African and Malagasy voices while revealing how ecumenical diakonia participates in the reproduction of power relations and describes the situation and power relations in which the empirical material was produced. The chapter further discusses the

validity of the study and argues that a thick description, revealing tensions, contradictions and complexities, can be a valuable contribution to a dialogue.

The findings of the study are presented as a thick description that shows how power relations condition ecumenical diakonia and participate in the reproduction of injustice.

In chapter five, I describe how the actors by telling each other stories about how they exercise their own abilities to reason and to act construct the normative order of Use Your Talents. The actors describe the process of doing Use Your Talents as a process of liberation from colonialism, Western missionaries and development donors and argue that by using their own abilities to reason and to act, actors can liberate themselves and rediscover their identities as human beings. The chapter describes how in construction of the normative order of Use Your Talents human beings are measured by their abilities to reason and to act.

In chapter six, I describe how the actors integrate their faith in their processes of reasoning. The actors justify the norms and social orders they construct with references to the Bible. With references to the Bible, the actors construct two kinds of theologies. The first kind of theology produce representations of human beings as vulnerable and the second kind of theology produce representations of human beings as actors who have the ability to reason and to act. Both the two kinds of theologies are part of the same framework that justify and negotiate norms and social orders with reference to the Bible.

Chapter seven provides a description of the context of relations and structures in which the normative order of Use Your Talents is constructed. The normative order of Use Your Talents is located in a network of relations of actors who recognise each other's abilities to reason and to act. The social order of recognition prevents revelation of the power relations in which the actors' struggles for justice are located and, by arguing that the actors can use their own resources, Use Your Talents provide a justification for acceptance of economic inequalities.

In chapter eight, I describe how the actors struggle against the injustice produced by economic inequality. The actors struggle to access financial resources and they struggle to protect their families, communities, congregations, and relations against the impacts of injustice. The chapter describes how Use Your Talents may be described as a struggle against the idea that actors can use their own resources.

Chapter nine is the conclusion of the study. The conclusion describes two kinds of ecumenical diakonia. Both these two kinds of ecumenical diakonia are located in a global context of power relations in which human beings struggle for justice through construction of social and normative orders, seeking to influence others reasoning and actions. Human beings' abilities to influence others' reasoning and

actions are related to their access to financial resources, and economic inequalities reproduce unjust social and normative orders.

2. Power Relations in Ecumenical Diakonia

In chapter one, I introduced the study as a study of ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice. With reference to Rainer Forst, I presented justice as a relational concept and a question of power. In this chapter, I explore the issue of power relations in ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice through previous studies. The study is interdisciplinary, and the studies I review belong to different disciplines and use different concepts and methods.

In the first part of the chapter, I refer to studies that reveal how theologians construct norms for how actors should struggle for justice and norms for how actors should read the Bible, protecting their own roles in the field of diakonia. In the second part of the chapter, I refer to studies that show how development aid both constructs and reveals power relations. In the third part of the chapter, I present a review that shows how mission studies struggle to address power relations constructed by the understanding of Western mission as a project of civilisation. In the fourth part of the chapter, I review studies that describe power relations in development, and I describe a number of strategies developed in navigation of power relations in development. In the last part of the chapter, I provide a review of the role of religion in struggles for justice.

2.1. Theology Constructs Normativity

In the Orthodox tradition, the Biblical stories of the first Christians serve as a foundation for a broad understanding of diakonia,⁵⁶ where diakonia is described as the witness of the church in the world.⁵⁷

In Lutheran churches in Western Europe, the use of the term diakonia to describe churches' social ministries developed from the diaconal movement in Germany in the first half of the 19th century.⁵⁸ In construction of the diaconate as a specialised ministry, the story in Acts 6 has often been described as the inauguration of the diaconate.⁵⁹ Under the leadership of male theologians, the diaconate developed as a specialised ministry of service, with particular attention and responsibility for the poor and marginalised and emphasis on humble service.⁶⁰ The understanding of diakonia as humble service

⁵⁶ Nicolas Abou Mrad, 'Diaconal Perspectives between the Book of Acts and the Orthodox Liturgy', in *The Diaconal Church*, ed. Stephanie Dietrich et al. (Regnum Books International, 2019), 65–82.

⁵⁷ Fr. Christian Sonea, 'The "Liturgy after the Liturgy" and Deep Solidarity. The Orthodox Understanding of Christian Witness and Its Implications for Human Society', *Mission Studies* 37 (2020): 452–77.

⁵⁸ For an overview of the historical development of the concept of diakonia in Western Europe, see Gyrid Gunnes, 'Towards a Diaconia of Displacements: An Empirical Theological Inquiry' (Oslo, VID Specialized University, 2020), 8–10.

⁵⁹ Kjell Nordstokke, *Liberating Diakonia* (Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag, 2011), 65.

⁶⁰ Olav Fanuelson, 'Den Diakonale Bevegelsen i Tyskland På 1800-Tallet', in *Diakonen - Kall Og Profesjon*, ed. Stephanie Dietrich, Kari Karsrud Korslien, and Kjell Nordstokke (Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag, 2011), 81–86.

supervised by theologians may have contributed to reproducing the marginalisation of women in church ministry.⁶¹

Towards the end of the 20th century, semantic studies challenged the understanding of diakonia as humble service. John N. Collins has studied the meanings and uses of the term diakonia in other Greek scriptures from the period when the New Testament was written. Collins found that the term described a role as a bridge builder or go-between who carried out an important task on behalf of a master.⁶² Collins has used the rediscovery of the meaning of diakonia as a mandate of authority to address the understanding of diakonia as humble service and the exclusion of women from ministry positions in the Roman Catholic Church.⁶³

The understanding of diakonia as an essential church ministry of authority is further developed by Kjell Nordstokke. As a young theologian, Nordstokke served as a missionary to Brazil for the Norwegian Mission Society. In his doctoral thesis about the life and ministry of Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff from 1990, Nordstokke describes how Boff, after spending time among the poor, developed a theology that, in his understanding, took the position of the poor.⁶⁴ Liberation theology has been described as a double epistemic break with the history of theology, first, by emphasising the situation of the poor, where addressing the situation of the poor is understood as a central mandate of the church, second, by recognising the poor's consciousness, autonomy and capacity, stressing that the church consists of the poor.⁶⁵

Based on the insights from Latin America, Nordstokke has developed a framework for diakonia that seeks to integrate diaconal theory and practice. He describes the three steps, see–judge–act, as the methodology of diakonia. The first step, to see, has at least two different aspects. One aspect is an emphasis on the context, of observation of what is happening in the world, and another aspect is related to seeing and recognising the diaconal action that is already happening in the world.⁶⁶ The second step, judge, is the process of critical discernment of what is happening. Nordstokke suggests that the process of discernment should be informed by theological reflections as well as sciences of

⁶¹ Kjell Nordstokke, 'The Feminization or Engendering of Diakonia: New Testament Perspectives', in *Diakonia in a Gender Perspective*, ed. Stephanie Dietrich et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2016), 41–42.

⁶² John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 77–95.

⁶³ John N. Collins, *Diakonia Studies, Critical Issues in Ministry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3–20.

⁶⁴ Kjell Nordstokke, 'Ekklesiogenese, konsil og kontekst i Leonardo Boffs ekklesiologi' (Oslo, Diakonhjemmets Høgskolesenter, 1990), 37.

⁶⁵ J. Severino Croatto, 'Biblical Hermeneutics in the Theologies of Liberation', in *Irruption of the Third World, Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1983), 140–68.

⁶⁶ Nordstokke, *Liberating Diakonia*, 34.

relevance for the specific field of practice. Diakonia is therefore interdisciplinary. The interdisciplinarity of diakonia has epistemic implications:

If it is admitted that the theoretical framework of the science of diakonia must be interdisciplinary, this position implies several important points. It rejects the hegemony of one theory or discipline, either theology or social sciences. Instead, it advocates dialectic between different criterion, conditioned by context and consequences. According to this understanding, interdisciplinarity is more than multidisciplinary; it strives to develop an open epistemology where different systems of knowledge may be interrelated through mutual respect for the appropriate authority of each.⁶⁷

Nordstokke does not specify what “respect for the appropriate authority of each” might mean or how this might be applied. Action is the third step in this methodology of diakonia, where the insights from the process of seeing and discerning are enacted in practice.

Nordstokke’s framework maintains theology’s role in discernment of truth, right and wrong while he invites insights from other sciences into the discussion of what it means to be church. He argues that theology can contribute to the discernments of truth, right and wrong in the world in dialogue with social sciences and humanities. Nordstokke describes this critical dimension of diakonia as prophetic.⁶⁸ Nordstokke suggests that diakonia’s perhaps most important prophetic task is to raise critical questions about whether the church is truthful to her mandate in the world.⁶⁹ Kjetil Fretheim describes how diakonia and theology may serve a prophetic task of critically analysing what is happening in society.^{70 71}

Nordstokke’s understanding has become influential through his position in the Lutheran World Federation where he wrote the document ‘Diakonia in Context’.⁷² Nordstokke has also had an influential role in the struggles to develop a common understanding of ecumenical diakonia among churches in the ecumenical movement as presented in the World Council of Churches’ document.⁷³

The influence of liberation theology has been an important driving factor for churches’ raised awareness of diaconal actors’ roles as critics of power structures in society and within the church, as reflected in the understanding of diakonia as a struggle for justice. Liberation theology argues that the poor have an epistemic privilege when it comes to understanding injustice. Liberation theology is

⁶⁷ Nordstokke, 35.

⁶⁸ Nordstokke, 49–53.

⁶⁹ Nordstokke, 51–53.

⁷⁰ Kjetil Fretheim, ‘Dimensions of Diaconia: The Public, Political and Prophetic’, *Diaconia – Journal for the Study of Christian Social Practice* 4 (2013): 67–80.

⁷¹ Kjetil Fretheim, *Interruption and Imagination. Public Theology in Times of Crisis*. (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

⁷² ‘Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment: An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia’ (Lutheran World Federation, 2009).

⁷³ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, ‘Called to Transformation, Ecumenical Diakonia’.

however not necessarily developed by the poor and suppressed and the poor and the suppressed do not necessarily read the Bible in liberating ways.⁷⁴ Sturla Stålsett observes that the greatest enthusiasm for liberation theology may be found among Western theologians in the ecumenical movement.⁷⁵

With reference to Thomas Kuhn, Courtney T. Goto describes how a paradigm provides the concepts for critique of what is taken for granted and true. When a scientist makes a discovery that convinces her of a new paradigm, she will be occupied with the creation of coherence and legitimacy within the paradigm since the concepts of the paradigm are the tools available to her.⁷⁶ Goto argues that privileged theologians' search for coherence and legitimacy in the field of practical theology has adverse effects. Words and phrases used in a discipline represent epistemological and methodological assumptions that might be shared among people at the centre of the discipline. However, she points out, words and phrases are only symbols or metaphors. Language does not capture the complexity and fluidity of the world.⁷⁷ Research is thereby shaped not only by the discovery of new knowledge but also by "the social dynamics involved in the construction of ideas."⁷⁸

We may ask how theologians' struggle for coherence and legitimacy in the field of diaconal studies influence processes of knowledge production. Liberation theology may perhaps be described as a theology developed by theologians who struggle for justice. In their struggles for justice liberation theologians develop norms for how the poor and suppressed should read the Bible, namely as a source of liberation and a call for social action. The combination of the arguments that liberation theology is a theology from the poor and that the church consists of the poor serves as an effective protection of the legitimacy of theology and the role of the church in struggles for justice. In her discussion about the methodology of diaconal research, Kaia S. Rønsdal expresses concern that if the theological foundation of diaconal research is not protected, it may jeopardise diakonia as an academic discipline.⁷⁹

Ecumenical documents are developed in fellowships of actors who hold different social positions and who may not necessarily be described as poor and suppressed. The concept ecumenical diakonia as

⁷⁴ A study of readings of Matthew 25 in Mafo Congregation in Southern Ethiopia shows that actors living in poverty may read the Bible in ways that may contribute to challenge, but also to reproduce, power relations. See Esayas Emene Enicha, 'The Parable about the Talents in Matthew 25: 14-30: Exegesis and Its Application to the Use Your Talents Project in the South West Synod of Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus' (Master Thesis, Stavanger, VID Specialised University, 2019).

⁷⁵ Sturla Stålsett, *Religion i urolige tider. Globalisering, religiøsitet og sårbarhet* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2017), 189.

⁷⁶ Courtney T. Goto, *Taking on Practical Theology, The Idolization of Context and the Hope of Community* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 34.

⁷⁷ Goto, 8.

⁷⁸ Goto, 36.

⁷⁹ Kaia S. Rønsdal, 'Is It Different? Explorations of Empirical Diaconia Research', *Diaconia – Journal for the Study of Christian Social Practice* 12, no. 1 (2021): 84.

presented by the World Council of Churches rests on certain theological foundations that construct norms and social orders for how others should read and relate to the Bible. The document could be read as an attempt to construct a norm for how actors all over the world should use the Bible as a source of liberation and critique of power structures.⁸⁰ The document could further be read as a construction of norms for churches and congregants' social actions and a normative interpretation of the meaning of being church. The development of the concept of ecumenical diakonia may, consciously or unconsciously have been shaped by theologians' protection of their own roles as developers of diaconal normativity.

Sturla Stålsett addresses the use of the Bible as a source of power in construction of diaconal normativity. Stålsett describes the relation between diaconal action and theology as a hermeneutical spiral, where actors' experiences may give birth to new theologies and a plurality of theologies may be seen as resources for creativity and critique. He thereby maintains that theology may have a role in discernment of social practice, while he deconstructs the authority of a given interpretation or application. Stålsett argues that theologies that arise from contexts of conflict and struggle are particularly valuable for diakonia and suggests that a diversity of different theologies may potentially contribute critical perspectives on diaconal practice. Stålsett admits that there is a danger that such a hermeneutical spiral may become self-confirming and self-righteous. Awareness of power and analysis of power relations are necessary for the process of critical self-reflexivity, which is essential for the credibility of diakonia.⁸¹

Sturla J. Stålsett, Arnhild Taksdal and Per Kristian Hilden suggest that certain processes of knowledge production could be described as diakonia. They suggest that commitment to the cause of justice, social action and a participatory or dialogical approach involving a diversity of actors are marks of research as diakonia.⁸² However, the authors themselves do not refer to, nor describe, any dialogue or involvement with actors, nor any systematic analysis of power relations. In their own research they turn to liberation theology as the normative foundation, while the reader remains ignorant of diaconal organisations, researchers and theologians limited power to change the power relations in which they participate and the complexity of such processes.

⁸⁰ Sturla Stålsett notes that the greatest enthusiasm for liberation theology may be found among Western theologians in the ecumenical movement. See Stålsett, *Religion i urolige tider. Globalisering, religiøsitet og sårbarhet*, 189.

⁸¹ Sturla J. Stålsett, 'Interpretation, Inspiration, and Interruption: The Role of Theologies in Diaconia', in *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diaconia, Contextual Theologies and Practices of Diaconia and Christian Social Services - Resources for Study and Intercultural Learning*, ed. Godwin Ampony et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021), 95–104.

⁸² Sturla Stålsett, Arnhild Taksdal, and Per Kristian Hilden, 'Research as Diaconia: Commitment, Action and Participation', *Diaconia - Journal for the Study of Christian Social Practice* 9, no. 2 (2018): 165–80.

With reference to power theories, Aud Tønnessen describes how diaconal actors in their strives for legitimacy construct representations of others as recipients of aid. Tønnessen promotes a rights-based approach to diakonia as an attempt to address power relations. She calls for self-critique and describes how competing discourses, and the tensions between the different discourses, participate in processes of change.⁸³ Hans Morten Haugen describes Norwegian Church Aid's struggle against female genital mutilation as a case of rights-based practice.⁸⁴ In a struggle to influence the laws and policies that were meant to be authored by the citizens of a country, advocacy work produces representations of actors as rights holders and duty bearers.

Use Your Talents may perhaps be described as an attempt to overcoming dichotomising representations and involving the actors themselves in dialogical processes of knowledge production. The approach has developed in dialogue with the field of development studies.

2.2. Development Constructs and Reveals Power Relations

In his inaugural speech in 1949, American president Harry S. Truman introduced the four-point programme as a strategy to improve the life conditions of people in Africa, Asia and South America by transferring the scientific and industrial development of America to relieve the sufferings of those who are living "primitive and stagnant" economic lives in poverty that is "a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas".⁸⁵ This event is often referred to as constitutive of the era of development aid.^{86,87} Anthony Payne and Nicola Phillips trace the meanings of the term development through history, beginning with the discussions between Adam Smith and Karl Marx about financial growth and distribution, and ending with a description of the change from state responsibility to globalisation and neoliberalism.⁸⁸ In their understanding, development has been associated with and measured by economic growth. The classification of countries into categories of low-income, middle-income and high-income reflected this economic understanding of development.

Other meanings of the term development, with greater emphasis on human factors, were consolidated following Amartya Sen's discovery of the role of freedom in human well-being, for which Sen was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences.⁸⁹ Based on empirical studies of the relationship

⁸³ Aud V. Tønnessen, 'Representing the Other', in *Heterotopic Citizen, New Research on Religious Work for the Disadvantaged*, ed. Trygve Wyller (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 98–113.

⁸⁴ Hans Morten Haugen, 'Diakonia as Rights-Based Practice', in *Diakonia as Christian Social Practice. An Introduction.*, ed. Stephanie Dietrich et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 123–38.

⁸⁵ Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Harry S. Truman quoted in Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, Fifth edition (London: Zed, 2019), 71.

⁸⁶ Rist, 69–72.

⁸⁷ Anthony Payne and Nicola Phillips, *Development, Key Concepts* (Polity, 2010), 62–63.

⁸⁸ Payne and Phillips, *Development*.

⁸⁹ Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor. Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Rev. and exp. ed. (Orbis Books, 2011), 29–31.

between famine and democracy, Sen suggests that development is better understood as a person's freedom to define and seek what is important to them. According to Sen, freedom is both the ends and the means of development.⁹⁰ The role of human factors in development was highlighted by the leaders in Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in 1972. In a letter to the Lutheran World Federation titled "On the Interrelation between Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development", General Secretary Gudina Tumsa and other leaders working under him, described how the impact of modernity on Western churches had created a dichotomy between "social action, community development, liberation from dehumanising structures and involvement in nation-building" on the one hand and "proclamation of the Gospel" on the other hand.⁹¹ The letter was written in a particular historical context, where Western mission partners were cutting their financial support for theological training and church activities while donor support for development projects was increasing. The letter described the "development of the inner man as a pre-requisite for a healthy and lasting development of our society".⁹²

The practical implications of the human development approach have been elaborated by Martha Nussbaum. Focusing on the development of human capabilities, Nussbaum describes 10 capabilities that, in her understanding, are necessary to secure citizens' ability "to pursue a dignified and minimally flourishing life".⁹³ The capability approach is reliant on a well-functioning nation state that recognises a duty to facilitate its citizens' abilities "to pursue a dignified and minimally flourishing life", hence the theory may be seen as an attempt to constitute states' duties towards their citizens.

The discovery of the role of freedom in development may have contributed to a growing awareness of how development aid does not only contribute to the development of freedom. Gilbert Rist criticises Western political leaders for picturing development aid as a struggle against poverty in other parts of the world, while at the same time they, through political negotiation processes, further their own countries' economic and political interests. Based on discourse analyses of political historical events, Rist questions the notion of development as an attempt to alleviate asymmetrical power relations. He provides a rather provoking definition of development that highlights economic aspects:

'Development' consists of a set of practices, sometimes appearing to conflict with one another, which require – for the reproduction of society – the general transformation and destruction of

⁹⁰ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 35–53.

⁹¹ Gudina Tumsa, Olav Sæverås, and Manfred Lundgren, 'On the Interrelation between Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development', in *Witness and Discipleship, Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution*, ed. Gudina Tumsa Publishing House, 2nd expanded edition (WDL - Publishers, 2015), 85–98.

⁹² Tumsa, Sæverås, and Lundgren, 89.

⁹³ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities, The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 33.

*the natural environment and of social relations. Its aim is to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by way of exchange to effective demand.*⁹⁴

While Rist's definition refers to how, despite the discovery of human aspects of development, development is still closely connected to the expansion of capitalism, Arturo Escobar approaches development discourse from a Foucauldian concept of epistemic power. Based on empirical study of several development projects in Colombia, Escobar describes how development is deployed through professionalisation of development knowledge and institutionalisation of development practice that constitute "the hegemonic worldview of development".⁹⁵ Through production of representations of people as underdeveloped objects, development has created a system of power.⁹⁶ Such power systems are constituted through development discourses that produce a knowledge system of representations, such as "development experts" and "the underdeveloped" , "the poor", "the illiterate" or "the malnourished", where the relations among the representations constitute a power system.⁹⁷ Escobar understands this process as a continuation of colonial attitudes of superiority that provide donor countries with the right and moral duty to intervene in other countries.⁹⁸ He further describes how "deployment of development" has affected the identities of both "the developers" and "the underdeveloped" where "many in the Third World began to think of themselves as inferior, underdeveloped and ignorant and to doubt the value of their own culture"⁹⁹, although he admits that there are not many studies of how development discourse affects identities.¹⁰⁰ Escobar's critique highlights the connection between development as economic growth and development as freedom. It appears that actors' freedom is limited by the financial support they receive by those who seek to liberate them. Development actors' struggles for justice are located in pre-existing systems of power.

2.3. Struggles to Address Power Relations in Studies of Christian Mission

The effects of power asymmetries on human beings' identities are central in studies of Christian mission and colonialism. Western missionaries have been criticised for their use of power to further Christian faith and for understanding mission as a project of civilisation. A recent review on Christian mission and colonialism highlights the challenge of studying and describing Western missionaries' roles without participating in the re-production of power asymmetries. Kyo Seong Ahn notes that Western scholars working on mission and colonialism "either gradually moved into studies of mission and

⁹⁴ Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, 13.

⁹⁵ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development, The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, paperback reissue with a new preface by the author (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 17–18.

⁹⁶ Escobar, 6–11.

⁹⁷ Escobar, 40–41.

⁹⁸ Escobar, 26–28.

⁹⁹ Escobar, 52.

¹⁰⁰ Escobar, 48.

postcolonialism or continued to do research on colonialism in a more sophisticated style, overcoming bifurcations such as missionary versus national or colonialism versus nationalism”¹⁰¹. From non-Western perspectives, the Western missionary movement has been studied as integral to church history¹⁰² and maybe even to the general history of a country or area. Newer studies of relations between Western missionaries’, the colonised and the colonisers reveal that their relations were complex and multi-faceted. The boundaries between the colonisers and the colonised were sometimes blurry and the missionaries’ agency may have been limited.¹⁰³ Awareness of the ambiguous roles of Western missionaries has instigated a number of new directions of research, in which addressing the understanding of Western mission as a process of civilisation is central.¹⁰⁴ Understanding Western missionaries as part of a project of civilisation erase the distinction between the roles of Western missionaries and that of development workers. While the field of mission studies struggles to address the understanding of mission as a project of civilisations, the concept ecumenical diakonia relates discussions on the roles of churches in development¹⁰⁵ and may be seen as both a break with and a continuation of churches’ project of civilising the world.

2.4. Navigation of Power Relations in Development

Postcolonial voices contribute important perspectives to discussions on navigation of power relations. Maria Eriksson Baaz has studied identity constructions of development workers from Denmark and Sweden working in Tanzania from postcolonial perspectives. She found that the development workers positioned themselves as developed and superior in contrast to the “other” (the Tanzanians). The Scandinavians not only related their superiority to economy, technology and poor communication but also referred to the “others” as lacking in knowledge, unreliable, irresponsible and of poor moral, passive and following detrimental cultural practices. However, this discourse of Western superiority was accompanied by a discourse influenced by postcolonial perspectives that were critical of the Eurocentric episteme of development and the developed experts and underdeveloped others. Eriksson Baaz argues that internal critique and the search for alternative discourses are characteristic of development. She describes how when donors promote the discourse of transparent and open partnerships, it may be understood as a call for the corrupted, passive and unreliable to become active, transparent and open, a discourse that may contribute to perpetuate the image of others as morally and culturally inferior. However, partnership also connotes a mutual relationship between equal

¹⁰¹ Kyo Seong Ahn, ‘Christian Mission and Colonialism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, ed. Kirsteen Kim, Knud Jørgensen, and Alison Fitchett-Climenhaga (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 332.

¹⁰² Ahn, 332.

¹⁰³ Ahn, 335.

¹⁰⁴ Ahn, 336–37.

¹⁰⁵ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, ‘Called to Transformation, Ecumenical Diakonia’, 14.

partners working together for a better world. The partnership discourse is both a break and a continuity of paternalism in development.¹⁰⁶ Eriksson Baaz's study has been criticised for its methodological choice of approaching the issue of partnership in development from the perspectives of development workers from Scandinavia.¹⁰⁷

The issue of power and partnership was raised in an international conference in Oslo in 2013. The conference was organised by Digni and Norad in cooperation with the Norwegian Council for Mission and Evangelization (NORME) and Egede Institute for Missiological Study and Research. The conference has been described as a call for actors to be more conscious of power and the use of power in diakonia and development.¹⁰⁸ In a book chapter that was published in connection to this conference, Narend Bajinath and Genevieve James identify five factors that contribute to asymmetrical power relations and unequal partnerships in development. The first factor is the Western dominance in production and ownership of knowledge, including knowledge about development in previously colonised countries. Bajinath and James argue that this domination may be interpreted to suggest that "the rest were devoid of cognitive capacity, local knowledge and the ability to create solutions"¹⁰⁹ and call for increased awareness of the plurality of knowledge. They further suggest that without increased consciousness of own positionality and mutual learning, knowledge production "will continue to perpetuate the notion that all things western are superior in quality and intellectual rigor"¹¹⁰, and thereby continue to re-produce power asymmetries. The second factor points to the role of economy in processes of knowledge production. Countries that are willing to fund research may be better equipped to handle and respond to different kinds of crisis than countries that do not prioritise research in their budgets. When crisis hits, countries that have a solid base of context-relevant knowledge are better equipped to identify appropriate responses to a situation, they argue. Although countries that do not fund their own research can learn from others, knowledge developed in other contexts may not be directly transferrable. Differences in access to information and communication technology (ICT) is a third factor that according to Bajinath and James contribute to perpetuate unequal partnerships. ICT is necessary to ensure effective and efficient operation of an organisation. Differences in access to technology, digital and media literacy, awareness on how to use the world wide web critically, research and communication skills and affordability create unjust conditions that

¹⁰⁶ Maria Eriksson Baaz, *The Paternalism of Partnership, A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2005), 166–70.

¹⁰⁷ Jonathan Goodhand, 'The Paternalism of Partnership: A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid by Maria Eriksson Baaz', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 7, no. 3 (2007): 418–20.

¹⁰⁸ Knut Edvard Larsen and Knud Jørgensen, *Power and Partnership*, Regnum Studies in Mission (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2014), 1.

¹⁰⁹ Narend Bajinath and Genevieve James, 'Transforming Development: A View from South-Africa', in *Power and Partnership*, ed. Knut Edvard Larsen and Knud Jørgensen (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 38.

¹¹⁰ Bajinath and James, 39.

prevent mutuality. Bajjnath and James describe aid as a fourth factor that contributes to unequal partnerships and keeps Africa in unequal relationships of dependency. They call for scrutiny of development donors' agendas, and, with reference to Alfe Morten Jerve, they argue that recipients must sit in the driving seat while the donors must step out of the car. They further suggest that dependency relations undermine governments' own responsibilities for prevention of corruption, funding of research and sound budgeting and decision making. The last factor contributing to unequal partnerships mentioned by Bajjnath and James is innovation and competition. With reference to Europe's identification of innovation as the appropriate and successful response to the financial crisis in 2008, they promote innovation as the key to development also in Africa. Promotion of a culture of innovation is according to Bajjnath and James the essential solution to the problem of unequal partnerships.¹¹¹ Despite their critique of the lack of mutuality in partnerships and their description of many of the factors that amount to reproduce inequality, Bajjnath and James conclude by calling for partners from different parts of the world to work together "to edge closer to the realisation of equal, respectful, more authentic and enduring partnerships"¹¹². The factors that contribute to the problems they describe, such as knowledge production, research and development spend, ICT, aid and innovation are parts of their suggested solutions.¹¹³

Like Genevieve and James, Escobar argues that contrary to the intention of furthering prosperity, development aid has produced underdevelopment, impoverishment, exploitation and oppression.¹¹⁴ Escobar's suggested solution is epistemic. He describes how epistemic and economic power are entangled. In capitalism, economy becomes constructed cultural forces that create social orders in which the poor are categorised into representations constructed by those in power.¹¹⁵ As development institutions and professionals reproduce discourses that reproduce the power structures, the power structures and domination that development deploys continue. The structuring procedures that produce power relations are only effective when invisible and when the categories or representations that development deploys are seen as facts external to the knower and independent of him or her, he argues. Escobar suggests that institutional ethnographies that study the institutional apparatus that deploys development may contribute to deconstructing power structures.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, he suggests that the power relations constructed by development can be deconstructed through the construction of alternative development orders that "take subjects as agents of self-definition".¹¹⁷ Escobar however

¹¹¹ Bajjnath and James, 37–45.

¹¹² Bajjnath and James, 46.

¹¹³ Bajjnath and James, 45.

¹¹⁴ Escobar, *Encountering Development, The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, 4.

¹¹⁵ Escobar, 63.

¹¹⁶ Escobar, 107.

¹¹⁷ Escobar, 99–101.

acknowledges that presenting alternative development orders is not easy for researchers, who are often socialised in the hegemonic understanding of the world.¹¹⁸

Anne Kubai's study of the development strategy of the Rwandan government describes a case of contextualism that may demonstrate a researcher's or an actor's dilemma in navigating the tensions between their own and others' values and identities. In Rwanda, the government has developed a strategy for development based on the idea that the revival of positive traditional values may help develop "an independent minded culture", solidarity and social capital, which according to the strategy, are key elements in poverty reduction. The government implements the country's strategy for development through re-invention of traditional cultural concepts in recognition of the value of the holistic African worldview, where a good life encompasses all aspects of life, and the welfare of the African community is inseparable from the welfare of individuals.¹¹⁹ Kubai's study suggests that contextualism may be a double-edged sword in development. Kubai points to how the concept of "umuganda", which in the strategy is used to further volunteer community work, was also used to mobilise volunteer killers during the genocide. She further describes how the concept of "girinka" due to traditional taboos contributes to constructing a relationship of dependency between women and men, which is particularly problematic in a society where so many households are led by widows or other single women. The strategy has furthermore been criticised for the instrumentalisation of concepts to serve the strategy of decentralisation, for providing a platform for indoctrination and for superficial attempts at reconciliation that may contribute to perpetual injustice by failing to address the wounds from the past.¹²⁰ Kubai concludes by describing the strategy as an experiment that can only be challenged through evaluation, which "perhaps (...) is also unnecessary because Rwanda does not owe anyone an explanation for its recourse to cultural beliefs and practice in search for sustainable development, especially when development, like democracy, is said to elude the African continent"¹²¹, highlighting that although the Rwandan government might not be accountable to external evaluators or researchers, in a democratic society, a government would be accountable to the country's citizens.

Asset-based community development (ABCD) may be described as an alternative development order that "take subjects as agents of self-definition" and a possible response to Baijnath and James' critique of development aid. ABCD was developed as a response to top-down development initiatives. In an attempt to address asymmetrical power relations in development, ABCD focuses recognition of

¹¹⁸ Escobar, 168.

¹¹⁹ Anne Kubai, 'Reinventing "Tradition" Social Reconstruction and Development in Post-Genocide Rwanda', in *Religion and Development, Nordic Perspectives on Involvement in Africa*, ed. Tomas Sundnes Drønen (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 87–94.

¹²⁰ Kubai, 95–103.

¹²¹ Kubai, 105.

existing resources in the community and assigns actors the roles as experts of development. ABCD is a flexible approach that can be implemented in different ways.¹²² According to Ramiandra Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo studies have suggested that “ABCD can in fact be successful in enabling community members to engage and participate meaningfully with each other and can transform people’s poverty-influenced mindset to active citizens’ mindset.”¹²³ The description of the success of ABCD with reference to the approach’s ability to influence actors’ mindsets and actions suggests that the underlying assumption of ABCD is that poverty may be explained in limitations in poor people’s mindsets and in lack of meaningful engagement.

ABCD has been criticised for lack of attention to power systems. The approach is accused of furthering a neo-liberal understanding of poverty that assigns the responsibility for handling social problems to individuals and local communities, ignoring systemic and structural causes. Ignorance of systemic and structural power may reinforce asymmetrical power relations and contribute to reproduce narratives that hold the poor responsible for their limited ability to pull themselves out of their situation, thereby reinforcing low self-esteem. Research has further revealed that ABCD as an approach to development may struggle to liberate itself from discourse that contribute to reproduce representations that perpetuate power structures. Furthermore, the ABCD approach is accused of ignoring internal power structures within the community and among different actors. Defenders of the approach have argued that although ABCD does not always change power dynamics, there are examples of ABCD-initiatives that do.¹²⁴ With reference to Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed, Liam Maclure provides three points for augmentations to the ABCD approach that he suggests may enhance the approach’ capacity to target power. First, Maclure targets the approach’ limited ability to inform actors of suppressing doctrines by suggesting that the approach should incorporate a process of indoctrination. The aim of indoctrination should, according to Maclure, be “to help marginalized community members understand that external forces contribute to their social position and encourage them to analyze how dominant power structures can be changed”¹²⁵. Second, Maclure suggests that ABCD must be amended to target the approach’ ignorance of local power structures through creation of power-sensitive processes of decision-making and by ensuring that the asset-mapping is truly local, seeking to leverage activities, investments and resources from outside. In the third amendment to the ABCD

¹²² Liam Maclure, ‘Augmentations to the Asset-Based Community Development Model to Target Power Systems’, *Community Development*, 24 January 2022, 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2021.2021964>.

¹²³ Zo Ramiandra Rakotoarison, Stephanie Dietrich, and Heikki Hiilamo, ‘Tackling Poverty with Local Assets: A Case Study on Congregational Asset-Based Community Development in a Lutheran Church in Madagascar’, *Diaconia - Journal for the Study of Christian Social Practice* 10, no. 2 (2019): 121–22.

¹²⁴ Maclure, ‘Augmentations to the Asset-Based Community Development Model to Target Power Systems’, 3–6.

¹²⁵ Maclure, 6.

approach recommended by Maclure, the community should turn their attention outwards by engaging in what he describes as “nonviolent direct action campaigns”.¹²⁶ The augmentations that Maclure suggest, protect ABCD’ understanding of local actors’ power to change their situation and may thereby also contribute to reproduce the understanding of local actors’ own responsibility for their situation. Maclure’ s understanding of actors’ capacity to address the impact of power systems reflects a naive attitude to power suggesting that Maclure has limited understanding of and experience with the realities of oppression.

Ramiandra Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo’s study of ABCD is based on empirical material from Use Your Talents in Madagascar. Based on the study of actors’ activities in Madagascar, Zo Ramiandra Rakotoarison, Stephanie Dietrich and Heikki Hiilamo describe the Use Your Talents approach as congregational asset-based community development, a case of ABCD. Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo describe how the Malagasy Lutheran Church (FLM) implements ABCD in communities in Madagascar by teaching congregants that they have potential, capabilities and abilities and, in cooperation with municipalities, creating development committees to develop and promote the concept of Use Your Talents and to integrate development activities in the understanding of the church’s mission. They provide eight examples of different activities that their informants described in interviews about Use Your Talents. They further stress that assets may encompass all kinds of resources, and may include intangible assets such as actors’ faith, personal attributes, skills and interpersonal relations. Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo criticise religious leaders for limited competence and low awareness of power structures, which they argue may be a hindrance for successful implementation of the approach.¹²⁷

Ramiandra Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo suggest ways of improvement of what they describe as the Use Your Talents approach that target different levels of power. First, they argue that there is a need for more training of local institutional leaders. Second, they highlight the crucial role of power structures and suggest that the success of the approach rests on its ability to address power structures that hinder successful implementation of the approach. Hidden agendas among actors are mentioned as one of the factors that must be addressed. Ramiandra Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo are thereby accusing actors of hindering the success of the approach. Third, they point to the connection between local and global power imbalances and suggest that actors who ascribe to the approach could benefit from participation in the wider international development discourse, thereby highlighting the

¹²⁶ Maclure, 6–10.

¹²⁷ Rakotoarison, Dietrich, and Hiilamo, ‘Tackling Poverty with Local Assets: A Case Study on Congregational Asset-Based Community Development in a Lutheran Church in Madagascar’.

limited capacity of the Use Your Talents approach in addressing the factors that produce poverty and powerlessness.¹²⁸

In the essay “Can the subaltern speak?”, a classic in postcolonial studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes the risk of Indian women’s voices being caught in the tensions between the traditional patriarchal systems and the colonial powers seeking to liberate them from suppressing traditions.¹²⁹ With reference to Spivak, Ilan Kapoor draws attention to the fact that subalternism is more than semantic constructions. Asymmetrical power relations have materialist dimensions located in global inequality and socioeconomic impoverishment that persist today.¹³⁰ Pointing to how subaltern actors may modify their speech or adjust what they express, Kapoor argues that ignorance of macro-level imperialism “reproduce(s) the subalternity of the people at the very moment that it seem(s) to let them speak”¹³¹. Even when actors themselves tell their stories, “there is no avoiding the question of who edits the stories, how they are presented, for whom and what purposes they are framed”.¹³² Kapoor criticises Escobar for an ahistorical approach that fails to recognise heterogeneity and warns that Escobar’s critique of development may ultimately contribute to constructing heroic and romanticised representations of the subaltern that hide political ideologies and hinder subaltern actors’ struggles for development.¹³³ Asymmetrical power relations are located in historical and material realities and epistemic deconstructions’ capacity in overcoming the impacts of global injustice is limited.¹³⁴ A study of 20, 000 people in 23 countries’ experiences of poverty has documented how poverty may affect actors’ identities. The participants in the study described a common feeling of powerlessness that impacted their self-respect, confidence, relations, freedom of choice and actions. The study further documented how a lack of material resources impacts people’s well-being and may be a source of shame.¹³⁵ The relation between poverty and powerlessness that the actors in the study described indicates that struggles for justice must account for the material unjust realities. The impacts of asymmetrical power relations are not only in the poor actors’ minds.

¹²⁸ Rakotoarison, Dietrich, and Hiilamo, 137–38.

¹²⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66–111.

¹³⁰ Ilan Kapoor, ‘Hyper-Self-Reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World “Other”?’, *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2004): 629.

¹³¹ Medevoi et al in Kapoor, 637.

¹³² Kapoor, 637.

¹³³ Kapoor, 638.

¹³⁴ Seyla Benhabib, ‘The Uses and Abuses of Kantian Rigorism. On Rainer Forst’s Moral and Political Philosophy.’, *Political Theory*, SAGE Publications, 43, no. 6 (2015): 777–92.

¹³⁵ Deepa Narayan-Parker et al., *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change* (Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 2000).

2.5. The Ambiguous Role of Religious Power

Religious actors' struggles for justice are located in the material world. The roles of faith-based actors in development have been subject to increased attention in recent decades.¹³⁶ Studies show that religious actors are a diverse group, and the relationship between religion and development is complex and multi-faceted.¹³⁷ Faith-based actors have a long history of provision of health and educational services, and churches, mosques and temples are located all over the world, including remote places where other structures may be weak or absent. Religious leaders have competence in addressing ethical issues that often arise in processes of social change, and since they often hold high levels of trust in communities, they have the capacity to influence actors' thinking and actions.¹³⁸ Religions are global fellowships across cultural and political differences that, by working together across differences, may contribute to building a common understanding and fellowship across religious, cultural and geographical divisions.¹³⁹ Religions are at the same time sources of conflict. Religious institutions are often patriarchal and undemocratic.¹⁴⁰ A study by Robert Woodberry argues that there is a correlation between the historical presence of Protestant missionaries and liberal democracy.¹⁴¹ The role of religious power in actors' lives is ambiguous.

Arguing that a study of religion is a study of peoples' lives, John Mbiti has described how religion is integrated into a religious person's identity, not an element or aspect of life that can be separated from other aspects of life.¹⁴² Similarly, Nancy Ammerman's comprehensive empirical study of lived religion in the United States supports an understanding of religion as an integrated element of a person's life.¹⁴³

Throughout history, people who have been suffering under suppression, abuse and marginalisation have found hope, strength and empowerment in their faith and in the Bible. Slaves in the United States

¹³⁶ Swart and Nell have documented the growth in number of studies on religion and development between 2001 and 2015. Ignatius Swart and Elsabè Nell, 'Religion and Development: The Rise of a Bibliography', *HTS Theologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016): a3862.

¹³⁷ Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano, *Religion in Development, Rewriting the Secular Script* (London: Zed Books, 2013).

¹³⁸ Jeff Haynes, *Religion and Development: Conflict or Cooperation?* (Basingstoke, GB: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 16–18.

¹³⁹ Azza Karam describes an UN-initiated example of diapraxis among a diversity of faith-based organizations. See Azza Karam, 'From Dialogue to Diapraxis in International Development?', *International Journal on Human Rights* 16, no. 29 (August 2019): 33–39.

¹⁴⁰ Haynes, *Religion and Development*, 50.

¹⁴¹ Robert D. Woodberry, 'The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy', *American Political Science Review* 106 (May 2012): 244–74.

¹⁴² Kwame Bediako, 'John Mbiti's Contribution to African Theology', in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (Berlin and New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 1993), 375–76.

¹⁴³ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes, Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

found strength in songs with references to stories from the Bible, particularly stories from the Old Testament. The Tamar Campaign is an example of how a text from the Bible may be used to address injustice. Actors experience that the story about the rape of Tamar from 2 Samuel 13, 1–22, opens the space for talking about gender-based violence in churches and among religious leaders.¹⁴⁴

Development donors working with religious actors have increasingly recognised religious leaders' capacity to influence actors and have attempted to utilise religious leaders' trust and networks to further development,¹⁴⁵ while development donors' understanding of the role of faith in actors' lives and identities may be limited.¹⁴⁶

A recent study of the entanglements of religion, science and power highlights the complex relationship among religion, power and identity. While the study of Bengali Tantric under the acronym Arthur Avalon has until recently been credited to the British intellectual Sir John Woodroffe, Julian Strube argues that the influence among the Bengali Tantric pandit Shivachandra Battarachya Vidyarnava, his Bengali disciple, philosopher and nationalist educator Pramathanath Mukhopadhyay, and Woodroffe, who was also Shivachandra's disciple, was multidirectional.¹⁴⁷ The case of Bengali Tantric is an example of how religion, power and identity are constantly "contested and negotiated through global exchanges that condition(ed) and transform(ed) the ideas of all their participants".¹⁴⁸ Strube's study suggests that religious power might hold potential to compensate for power asymmetries rooted in colonial history.

Marianne Skjortnes describes how encounters between people from different contexts confront actors with conflicts between their own and others' ways of thinking and living that may prompt reflection on their own values and practices. Skjortnes introduces two different ways of relating to cultural relativism. She suggests that cultural relativism may be used either as a method to help understand the other or as an ideological position that guides moral decision-making.¹⁴⁹ Skjortnes' distinction between descriptive understanding and normative acceptance may help actors and researchers navigate their own norms and values in the midst of diversity. The distinction does not address the

¹⁴⁴ Fred Nyabera and Taryn Montgomery, *Tamar Campaign: Contextual Bible Study Manual on Gender-Based Violence* (The Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and The Horn of Africa (FECCLAHA), n.d.).

¹⁴⁵ Marit Tolo Østebø and Terje Østebø, 'Are Religious Leaders a Magic Bullet for Social/Societal Change? A Critical Look at Anti-FGM Interventions in Ethiopia', *Africa Today* 60, no. 3 (2014): 82–101.

¹⁴⁶ Haynes, *Religion and Development*, 50.

¹⁴⁷ Julian Strube, '(Anti-)Colonialism, Religion and Science in Bengal from the Perspective of Global Religious History', *Journal of Global History*, 2022, 1–20.

¹⁴⁸ Strube, 20.

¹⁴⁹ Marianne Skjortnes, 'Religion and Development, A Gender Perspective on the Ambiguous Role of the Churches', in *Religion and Development, Nordic Perspectives on Involvement in Africa*, ed. Tomas Sundnes Drønen (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 161–73.

question of the legitimacy of actors' use of power to promote their own values and norms. The distinction may nevertheless help actors develop awareness of the complex relation and tension between recognition of what one finds valuable and important based on one's own experiences of the world, recognition of what others find valuable and important based on their experiences of the world and upholding every human being's equal value and dignity in a world where actors experience the world differently.

2.6. Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed previous studies of relevance for the study of power relations in ecumenical diakonia. The studies describe a diversity of attempts to address injustice and the issue of power in the complex network of relations in which ecumenical diakonia is located. The review shows that theologians, development donors and researchers who struggle for justice at the same time participate in the reproduction of power relations.

3. Justice as the Right to Justification in a Context of Power Relations

Having presented studies that show how theologians, researchers and development donors participate in the reproduction of power relations, I will now present the theoretical framework in this study. The right to justification is developed in the critical tradition of the Frankfurter school.

Critical theory in this tradition has been described as a combination of awareness of the hermeneutical process and critical analysis of actual social realities. In the Frankfurter school, knowledge development is an attempt to expose forces that hinder actors from “shaping the decisions that crucially affect their own lives”¹⁵⁰; a process of emancipation that is part of a struggle for justice. Critical theory seeks to help the researcher avoid “providing any given formulaic solution”¹⁵¹ and avoid “making critical interpretations from rigid frames of reference”¹⁵². The critical thinkers in the Frankfurter school seek to reveal how power asymmetries condition the social world, in order to create opportunities for changing such conditions. Critical theory opposes the idea that social conditions and developments are natural by providing frames of reference that reveal how, social institutions and ideologies that are often taken for granted, are in fact constructed in historical processes heavily influenced by power asymmetries and special interests. Opposed to studies that seek to identify regularities or causal connections, “(t)he task of critical social science is to distinguish what is socially and psychologically invariant from what is, or can be made to be, socially changeable, and to concentrate upon the latter.”¹⁵³ The first task of a critical theory is to liberate the mind of the researcher from the frames of reference she has been socialised into and may take for granted.

The theory of the right to justification offers a framework that may serve to deconstruct the authority of norms and social orders that may be taken for granted, by revealing how construction and negotiation of norms and social orders are located in, and influenced by, social conditions. The theory provides a frame of reference that has potential to reveal the effects of power and injustice through construction of an idea of what justice could be.

My choice of the theory of the right to justification as a main theoretical framework, constructs or reveals a tension in this study of ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice. While the concept of ecumenical diakonia is constructed with reference to the triune God and the Bible as a source of

¹⁵⁰ Kincheloe and McLaren in Alvesson and Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 179.

¹⁵¹ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 179.

¹⁵² Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 179.

¹⁵³ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 180.

authority¹⁵⁴, according to Rainer Forst, a struggle for justice cannot rest on norms constructed with reference to a higher authority such as God or the Bible.

3.1. Justice as the Right to Justification

Forst's project is to develop a theory of justice that can be a tool for the analysis of relations across, among and between people of diverse cultural, social and religious backgrounds. By describing his project in this way, Forst takes a constructivist approach, and he understands justice to be a relational concept. Forst argues that to avoid ethnocentrism, a theory of justice must be independent of authoritative dogmas or worldviews and rest only on itself.¹⁵⁵ In taking this as his starting point, Forst can be described as a Kantian philosopher. Kant developed his philosophy of ethics with a strong belief in rationalism and in the understanding of the human being as the end in themselves. Kantian ethics do not serve to fulfil religious laws or rules that serve a higher purpose. In Kantian ethics, the person is the end.¹⁵⁶

The theory of justice as the right to justification is constructed on Forst's understanding of what it means to be human. He identifies the ability to reason and finitude or vulnerability as aspects of what it means to be a human being. Forst suggests that these elements of the meaning of being human may serve as a common ground for the establishment of a theory of justice. The foundational idea in justice as the right to justification is that as vulnerable beings with the ability to reason, human beings are entitled to justifications of actions and conditions that concern and affect them.¹⁵⁷ Forst explains the ability to reason as the capacity to account for one's beliefs and actions. Human beings' finitude is in Forst's understanding related to our being as bodies in a given context of interaction with other human beings and the world. Being in a given context of relating to other human beings and the world exposes human beings to the risks of suffering, where being vulnerable means being bodily or psychologically affected by other people's actions, the conditions in the environment we live in and what happens in the world.¹⁵⁸ Human beings' finitude or vulnerability also means that our capacity to reason is limited. Forst stresses that to serve as a ground for justice, reasons must withstand relevant critique, be publicly accessible and assessable, and become common property.¹⁵⁹ The limitations or finitude of human beings' ability to reason implies that there are no unquestionable or "ultimate" reasons, and continuous questioning and assessment of justifications are necessary.¹⁶⁰ In this way, Forst argues, the

¹⁵⁴ World Council of Churches and Act Alliance, 'Called to Transformation, Ecumenical Diakonia'.

¹⁵⁵ Forst, *The Right to Justification – Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice*, 45, 138–46.

¹⁵⁶ Forst, 45.

¹⁵⁷ For the fuller explanation of the rational grounding of the right to justification, see Forst, 13–121.

¹⁵⁸ Forst, 38–42.

¹⁵⁹ Forst, 14.

¹⁶⁰ Forst, 39–40.

theory of the right to justification is more than a theory for rational beings; it is a theory for those who have a sense of what it means to be subject to actions that are not validly justified.¹⁶¹ Justice is in this sense a normative relational concept that, according to Forst, could protect human beings from the risks of harm connected to vulnerability if human beings with the ability to reason and the freedom to act based on reasoning would consider other people to be the end and would account for the effects of the ends and the means of their actions, or failures to act, in their decision-making.

The three steps process of seeing, reasoning and acting based on processes of reasoning is according to Forst constitutive of an autonomous person. He describes this process of seeing, reasoning and acting based on reasoning as the source of autonomy. Forst argues that morality rests on the actor's ability to see and recognise the other's vulnerability, recognise the other's and their own ability to reason and recognise that their actions or lack of action may affect the other. Since the actor's actions or lack of action may affect the other, the actor has a duty to justify themselves to the other in order to protect the others' dignity as a vulnerable person who has ability to reason, he argues. As vulnerable, relational beings who reason, humans are justifying beings. While Kant argues that ethics serves to protect the agent's identity and dignity by guiding a person to do what is right, Forst argues that ethics must be motivated by the protection of the other's dignity and holds that if a person considers the other's right to justification in processes of reasoning, she is a moral person. The recognition of ones' own humanity cannot be separated from recognition of the other.¹⁶² Forst recognises that human beings' ability to reason and our freedom is limited by our finitude. Although imperfect, reason is nevertheless the best available tool for discerning right or wrong, good or bad that we have, he argues.

The concept of practical reasoning refers to a process where actors provide reasons for their actions or non-action. A process of practical reasoning could also be a process of constructing or negotiating a norm, a social order or a political structure. An ethical process of decision-making follows a process of reasoning based on values that are normative in the given context. There is a difference between explaining and justifying one's actions. On the basic level of rational grounding, a person is simply explaining the reasoning behind her actions. She may act in a certain way based on what she thinks will serve a purpose or what she considers to be a good life. A person's action may also be an emotional response motivated by compassion or by anger. A person may be able to explain why they acted in a certain way in a given situation, but to justify their action, they must be able to show that their actions can be justified according to the criteria that are valid in the given community or context.¹⁶³ In ethical

¹⁶¹ Forst, 39.

¹⁶² Forst, 36–42.

¹⁶³ Forst, *The Right to Justification – Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice*, 15.

reasoning, the choice of action corresponds to the ethical values held in the person's ethical community/ies.¹⁶⁴

The central point in Forst's thinking is the process of validation of justifications. He proposes generality and reciprocity as criteria for the validation of justifications.¹⁶⁵ Generality means that the reasons for generally valid norms must be shareable by all those affected and the objections of any affected person must be considered in the process of validation.¹⁶⁶ Reciprocity means that "no one may raise claims that she refuses to grant to others (reciprocity of contents) and that no one may simply assume that others share their own evaluative conceptions and interests so that she could claim to speak in their name or in the name of higher values (reciprocity of reasons)."¹⁶⁷ These criteria are constructed to prevent the exclusion of any affected member and to protect the equal status and respect of every affected person and the authority of the moral community over the individual.¹⁶⁸ Every person has the right to veto the validity of a process of justification.^{169,170}

In this understanding, the potential ends of actions cannot be separated from its' potential means. The reasoning that grounds actions must account for and relate to both the ends and the means of actions or of the social orders or norms that grounds actions.¹⁷¹ "(W)hat is called for here is a form of reasoning that submits both the ends of action and the means to justification *before others* as those morally affected."¹⁷² The criteria of generality and reciprocity provides a critical lens that moves beyond the norms, values, social orders and structures that the practical reasoning in a given community or context may take for granted by deconstructing the authority of the foundations of such norms, values, social orders and structures.

The process of validating claims of justification takes place in a practical ethical community of social discourse among people who are themselves subject to the norms they are meant to be authoring, allowing for a critical examination of both what counts as valid justifications in a given social setting and the process and procedures of justification in the given ethical community. The process of validation may involve asking if the established norms and institutions fulfil their purpose or, more

¹⁶⁴ Forst, 14–18.

¹⁶⁵ Forst, 214.

¹⁶⁶ Forst, 49.

¹⁶⁷ Forst, *Normativity and Power, Analyzing Social Orders of Justification*, 28.

¹⁶⁸ Rainer Forst, 'The Right to Justification: Moral and Political, Transcendental and Historical. Reply to Seyla Benhabib, Jeffrey Flynn and Matthias Fritsch', *Political Theory*, SAGE Publications, 43, no. 6 (2015): 824–25.

¹⁶⁹ Forst, *The Right to Justification – Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice*, 49.

¹⁷⁰ Forst draws and Rawls' principle of the veto of the least privileged. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Original Edition Reprint (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 11–17.

¹⁷¹ Forst, *The Right to Justification - Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice*, 14.

¹⁷² Forst, *Normativity and Power, Analyzing Social Orders of Justification*, 15.

radically, asking what purpose the norms serve and if the identified purpose is justified.¹⁷³ Consequently, according to Forst, the question of justice is not a question of social and historical context: "...it is not true 'that social and historical conditions (are) needed to determine what counts as justified in each case'".¹⁷⁴ Justice as the right to justification moves beyond context by critically examining the justification of norms and the justification of the grounds for norms within and beyond social and ethical contexts, he argues. A valid justification cannot be reasonably rejected and is thereby non-rejectable. The process of validation is never finalised since the possibility that someone may reasonably reject a justification can never be excluded.

In Forst's understanding, justice is not mainly about the distribution of resources. Justice is every person's right to justification of any action or procedure that affects them. More important than the distribution of goods are therefore the questions of how the goods are produced and who produces them, how the system of production is developed and who decides the system of production and distribution.¹⁷⁵ The construction of systems of production and distribution are located in historically and socially unjust conditions. The right to justification seeks to reveal the constructed nature of the social conditions in which constructions of systems of production and distribution are located.

Forst claims that his approach bridges the separation between normativity and practice. Action is guided by the reasons that justify the action, and the reasons are found in the understandings, values, theories and justifications available to the actor, he argues.¹⁷⁶ The actor is thus limited by the normative principles of her context. "Particular standards of justification apply to the respective contexts and these standards are normative in nature: the standards of theoretical reason are binding because they have truth as their goal; the standards of practical reason are binding because they aim at the good or the right."¹⁷⁷ Although human reasoning is finite and therefore an imperfect tool of discernment, according to Forst, reason is nevertheless the only tool for examining justifications.¹⁷⁸ Forst recognises that the boldness of this claim makes him vulnerable to criticism and claims that reflexivity is built into the theory. The reflexive application of the criteria of generality and reciprocity means that the theory of justification rests on the discursive practice among all those who are subject to the norm of justification and who, according to the norm of justification, are meant to be the authors of norms, he argues.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷³ Forst, 2–4.

¹⁷⁴ Forst, 4.

¹⁷⁵ Forst, 123–27.

¹⁷⁶ Forst, 21.

¹⁷⁷ Forst, 22.

¹⁷⁸ Forst, 22.

¹⁷⁹ Forst, 23–35.

Accounting for the fact that actors in other historical or geographical locations may be affected by an actors' action, the theory has potential to account for processes of globalisation. Reason is not a Western phenomenon or trait. The theory's global perspective highlights that justice as the right to justification is a theory and an idea far from empirical reality. Organising a global process of practical reasoning that recognise every human being's right to justification would be impractical. Forst does however argue that by offering an idea of what a different world could look like and by describing the road towards this world as a social practice the theory has potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The right to justification "turns the question of justification into a theoretical *and* a practical one and seeks to analyse and transform *existing orders and relations of justification*"¹⁸⁰, he argues. The idea of a process of practical reasoning that accounts for the global effects of actors' actions and actors' different experiences of such effects might be appealing but is also painful. The effects of human beings' actions are devastating. The theory reveals tensions and conflicts of interests and values but cannot resolve them. Revelation of complexities, tensions and conflicts is an essential element in a struggle for justice.

3.2. Noumenal Power Works in Actors' Minds

Forst's understanding of power as a noumenal concept that works in people's minds is developed from the principle of justification. Noumenal power is not a static concept that somebody holds but an inter-relational and, at the same time, mental concept of influencing others' thinking and thereby their actions. As humans are justifying beings, changing the other person's thinking enables a person to change the other person's choice of actions. Forst defines power as "the capacity of A to motivate B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done."¹⁸¹ Consequently, "to have and to exercise power means to be able – in different degrees – to influence, use, determine, occupy or even seal off the space of reasons for others".¹⁸² An exercise of power could also potentially open the other's space of reason. In this understanding, exercising power is not in itself a bad thing. To exercise power over someone does not equal domination and is not necessarily a threat to others' interests or autonomy. Power can limit or liberate.

Structures and institutions equip people with what Forst describes as "noumenal capital", which enables people to exercise power. Politicians, teachers and religious leaders are examples of positions that enable people to exercise noumenal power by influencing others' understandings, values, norms and justifications. For Forst, the central aspect of power is not the justification of a person or

¹⁸⁰ Forst, 2.

¹⁸¹ Forst, 40.

¹⁸² Forst, 42.

institution's power but the power of justifications.¹⁸³ Actor's justifications of their actions should be validated based on the criteria of generality and reciprocity.

Forst describes a spectrum of justifications. A person may totally accept the reasons as justified, she may choose to accept the reasons given the norms and values in the situation by critically questioning the justifications of the given norms and values, or she may accept the reasons by force to avoid exclusion or sanctions from the given community, institution or structure.¹⁸⁴ Violence, threats and sanctions may be seen as expressions of powerlessness, suggesting that the reason giver has failed to provide reasons that have convinced the other to think and do what she wants the other to think and do. Violence is thereby a desperate measure and a last resort that, according to Forst, may be understood as a failure of justification. The threat of violence or the act of violence affects the minds of the object and the witnesses only as long as the purpose of avoiding violence is dearer than their own cause. An act of violence has lost its power the moment the cause becomes more important than the fear of violence or the potential loss of life.¹⁸⁵ Forst describes capitalism as a false justification. In the structure of capitalism, where financial growth is the end, material capital is a false justification that enables the rich to exercise noumenal power over the poor.¹⁸⁶ With reference to how "our postcolonial global capitalist era" continue to reproduce structural injustices, he is particularly critical of theories of justice that "either paint a positive picture of 'cooperation' at the international level or are content to strengthen 'capabilities' whereas the key issue should be to put an end to structural exploitation."¹⁸⁷

Domination describes unjustifiable asymmetrical social relations that appear to be "legitimate, natural, God-given or in any way unalterable".¹⁸⁸ Relations of domination do not leave any room for the questioning or critique of justifications, as the persons involved fail to mutually recognise each other's equal moral authority and right to justification. The space of reason is sealed off and justifications are accepted without contestation. According to Forst, when unjustifiable norms appear legitimate or when the arena to discuss and exchange generally and reciprocally non-rejectable justifications is lacking, there is a form of domination.¹⁸⁹

Creation of arenas for practical exchange and critique of justifications among people who recognise each other's equal moral authority are essential steps in a process of emancipation. "Genuine progress

¹⁸³ Forst, 38.

¹⁸⁴ Forst, 41.

¹⁸⁵ Forst, 39–44.

¹⁸⁶ Forst, 46.

¹⁸⁷ Forst, 12.

¹⁸⁸ Rainer Forst, 'Noumenal Power', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (2015): 125.

¹⁸⁹ Forst, 125.

occurs where new levels of justification are made accessible or are achieved through struggles that make subjects into justificatory authorities in the first place.”¹⁹⁰ According to Forst, genuine emancipation is therefore a noumenal process where actors recognise their own and others’ right to and duty of justification.

Forst uses the term noumenal alienation to describe a situation where a person loses the “sense of oneself as a rational normative authority equal to all others”.¹⁹¹ First order noumenal alienation occurs when a person is denied moral authority by others as they fail to recognise her as an equal fellow human being and ignore her right to and duty of justification. Second order noumenal alienation describes a situation in which a person no longer sees herself as a normative authority with the ability to reason and make moral decisions. According to Forst, first order alienation may sometimes lead to second order alienation. However, he points out, if social alienation always led to self-alienation, there would be no struggle for recognition.¹⁹²

Forst argues that even though struggle for emancipation may take different forms, the ability to criticise alienation rests on three noumenal aspects of alienation. First, moral criticism of alienation relies on the recognition of every human being’s dignity, which according to Forst, is tied to the “right to be respected as a normative equal authority and author of binding norms”. Second, alienation and de-alienation are cognitive processes. When a person fails to respect the other’s normative moral authority (first order alienation), it is an intersubjective process of failing to see each other as equals, and when a person fails to recognise her own moral authority (second order alienation), it is an injury in the person’s relation to herself. Alienation is thereby an intersubjective relational process of lack of recognition of self and others which is “much more than a state of mind, as it refers to intersubjective relations, social structures and a whole social order, but it also expresses a cognitive attitude towards others and to oneself.” Third, cognitive and practical emancipation are closely and complexly related, as a person’s choice of action towards the other relates to her perception of the other. Noumenal power, the ability to influence the other’s reasoning, is thereby essential in a struggle to overcome alienation, and a struggle for emancipation must therefore include analysis of noumenal power relations.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Forst, *Normativity and Power, Analyzing Social Orders of Justification*, 8.

¹⁹¹ Rainer Forst, ‘Noumenal Alienation: Rousseau, Kant and Marx on the Dialectics of Self-Determination’, *Kantian Review* 22, no. 4 (2017): 525.

¹⁹² Forst, 525.

¹⁹³ Forst, 544–45.

3.3. Navigating the Power of Justification Narratives

The right to justification is constructed to serve justice by constituting human beings' dignity as justifying beings. According to Forst, emancipation rests on actors' recognition of their own and others' right to justification of actions, norms and social orders that affect them, and justification is a social practice situated in a given situation where actors, "on the one hand, are free to choose their reasons but, on the other, are bound by the reasons that are available to them".¹⁹⁴

Researchers are part of the contexts we study, and our ability to describe and criticise noumenal power relations rests on our ability to recognise noumenal power. Recognition of others' reasoning calls for a plurality of languages of justifications. The concept of a justification narrative may help discover processes of reasoning and struggles for justification in the social world.

Human beings tell stories. Our stories are situated in given situations located in time and space, what Forst refers to as a spatiotemporal context¹⁹⁵, where processes of meaning making of individual events and experiences are located in a complex network of narratives located in complex networks of relations of actors located in different geographical and historical locations.¹⁹⁶ Forst suggests that the stories human beings tell each other and construct together may be understood as justifications. Actors constitute their own and others' identities as justifying beings with the ability to reason by telling stories or narratives that connect them to greater narratives. Such justification narratives may arise in historical situations and be kept alive and adjusted over generations. Justification narratives are in the words of Forst "embodiments of contextual reality" where "images, individual stories, rituals, facts, and myths are condensed into powerful grand narratives that serve as a resource for generating a sense of order"¹⁹⁷ and meaning making. Narratives of a religious nature and narratives that can be traced to a common past of overcoming collective injustice inspire identification and have a special binding power and authority.

*Telling a story of destruction, persecution, and torture, of humiliation and discrimination, then seems to be sufficient to justify normative claims. But perhaps it is not quite sufficient, because not only must the story be told in the right way, which is hard enough, but the one who tells it with the intention of providing a justification must also be able to show whether the right conclusions were drawn from it.*¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁴ Forst, *Normativity and Power, Analyzing Social Orders of Justification*, 55.

¹⁹⁵ Forst, 55.

¹⁹⁶ Mikhail Mikhailovic Bakhtin describes how authors construct their stories through creation of a dialogue between different voices and their stories. See Mikhail Mikhailovic Bakhtin, 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 41–51.

¹⁹⁷ Forst, *Normativity and Power, Analyzing Social Orders of Justification*, 57.

¹⁹⁸ Forst, 57.

Connecting their stories as narrative justifications to religious narratives or historical narratives of struggles for justice provide actors with power and authority that may enable them to influence actors to accept their justifications and thereby the norms, social orders, values, structures, social relations or political institutions in which they partake or seek to promote.¹⁹⁹

Critical analysis of the connection and relation between the different individual narratives and the greater justification narratives, may help uncover structures and relationships that prevent critique of justification narratives and that thereby contribute to reproduce domination. Normative orders framed in narratives are however difficult to criticise. Critique of such narratives must navigate the multiple meanings of narratives in consideration of what might be at stake for the different actors in the different images, individual stories, rituals, facts, and myths from which justification narratives are constructed.

3.4. Critique of Black Reason and the Power of Recognition

The thinkers in the Frankfurter school believe that humanity, through processes of practical reasoning and recognition of each other's humanity, can make steps of progress towards a just future. From the perspectives of those who experience the dark side of human beings' reasoning, the capacity of reason may seem less promising.

Cameroonian historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe's critique of Black reason describes the detrimental effects of human being's reasoning or failure to recognise each other's abilities to reason. Mbembe is a master in navigation of different meanings of concepts and narratives and the tensions and power relations in which the different meanings of concepts and narratives are located. Mbembe's concept of Black reason is a concept or a narrative that holds multiple meanings.²⁰⁰ Struggling to protect what is at stake in this concept, Mbembe navigates the multiple meanings of the concept or narrative throughout his argument.

According to Mbembe, the description of a person as Black is not a description of a person's skin colour. Black is a term that has acquired its meaning in a power relation to a "master", he argues.²⁰¹ Mbembe describes three critical moments in the narrative of Blackness. The first moment is the Atlantic slave trade through which men and women from Africa were transformed into human-objects, human-commodities, human-money²⁰² and denied recognition as cohumans. Mbembe stresses that despite the dehumanising treatment and lack of recognition, the Black remained active subjects throughout

¹⁹⁹ Forst, 12–18.

²⁰⁰ Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 10.

²⁰¹ Mbembe, 153.

²⁰² Mbembe, 2.

this moment. The second moment in the narrative of Blackness is, according to Mbembe, the period when the Black let their voices be heard. Slave revolts, the independence of Haiti, battles for abolition of slave trade, decolonisation, struggles for civil rights and dismantling of apartheid are marks of the second moment in the narrative of Blackness. The third moment in the narrative of Blackness is the neoliberal period of globalisation and privatisation of the markets. Mbembe describes neoliberalism as a period where all events and aspects of life are measured in market value. The process of neoliberalism is, according to Mbembe, “characterized by the production of indifference”, where the logic of capital “defines itself as unlimited in terms of both ends and means”.²⁰³

Mbembe’s narrative draws the connection between slavery, the treatment of the colonised in the colonial state and the devaluation and instrumentalisation of the created world that continues today. He warns that as the global economic order invades every sphere of society, we are all becoming the Black of the world whose value is measured against the purpose of furthering economic growth. The logic of capitalism infects human beings’ capacity to reason and threatens the existence of human beings as bodies in a material world, he argues.²⁰⁴

Mbembe describes two kinds of Black reason. The first kind of Black reason is a parallel to Edward Said’s description of Orientalism as others’ attempts to describe a certain group of people or a context.²⁰⁵ According to Mbembe, stories from travellers, explorers, soldiers, adventurers, merchants, missionaries and settlers, together with the establishment of the science of “Africanism”, have contributed to the development of this level of Black reason:

*Black reason consists of a collection of voices, pronouncements, discourses, forms of knowledge, commentary and nonsense, whose object is things or people ‘of African origin’. It is affirmed as their name and their truth (their attributes and qualities, their destiny and its significance as an empirical portion of the world).*²⁰⁶

Mbembe admits that this reasoning carries a concern for truth, however, he argues, by constructing the Black man as a racial subject, “Western consciousness of Blackness” has provided justifications for racial domination. Mbembe further describes how in the context of Black reason, reason and action are connected:

In this context ‘Black reason’ names not only a collection of discourses but also practices – the daily work that consisted in inventing, telling, repeating and creating variations on the formulas, texts, and rituals whose goals was to produce the Black man as a racial subject and site of savage

²⁰³ Mbembe, 2–3.

²⁰⁴ Mbembe, 179–83.

²⁰⁵ Edward Said, ‘Orientalism’, in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 1995), 81–91.

²⁰⁶ Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 27.

*exteriority, who was therefore set up for moral disqualification and practical instrumentalization.*²⁰⁷

Mbembe describes the second meaning of Black reason a response to or a reaction against the first meaning. This second meaning of Black reason is “a gesture of self-determination” in which the Black themselves constitute their own identities. According to Mbembe, while the first meaning of Black reason is an identity judgement, this second meaning of Black reason is, in contrast, a declaration of identity. According to Mbembe, this second meaning of Black reason may be described as a “theological performance” seeking to enact actors’ status as citizens like all others.²⁰⁸ However, he argues, although there are “profound disjunctures” between these two different meanings of Black reason, they are also closely related and may be described as “different sides of the same framework”²⁰⁹ that draw attention to the structures that are put in place “with the goal of submitting animality to measurement.”²¹⁰ In these words, Mbembe describes how in a global context of Black reason, human beings lives rest on their compliance with a role that can be instrumentalised by others.

Describing how the Black’s own reasoning participate in the reproduction of injustice, Mbembe may be criticised for a pessimistic outlook. He does however introduce the possibility of a pathway towards a more just world. The different world that he imagines could perhaps hold the capacity for transformation of the meaning of Blackness. In Mbembe’s imaginary world, human beings would recognise both each other’s similarities and each other’s differences.²¹¹

The right to justification’s potential as a contribution to justice rests on actors’ recognition of our similarities and differences as vulnerable beings who have the ability to reason. Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler describe how in a world of pre-existing power relations, recognition may work to reproduce power regimes where subjects are called to perform an identity in exchange for recognition of the regime’s reparative legislation.²¹² In a world of pre-existing power relations, recognition of one another’s vulnerability and ability to reason may become a struggle for recognition, where actors in their struggles for recognition submit to the other’s expectations.²¹³ While justice rests on human being’s recognition of each other’s humanity, human beings’ strives for recognition may become a source of domination. “(H)ow do we survive liberal recognition and its simultaneously life-affirming

²⁰⁷ Mbembe, 28.

²⁰⁸ Mbembe, 29.

²⁰⁹ Mbembe, 30.

²¹⁰ Mbembe, 31.

²¹¹ Mbembe, 178.

²¹² Judith Butler, ‘Recognition and Survival, or Surviving Recognition’, in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political, Conversations with Athena Athanasiou* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 75–76.

²¹³ Butler, 77.

and life-threatening claims for ensuring and protecting life?” asks Athanasiou.²¹⁴ According to Butler, “(t)his all depends on our ability to function as subjects who can instrumentalize (...) power without becoming subjugated by it. Can we pick and choose our involvement (...)?”²¹⁵

Affirmation of every human being’s right to justification may be described as that one “cannot not want”.²¹⁶ Failure to recognise the right to justification through non-compliance with the right to justification may become a rejection of human beings’ abilities to reason that can turn into a rejection of human beings’ responsibility for their actions before others. We may ask if in turning to the right to justification actors run the risk of being broken by the right to justification.

3.5. Summary

In this chapter I have presented the main theoretical framework of the study. The theory of the right to justification is a constructivist theory of justice that seeks to reveal how human beings reasoning and the norms and social orders we produce in such processes of reasoning are located in pre-existing power relations. By deconstructing the validity of social and normative orders, the theory of the right to justification may help the researcher liberate her mind from her own normativities and preconceptions, exposing what is taken for granted in her field and context. The right to justification invites interrogation of the connections between norms and social orders and the justifications or reasons that such norms and social orders rest on, revealing complexities and tensions. Human beings continue to provide invalid reasons or justifications for their actions, and in a world of pre-existing power relations, recognition may become a source of domination. The consequences of such processes of reasoning, where actors fail to recognise each other’s similarities and differences, may be devastating.

²¹⁴ Butler, 76.

²¹⁵ Butler, 83.

²¹⁶ Butler, 76.

4. Studying Struggles for Justice

In chapter two, I reviewed some of the studies on different attempts to address marginalisation and power relations in the global context in which ecumenical diakonia is located. The review showed that actors in ecumenical diakonia participate in the reproduction of power relations. In chapter three, I presented a theoretical framework that seeks to address social reproduction of power relations. In this chapter, I describe the methods I have used in construction and analysis of the empirical material, and I discuss validity and ethical issues. The main contribution of the study is empirical.

4.1. Critical Theory and Qualitative Research

The guiding principle of research in the tradition of critical theory is critical analysis of social reality, seeking to question what is taken for granted, in the purpose of emancipation.²¹⁷ Critical theory thus shares the emancipatory purpose of research as diakonia, as described by Stålsett, Taksdal and Hilden. Stålsett, Taksdal and Hilden argue that diaconal organisations through processes of knowledge production, combining commitment, action and participation, can fulfil their diaconal mandate of struggle for justice.²¹⁸

The decision to study ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice qualitatively was made in the understanding that human beings construct the social world through their words and actions.

In an attempt to acknowledge that all knowledge is produced by human beings, Sergio Sismondo constructs four different categories of constructions. First, the process where actors through processes of social interaction produce “knowledge, methodologies, fields, habits and regulative ideas” or norms. Second, the process where researchers produce “theories and accounts” based on empirical material. Third, the process where researchers produce an intervention in a laboratory, and last, the production of thoughts and representations. According to Sismondo, the Kantian tradition is an attempt to address this fourth kind of construction.²¹⁹ Sismondo is critical of the value of critical theorists’ attempts to address the construction of social thoughts and representations and argues that the Kantian tradition fails to recognise that although social thoughts and representations are constructed, they do exist.²²⁰ In a response to Sismondo, Karin Knorr Cetina describes Sismondo’s categories as an attempt to reconcile the distinction between positivism and social constructivism.²²¹ The distinction between positivism and social constructivism is more than a difference of methods or results, she

²¹⁷ Alvesson and Skoldberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 179–81.

²¹⁸ Stålsett, Taksdal, and Hilden.

²¹⁹ Sergio Sismondo, ‘Some Social Constructions’, *Social Studies of Science* 23, no. 3 (1993): 516.

²²⁰ Sismondo, 547–48.

²²¹ Karin Knorr Cetina, ‘Strong Constructivism - From a Sociologist’s Point of View: A Personal Addendum to Sismondo’s Paper’, *Social Studies of Science* 23, no. 3 (1993): 555–57.

argues. The distinction is a difference in the understanding of what human beings can know. The distinction between positivism and constructivism is not a question of the role of human beings in processes of knowledge production, but a question of the role of power. The only world that is accessible to human beings, is a world that is available through, or delimited by, science or processes of knowledge production. Recognition of the roles of human beings in the construction of knowledge does not erase the distinction between epistemology and ontology. The possibility of the existence of a world that is only available through faith or belief cannot be excluded.²²²

Socially produced thoughts and representations may or may not be solidified in practice.²²³ Studies that reveal diversities and tensions may contribute to reverse processes of solidification of the social practices to which concept and theories refer. Through deconstruction of the validity of the social processes in which the concept and theories we use to describe social reality were produced, the right to justification establishes a relationship between justice and qualitative empirical studies. This study analyses a socially constructed reality based on socially constructed empirical material. The empirical material in the study consists of qualitative data that reveals diversities and tensions in the world that human beings construct.

4.2. A Case Serves Several Purposes

A case study is a research design that allows in-depth analysis of empirical material from a specifically defined situation.²²⁴ There are different kinds of case studies that serve different purposes. Robert E. Stake distinguishes between an intrinsic case study in which the researcher is interested in the particularity of the case and an instrumental case study that serves to illustrate an issue. However, since the researcher is interested in both the general and the particular, there is no clear-cut line between these two types of case study and the distinction is unclear.²²⁵ With reference to Yin, Alan Bryman identifies five types of criteria in selecting a case. The critical case allows the researcher to illustrate or test a theory, the extreme or unique case is an unusual case, the representative or typical case is a case that can serve as an example of a common phenomenon, the revelatory case is a case that allows the researcher to study a phenomenon that has previously not been accessible, and the longitudinal case allows the observation of a phenomenon over an extended period.²²⁶ Cases may often serve several of these different functions at the same time.²²⁷ Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo

²²² Cetina, 557–59.

²²³ Cetina, 559.

²²⁴ Bent Flyvbjerg argues that in-depth case-study is necessary to understand complex issues like the relation between power and reason. See Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research', 219.

²²⁵ Robert E. Stake, 'Case Studies', in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Second edition (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 136–38.

²²⁶ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 62–63.

²²⁷ Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research', 231.

have studied Use Your Talents as a case of asset-based community development that may perhaps be described as typical.²²⁸ As a donor-funded development project, Use Your Talents may perhaps be described as an unusual case.²²⁹ Asset-based community development and a donor-funded development project are examples of what ecumenical diakonia may look like or how researchers or actors may describe ecumenical diakonia, navigating their different purposes. As a case of ecumenical diakonia, in this study, Use Your Talents could perhaps be described as a critical or revelatory case. This study reveals how ecumenical diakonia and Use Your Talents, and the social practices or struggles for justice to which these concepts refer, are located in pre-existing power relations and participate in the reproduction of historically situated unjust social orders.

4.3. Producing Empirical Material

The primary material in the study consists of field notes from participant observation during the Use Your Talents Innovation Project Annual Conference 2019 and transcripts from 17 unstructured interviews with actors in Use Your Talents. The analysis examines the specific context of Use Your Talents located in the fields of ecumenical diakonia and of development studies.

Documents serve as secondary sources of information about Use Your Talents. The decision to give limited attention to the documents was made in an attempt to liberate my description of Use Your Talents from preunderstandings presented in documents. In hindsight, I see that this decision may be a reflection of my limited confidence in my own capacity, or the capacity of critical theory, to liberate my mind from the dominating understandings in which these documents are situated. There is a possibility that a closer study of the documents would have made it easier to recognise and describe dominant understandings for the purpose of critiquing them. Such a description could however have contributed to reproduce rather than to challenge and problematise certain conceptions.²³⁰ Throughout the process of the study, I have been struggling to find the balance between the need to describe Use Your Talents in terms and concepts that are familiar in the field and the need for defamiliarisation for the purpose of emancipation.

4.3.1. Participant Observation in a (Un)natural Setting

Participant observation is a method adapted from ethnography. Ethnographers spend months or years in the field they study. The field notes in this study were produced over only six days and the study is not classified as ethnographic. In critical theory, the emphasis is not so much on the amount of data.

²²⁸ Rakotoarison, Dietrich, and Hiilamo, 'Tackling Poverty with Local Assets: A Case Study on Congregational Asset-Based Community Development in a Lutheran Church in Madagascar'.

²²⁹ Haus, "'Use Your Talents" Knowledge Development Project - Introduction Article'.

²³⁰ Alvesson and Sköldberg discuss the risk of studies contributing to reproduce dominating understandings of a phenomenon. See Alvesson and Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 201–2.

The value of a critical study is a question of the study's capacity to challenge and problematise what is hidden or taken for granted in a field.²³¹

Recognising that human beings are social beings whose words and actions as processes of meaning-making are constructed in a context of relations and structures, ethnographers have argued that social research should take place in the natural context of the actors with sensitivity to the nature of the setting and the phenomena of investigation.²³² In critical theory, the concept of a natural setting is problematic and a question of interpretation and definition. Any context of social interaction is constructed through social processes where actors construct norms, structures and social orders, and conditioned by their material environment.

In this study, the (un)natural setting in which most of the material was produced was the Use Your Talents Annual Conference 2019. This event took place in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon's (EELC) central office in Ngaoundéré in Cameroon from October 15th to 20th 2019. The office compound was developed by the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS), an evangelical Lutheran mission organisation which has been sending missionaries to Cameroon since 1925. The houses built for the Norwegian missionaries served as accommodation for the participants, and the meals were served in the old dining hall of the boarding school for the children of missionaries. Parts of the programme took place in the big church²³³ in front of the compound built with the support of the funds and labour²³⁴ of Norwegian missionaries.

The conference gathered 68 participants from Madagascar (4), Ethiopia (3), Kenya (3), Zimbabwe (1), Mali (2), Ivory Coast (3), Democratic Republic of Congo (5), Republic of Chad (4), Central African Republic (1), Norway (6) and Cameroon (36).²³⁵ The participants were from diverse professional backgrounds. Many of the participants were church leaders with theological backgrounds working at different levels in their national churches and local congregations, and many were development practitioners with backgrounds in education, health, agriculture, finance or administration. Others were university lecturers or teachers at a lower level, and there were some business entrepreneurs

²³¹ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 214–15.

²³² Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, 4th edition (New York: Routledge, 2019), 7.

²³³ Members in ELCC in Ngaoundéré call the church the cathédrale (French). I understand this expression as a reflection of pride in the church that may also have an ironic undertone. The use of local materials combined with a design that resembles that of newer churches in Norway is for me a symbol of ELCC as a result of the historical presence of Norwegian missionaries in Ngaoundéré.

²³⁴ One of the Norwegians who participated in the building of this church was paralysed for life following an accident that occurred during the work on the building.

²³⁵ Bobeto Bertrand et al., 'Use Your Talents: How Entrepreneurship Can Transform Your Community? Conference Hosted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon Ngaoundéré from 15 to 20 October 2019 Report', n.d., 72–73.

and people working in media. According to the list of participants, there were 21 women and 47 men. The participants belonged to many different churches and organisations: the Baptist Community of Northern Congo, Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Central African Republic, Brethren Lutheran Church of Cameroon, Brethren Lutheran Church in Chad, Madagascar Lutheran Church (FLM), Free Pentecostal Fellowship of Kenya, Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Ivory Coast (MELCI), Norwegian Mission Society (NMS), Mali Evangelical Lutheran Mission, Union of Baptist Churches in Cameroon, Union of Evangelical Churches in Cameroon, United Methodist Church, Protestant University of Central Africa, Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) and VID Specialized University.²³⁶

During the conference, the actors shared stories that are historically and geographically located in different places of the world. In this way, what happened in Ngaoundéré was a product of what is happening in other places. When the actors returned to their local communities, they brought back the stories from Ngaoundéré. The conference offered an opportunity to produce empirical material that recognise how geographically remote places are connected in a global context.

When I asked the project leader how the participants in the UYT-IP were selected, he explained that the participants had been selected by the churches based on instructions from the project leadership. They wanted a diverse group of passionate people who are active in their churches:

*What we said something about, or I, or the project in a way, was that one desires people from somewhat varied backgrounds, active and passionate people (ildsjeler), preferably some in leadership positions and some who in a way are ordinary members, but who are active and passionate (ildsjeler) in their own churches.*²³⁷

Elaborating, the project leader explained that in some churches, the participants in Use Your Talents were selected by the central leadership of the church, while in other churches, the initial contact was made with a diocese through a Norwegian mission partner. When I asked specifically about the selection of participants for the event in Ngaoundéré, the project leader explained that there was a mixture of new people who had never attended an event with Use Your Talents before and the central people who have been part of Use Your Talents for many years.²³⁸ When challenged about the poor gender balance among the employees in UYT-IP and in the UYT-IP Annual Conference 2019, the project leader explained that this is a reflection of the reality in the churches where the majority of the leaders

²³⁶ Bertrand et al., 'Use Your Talents: How Entrepreneurship Can Transform Your Community? Conference Hosted by Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon Ngaoundéré from 15 to 20 October 2019 Report', 72–73.

²³⁷ Interview with the project leader (my translation from Norwegian).

²³⁸ Interview with the project leader.

are men.^{239,240} Gender equality was not mentioned among the criteria for the selection of participants. The project leadership wanted to leave the choice with the church leaders, and the gender balance among the participants became a reflection of the gender awareness among those who selected the participants.

The languages of the UYT-IP Annual Conference 2019 were French and English, continuously changing depending on the preference of the speaker. The programme was translated simultaneously. In verbal informal communication the different participants used a variety of languages. Mostly French and English but also their own mother tongues. There were many informal conversations in which I did not partake. During group work and the field visit, the participants were divided in groups on the basis of language, either English or French. Interestingly, the Malagasy participants, although their competency in English was limited, wanted to be part of the English group and preferred to speak English. When I asked them about this, they explained that since French is the language of those who colonised Madagascar, they prefer to speak English.

Most of the participants from abroad arrived in Yaoundé on Monday October 14th where we were welcomed by a Norwegian missionary from NMS who lived in Cameroon. We (most of the participants from abroad) travelled together to Ngaoundéré on Tuesday morning, where the programme of the conference started with lunch. The programme ended with a festive dinner on Saturday evening, and most of the international participants left Ngaoundéré together after attending church service on Sunday morning. My arrival and departure with the other participants allowed me to integrate into the group and offered me opportunities to start producing data from the moment I arrived in Cameroon. I met some of the other participants already at the airport in Yaoundé. The list of participants from the conference included my name, and like the other participants, I received a certificate of participation. Researchers participate in and are part of the social world that they study.²⁴¹

The naturalist position promoted by the early ethnographers has been criticised for failing to account for the researcher's own influence on the actors and their context and for the way the researchers'

²³⁹ Interview with the project leader.

²⁴⁰ Zo Ramiandra Rakotoarison's study of the implementation of the Use Your Talents approach in one congregation in Madagascar shows that although Use Your Talents claims to further gender equality, the approach may contribute to the cementation of traditional gender roles. See Rakotoarison, Zo Ramiandra, 'Women, Use Your Talents! How Does the Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy (Malagasy Lutheran Church) through the "Use Your Talents" Project Empower Women?' (Master Thesis in Diakonia and Christian Social Practice, Oslo, Diakonhjemmet University College, 2013).

²⁴¹ In the introduction to his book on qualitative methods in social studies, Pål Repstad offers a rich and humorous description of the complex interaction between the researcher, the actors and their environment with reference to the Norwegian movie 'Salmer fra kjøkkenet'. See Pål Repstad, *Mellom Nærhet Og Distanse, Kvalitative Metoder i Samfunnsfag*, 4. reviderte utgave (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2007), 11–13.

values, interests and interpretations influence ethnographic studies.²⁴² The term participant observation may be understood in response to this critique, acknowledging that researchers participate in the construction of the social world they study. Today, ethnographers argue that through reflexivity, researchers' participation in the field they study may contribute valuable perspectives to a study.²⁴³ Since the researcher is the research instrument, an analysis of how the researcher may influence the actors and the context is central in the analysis.²⁴⁴ Actors' reactions towards, and relations with, the researcher may be a source of insight and understanding. However, understanding how the researcher influences the field is not a simple task. Aase and Fossåskaret describe how social status can be both a help and a hindrance to doing empirical research. They suggest that the researcher can find ways to construct and re-construct her own status.²⁴⁵

In my experience, the re-construction of a social status is not easy. Planning my fieldwork in Ngaoundéré, I was acutely aware that as a Norwegian participant in the UYT-IP Annual Conference 2019, I would likely be associated with the roles of the mission leaders and the missionaries. Wanting to study power relations, I perceived the risk of being associated with the mission leaders as a problem and I developed a strategy to overcome this perceived problem. The first point in my strategy was to make people aware of my close relationship with Africa by introducing myself as the wife of an Ethiopian man and the mother of Ethiopian children, who has lived 12 years of my life in Africa. The second point in my strategy was to integrate as much as possible with the African and Malagasy²⁴⁶ participants. I sat together with the women from Africa or Madagascar on the bus, airport and during the meals, and I spoke to the African and Malagasy participants during breaks. This was, of course, to produce data and because I enjoyed the fellowship, but it was also an attempt to not be too closely associated with the mission leaders from Norway. However, a number of factors worked against my strategy. I am a white-skinned woman from Norway who was placed to share accommodation with one of the mission leaders. When the participants were divided into groups to discuss challenges in their own churches, I was placed in the Norwegian group together with the project leader and the mission leaders. In the festive dinner on the last day, the project leader and mission leaders were seated on a special table together with the higher church officials. As a confirmation of the futility of my attempt to avoid association with the leaders from Norway, the host wanted me to be seated at

²⁴² Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, 10–15.

²⁴³ Ruth Behar describes how her own personal experiences with immigration, injuries and grief equipped her to study other vulnerable human beings' processes of meaning-making. See Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer – Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

²⁴⁴ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, 16–18.

²⁴⁵ Tor Halfdan Aase and Erik Fossåskaret, *Skapte Virkeligheter*, 2nd ed. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2014), 63–102.

²⁴⁶ Many Malagasy do not consider Madagascar part of Africa.

this special table. My attempt to construct a social status different from that of a mission leader or missionary seemed to have failed.

In the process of analysing the material and reflecting on this possibly failed attempt to re-construct my status, I have come to question the perception that my white face and the possibility of being associated with the mission leaders was necessarily a problem. One could argue that the role of a mission leader or missionary, a status that was already an integrated part of the (un)natural environment of the context, was preferable. Several of the participants in the conference were Norwegian missionaries or mission leaders. According to Spivak, “(t)he only things one really deconstructs are things in which one is intimately mired. It speaks you. You speak it.”²⁴⁷ Researchers are always “situated inside discourse, culture, institutions, geopolitics”.²⁴⁸ I could not escape my privilege, position and ethnicity. With reference to Spivak, Ilan Kapoor argues for a hyper-self-reflexive approach to fieldwork that involves learning languages, building intimate relations and wrestling with ones’ privilege and domination.²⁴⁹ In essence, this is what many Western missionaries and mission leaders have spent many years in Africa doing. My many years as a foreigner in Africa, learning languages and building intimate relationships with Africans, as well as my struggles with my privilege might have helped me develop a sensitivity that may have enabled me to listen to the actors’ experiences in ways that may have invited them to speak.²⁵⁰ The status of Western missionaries is embedded in the power structures the study explores and, the actors’ navigation of their relation and communication with me, may be a reflection of their navigation of their relation and communication with others.

The formal programme in the UYT-IP Annual Conference 2019 largely consisted of the actors telling each other stories about how they are doing Use Your Talents. The field notes largely consist of my notes from actors’ oral accounts of events, actions and experiences that they shared with some or all the participants in the conference and my own descriptions of the interactions between the actors and the situations that produced the descriptions. I also made notes from conversations in which I participated during meals, breaks or on the road. The original field notes were handwritten notes that I typed into a Word document on my return to Norway. The organised version of the fieldnotes constitutes 48 pages in Word font size 11 and space 1.5.

²⁴⁷ Spivak in Kapoor, ‘Hyper-Self-Reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World “Other”?’, 640.

²⁴⁸ Kapoor, 640.

²⁴⁹ Kapoor, 641–43.

²⁵⁰ With reference to Spivak, Ilan Kapoor argues for a hyper-self-reflexive approach to fieldwork of ‘unlearning one’s privilege as loss’, learning languages and building intimate relationships. See Kapoor, ‘Hyper-Self-Reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World “Other”?’, 641.

A limited additional part of the field notes was produced in a breakfast seminar about Use Your Talents that took place in Oslo in January 2020. This was a public event organised by the Church of Norway diocese of Oslo in co-operation with NMS. The seminar was a panel debate with representatives from Norad, Digni, Norwegian mission organisations and UYT-IP with the topic “How does locally developed methods like Use Your Talents fit Norwegian Development Governance?”²⁵¹

4.3.2. Open and Flexible Interviews Located in a Particular Situation and Relation

The material includes transcripts from 17 individual interviews with actors in Use Your Talents. The first nine interviews took place in Ngaoundéré during the UYT-IP Annual Conference 2019, with participants in the conference. The interviews offer deeper insights into the actors’ reasoning and allowed me to ask the actors about their experiences of the relational, structural and socioeconomic context in which they produced their accounts.

There is a distinction in social research between understanding actors’ accounts as sources of objective information about themselves and the world and understanding actors’ accounts as sources of information about the sociocultural or socio-political processes that generated the actors’ accounts. However, this distinction does not necessarily represent a dichotomy.²⁵² All actors are participants in the social world, and every account is part of a social context. Participants’ accounts are sources of information about themselves and the context and relations in which they participate. Interviews allow the researcher to learn more about how actors experience the social world, and this may, in turn, help the researcher gain insight into how actors’ accounts are shaped by the social world in which they are produced. Building on standpoint theory, Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis describe knowledge production as “a process of approximating the truth” that takes place in dialogical relationships among actors who are differently situated in the world.²⁵³ Every actor has their own particular position in the world that is different from all others. This emphasis on particularity has been used to critique universalistic theoretical frameworks by arguing that knowledge is always situated.²⁵⁴ Rainer Forst offers a framework that may be described as both universalistic and particular. According to the right to justification, processes of reasoning are always situated in a particular context of practical reasoning that is never finalised. There is always the possibility of discovering consequences of actions and actors’ perspectives that have not been accounted for. In this understanding, actors’ different positions, their different experiences, social practices and values are resources in the process of validation.

²⁵¹ My translation from Norwegian (Hvordan passer lokalt utviklede metoder som Use Your Talents inn i norsk bistandsforvaltning?).

²⁵² Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, 102–3.

²⁵³ Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis, ‘Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination’, *Feminist Theory* 3, no. 3 (2002): 315.

²⁵⁴ Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 317.

Consequently, diversity is a resource that adds validity to the process, and a diverse sample contributes validity to a study of struggle for justice. The diversity of actors participating in the Use Your Talents Annual Conference made this conference an excellent place to begin sampling. Entering the field, I discovered that a number of conditions determined the sample.²⁵⁵

The first factor that determined the sample was language. I do not speak French, and I had pre-arranged an interpreter. However, on arrival in Ngaoundéré, it became clear that the person I had asked would not be able to serve as my interpreter. Competency in English became one of the prerequisites for being interviewed, and since many of the participants were not comfortable expressing themselves in English, this became a determining factor in the sampling. Most of the participants who struggled with English were from Cameroon, while most of the international participants could express themselves in English. The requirement of a certain level of competency in English helped me develop a diverse sample of actors from many different countries, not favouring the Cameroonian majority.

Another factor that determined the sample was the participants' willingness. Approaching some of the actors, I picked up an unease that prevented me from asking them for an interview. A few of the actors who I did ask politely declined the invitation to be interviewed, but most agreed. Most of the interviewees seemed to appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences. One actor approached me to volunteer.²⁵⁶

Time constraints was a third factor that affected the sample. The programme of the conference was busy, and there was not much time available to do interviews. During the six days in Ngaoundéré, I interviewed nine actors. The sample from Ngaoundéré was supplemented with two interviews with actors who visited Norway for different reasons in the winter of 2019/20 and with five interviews with Ethiopian actors from a trip I made to Ethiopia in February 2020. Ethiopia has not been colonised by Westerners, and Ethiopian voices diversify the sample. Including actors who had not participated in the conference in Ngaoundéré but who have been actively involved in the UYT-IP in different ways, proved to be valuable. The distance from the atmosphere of enthusiasm in the conference invited the actors to be more critical in their reflections, and the later interviews were at the same time part of the process of triangulation of the preliminary analysis.

The sample was completed with an interview with the project leader in August 2021, 18 months after the last interview with the other actors. In the beginning of the study, I was afraid that interviewing

²⁵⁵ Hammersley and Atkinson discuss how factors other than the researcher's choice may determine the sample. See Hammersley and Atkinson, 110–12.

²⁵⁶ When interviews are done in connection to participant observation, interviewees may select themselves or be selected by others. See Hammersley and Atkinson, 108.

the project leader would make it more difficult for me to liberate my mind and my description of Use Your Talents from the preunderstandings in the field. I thus wanted to soak my mind in the descriptions of the other actors before interviewing the project leader. In hindsight it is difficult to know if this measure served a purpose. The project leader's voice and the understanding of Use Your Talents that he promotes is present in other parts of the empirical material and my interview with the project leader had limited impact on the analysis. Given his central role in the network and in my description, it was nevertheless necessary to offer him the opportunity to explain himself and justify his decisions.

The final sample consists of a diversity of actors of different backgrounds. Most of the interviewees hold roles as employees in a church, organisation or institution, but some are volunteers. Six of the interviewees are women and 11 are men, reflecting the gender imbalance in the conference. My intention was to have a better gender balance in the sample. However, few of the women in the conference were comfortable speaking English and some of those who spoke English declined the invitation to be interviewed. Like the project leader and the church leaders, I struggled to overcome the poor gender balance in the social context in which the study is located. The sample is a sample of a diversity of actors whose descriptions and actions are situated at different places in the relations, structures and global socio-political context in which Use Your Talents participate.

The table below lists the fictive names of the interviewees and gives an overview of the length of the interviews. Names appearing in the thesis that are not listed among the interviewees refer to actors to whom I have referred in the fieldnotes.

Interview:	Audio recording:	Pages of transcription*:
John	53.40 minutes	11.5
Eve	66.34 minutes	16.5
Jonas	56.42 minutes	13
Luke	32.33 minutes	11
Ester	11.37 minutes	2.5
Ruth	39.59 minutes	7
Joseph	62.49 minutes	14
Peter	58.12 minutes	9.5
Mary	40.42 minutes	16.5
Jakob	39.54 minutes	12.5
David	88.22 minutes	19
Isak	86.10 minutes	20.5
Hannah	53.29 minutes	11.5

Sarah	7.48 minutes	2
Daniel	19.01 minutes	6
Filip	44.16 minutes	13
Project leader	106.30 minutes	23

*The lack in consistency between the length of recordings and the length of the transcriptions may be explained in the different speed of the different interviewees' speech.

Initially, I approached the UYT-IP Annual Conference as an opportunity to access a diversity of actors who had experiences with ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice. I had prepared a simple interview guide with questions about the actors' experiences with injustice and power in ecumenical diakonia. As I started interviewing the actors, I discovered that the actors were less interested in my questions about abstract concepts like justice and power. The actors wanted to talk about Use Your Talents. Allowing them to talk about Use Your Talents invited good conversations, and I discovered that when the actors were talking about Use Your Talents, they were actually talking about their struggles for justice. I discarded the interview guide and opted for an open approach to the interviews. I began the interviews by asking the interviewees to tell me a little bit about themselves and their experiences with Use Your Talents. All the interviews were very different and developed from the individual interviewees' unique socio-political positions and experiences with Use Your Talents. In this kind of interviewing, active listening is an important skill, as the quality of the interview depends on the interviewer's ability to ask follow-up questions that allow the interviewee to speak about issues of significance to her and the phenomenon of investigation.

In interview research, knowledge is produced through the interpersonal relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer.²⁵⁷ In phenomenology, the aim of interviewing has been to allow the interviewee to, as much as possible, tell their stories to the interviewer freely, from their own perspective, producing descriptions of actors' experiences and beliefs, where the researcher's role is to affirm and validate the experiences of the interviewee. Svend Brinkmann proposes that the introduction of the researcher's perspectives and experiences in an interview may add value to interview research. He suggests that through critical questioning that facilitates examination of the reasoning and justifications behind the interviewees' stories, interviews may produce knowledge that moves beyond the interviewees' own perspectives. Brinkmann argues that by engaging in critical dialogue about values and concepts, the interviewer takes the interviewee's knowledge claims, their reasoning, their actions and their experiences seriously, seeing them as responsible agents, and since the risk of the researcher revealing her own experiences, reasons and justifications makes her

²⁵⁷ Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, *Interviews, Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Third (London: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2015), 3–5.

vulnerable, critical dialogue contributes mutuality to the encounter.²⁵⁸ By engaging in critical dialogue, the researcher recognises the interviewee's ability to reason.

In my interviews with the actors in Use Your Talents, I adopted a flexible interview approach. I opened the interviews by asking the interviewees to tell me about themselves and their experiences of being part of Use Your Talents. At the beginning of the interviews, my responses and follow-up questions were open and affirmative in line with a phenomenological approach. The interviews developed depending on the individual interviewees' unique positions, their experiences with Use Your Talents and their experiences with ecumenical diakonia. As my dialogues with the interviewees developed, I introduced critical aspects and perspectives that confronted the official success story about Use Your Talents, and I raised issues of justice and power directly. This was sometimes uncomfortable, particularly considering my own social position, and required sensitivity towards the interviewees' feelings and respect for the complexity of the world. I believe that my own situatedness in ecumenical diakonia and in Africa may have provided the necessary trust that contributed to a safe space for examining critical aspects. I understand Joseph's mention of white people who are married to Africans as his way of protecting me from his description of how people in Africa see a white person:

*So, you know, the way in which they look at the white person, it is not like a good person, he is a person who is here for selfish reasons. But I, if I am being honest with you, we have white people who came, and they had very good hearts. We have white people who came, and they ended up getting married in Africa. That is not a person with a bad heart.*²⁵⁹

I believe that my choice of introducing sensitive topics and critical perspectives served to validate actors' experiences. By opening the space for discussing the role of power in ecumenical diakonia and challenging the actors' reasoning and justifications, I took their identity as epistemic subjects seriously and recognised their accounts as contributions to the understanding of ecumenical diakonia as struggle for justice.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into written text by me. The process of transcription is an integrated element of the analysis. As the thickness of the sound is reduced to text, the transcriber participates in the process of interpretation.²⁶⁰ The tone, speed and volume of voice carry meaning that is not directly translatable to text. I attempted to include these aspects in the transcript by making notations on volume, silence and speed. In particularly emotional parts of the interviews, I made notations about emotions. Another challenging element of the transcription was punctuation. Punctuation may change the meaning of a sentence. Even when the intended meaning

²⁵⁸ Svend Brinkmann, 'Could Interviews Be Epistemic?', *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 8 (2007): 1116–38.

²⁵⁹ Interview with Joseph.

²⁶⁰ Brinkmann and Kvale, *Interviews, Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 203–4.

of the sentence is unclear on the audio record, the transcriber must decide where to place the comma. Irony is particularly difficult in the translation of voice to text. When I first transcribed the interview with Ruth, I did not make a note of irony. However, as I worked with the material and read the interview in light of other parts of the material, I discovered the possibility that a particular part of the interview was meant ironically. After listening to the audio recording again, I was almost sure that she spoke in irony. The possibility that her words were meant ironically prevented me from including the excerpt in the presentation of the findings. However, the possibility of irony added a perspective to the complex process of making meaning of the actors' meaning making.

4.3.3. Project Documents and Reports Produce Familiarity

The field notes and transcripts from the interviews are the primary material of this study. Different kinds of documents produced by others are referred to as secondary sources of information. Mission, diakonia, and policy documents constitute the background of the study. Documents are written by one or several authors who hold a particular role, to communicate a message to an audience. The message of the documents about Use Your Talents is that actors can use their own resources to address the problems of poverty. Documents may be valuable sources of background information. However, researchers should pay attention to the social processes that produced the documents. Analysis of documents may reveal truths about the social positions and processes in which the production of documents is located.²⁶¹ Documents play a central role in Use Your Talents. UYT-IP is in many ways constituted by the different documents, where the documents may be understood as attempts to frame Use Your Talents. In the introduction to the study, I presented Use Your Talents based on the documents, enabling readers from the field to recognise Use Your Talents as something familiar. The purpose of the study is liberation from familiar preunderstandings and from what is taken for granted in the field, and my analysis is based on the empirical material. The main documents to which I refer in the introductory description of Use Your Talents are the project document, the report from the UYT-IP Annual Conference 2019 and the UYT-IP evaluation report.

The project document states the purpose, method, expected results with indicators, target group, budget and timeframe of the project. Most of the project document is a presentation of Use Your Talents as an asset-based approach to development.²⁶² As discussed in chapter 2.2.3., asset-based community development is criticised for its lack of attention to power structures and may thus contribute to reproduce injustice. The UYT-IP project document was prepared by the project leader and a development advisor in NMS to Digni and Norad to secure funding. The authors of the document

²⁶¹ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, 129–33.

²⁶² Haus and Sameien, 'Use Your Talents Innovation Project 2017–2019 Project Document III'.

claim that international partners have contributed to the development of the document and the action plans. The development of documents is one of the strategies identified in the project document to enable the project to achieve its objective: to further develop and standardise the Use Your Talents approach.²⁶³ The strategy seeks to utilise the fact that documents are not only products of social processes. Documents participate in the production of social processes.

The report from the UYT-IP Annual Conference 2019 is an example of how the project attempts to standardise the Use Your Talents approach through documents. The report was written for the participants and distributed to them seven months after the conference.²⁶⁴ The report summarises the different actors' presentations highlighting central elements of the Use Your Talents approach that correspond with the understanding presented in other documents about Use Your Talents edited by the project leader.²⁶⁵

The evaluation report of UYT-IP is a document about UYT-IP that was not written by the project leader. The report was written by a group of evaluators commissioned by NMS based on studies of the project's documents and interviews with actors in Use Your Talents who were interviewed by other actors in Use Your Talents.²⁶⁶ In the first part of the report, UYT-IP is evaluated based on the goals and outcomes defined in the project document—time- and cost-efficiency—and Digni's empowerment assessment table.²⁶⁷ The second part of the report is a presentation of the activities that have taken place to promote the Use Your Talents approach and its impact, as described by the actors in the project documents and during interviews.²⁶⁸ The document echoes the project leader's understanding of Use Your Talents. The report strongly promotes Use Your Talents and suggests that when people have doubts in the approach, it may be explained by dependency, fear and limited capacity to address their situation of poverty.²⁶⁹ The report thus contributes to delegitimising the potential critique of the approach and narrowing the space for critical voices or perspectives. Reproducing such attempts to silence critique does not serve the purpose of emancipation and the report was not included in the primary material of this study.

²⁶³ Haus and Sameien.

²⁶⁴ Bertrand et al., 'Use Your Talents: How Entrepreneurship Can Transform Your Community? Conference Hosted by Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon Ngaoundéré from 15 to 20 October 2019 Report', 4.

²⁶⁵ The project leader has edited the book about the Use Your Talents approach that has been published and distributed by Digni. See Sigurd Haus, ed., *Use Your Talents – the Congregation as Primary Development Agent* (Oslo: Digni, 2017).

²⁶⁶ Boberg, Johansson, and Andriamisarisoa, 'Use Your Talents Evaluation Report, What Can We Do with What We Have Here and Now?', 5–6.

²⁶⁷ Boberg, Johansson, and Andriamisarisoa, 7–12.

²⁶⁸ Boberg, Johansson, and Andriamisarisoa, 13–25.

²⁶⁹ Boberg, Johansson, and Andriamisarisoa, 26–27.

4.4. Solving Mysteries of Meaning Making in Dialogue and Tensions

Critical research is criticised for lack of clarity around the methodological side of the interpretive process. The powerful use of a critical theory may create a gap between empirical description and theoretical analysis which may make it difficult for readers to recognise the role of the theory.²⁷⁰ The decision to work with the theory of the right to justification was made after the fieldtrip to Ngaoundéré, as in the process of transcription, I was getting deeper into the material and discovered that this theory offers concepts that helped me to understand and describe what was happening in the material. In development of my description of ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice based on the study of Use Your Talents, the theory of justice as the right to justification served at least two functions. First, the theory helped me liberate myself from my preunderstandings of Use Your Talents shaped by what is taken for granted in ecumenical diakonia and in development. The theory deconstructed my own authority and preunderstandings in ways that enabled me to approach the material with an open mind and to write a description where my own normativities and my preunderstandings of Use Your Talents were deconstructed. Second, the theory provided me with concepts that enabled me to recognise and describe the processes of practical reasoning that take place in the material as struggles for justice, where the actors justify themselves as justifying beings through negotiation of the normative order of Use Your Talents. The theory helped me to recognise different sources of noumenal capital, such as faith and the Bible, structures and relations, and financial resources.

The process of analysing qualitative material is flexible and guided by the material, the phenomenon of investigation and the research questions, while the researcher at the same time should be open to the possibility that the research questions, the phenomenon and the material may change.²⁷¹ Different qualitative researchers have developed different concepts attempting to describe the complex process of analysing qualitative material in a transparent way. Alvesson and Kärreman suggest that qualitative research may be described as a process of solving mysteries.²⁷² Their description of the process as mystery solving is an attempt to conceptualise the complex processes of meaning-making that take place in the encounter between the theories, the material and the researcher's own life and experiences.²⁷³ In my material from Use Your Talents, the actors' use of the term "doing Use Your

²⁷⁰ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 217–20.

²⁷¹ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, 167.

²⁷² Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman, *Qualitative Research and Theory Development, Mystery as Method* (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2011).

²⁷³ Alvesson and Sköldbberg describe how the researcher's life experiences are valuable in the process of analysis. Alvesson and Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 205–6.

Talents” was a mystery that puzzled me already in Ngaoundéré. Solving the mystery of the meaning of “doing Use Your Talents” became a key to making meaning of the actors’ meaning-making.

Having completed the transcription, I read through all the material using the computer programme NVivo. The first reading served mainly as a way to get deeply into the material where thinking about possible codes helped my focus and attention.²⁷⁴ Having read all the material attentively, with Rainer Forst’s thinking at the back of my mind, I had an idea of how I could present my meaning-making of the meaning-making of the actors in a way that attempts to account for the diversity, complexity and situatedness of what is happening. I then read all the material again. This time, I sorted the different parts of the material under codes that represented possible chapters and subchapters of the thesis. The dialogical context of the excerpts is important for the analysis, and the material was coded in long passages. Nvivo allowed me to place the same parts of a text under several chapters and subchapters at the same time. The titles and subtitles of the chapters, the codes, have changed as the analysis has developed.

As I worked with the material, I discovered that the practical reasoning in the material may be described as oral storytelling. Mikhail M. Bakhtin describes how an author constructs a story by creating a dialogue between stories told by other authors who have their own agendas and social positions.²⁷⁵ My analysis may perhaps be described as a story constructed by the stories of the different actors in Use Your Talents. In my storytelling, I create a dialogue between the different stories while I attempt to account for the different storytellers’ different agendas and social positions. The fact that many of the stories were already part of a historically and geographically situated real process of dialogical practical reasoning offers an opportunity to study the situatedness of practical reasoning. The tensions in and between the different stories were valuable and important in the process of analysis. Tensions makes it possible to avoid being caught by dominating ideas and institutions in the field and invite open interpretations.^{276 277} A single story could be a story about Use Your Talents as a struggle against power structures and a struggle located in the very same power structures. The actors use the Bible as a source of domination and of liberation, they deconstruct and reproduce structures, they embrace and resist market forces, all in the same story. The analysis continued as I began writing the different chapters. In the process of working on how to present the dialogue between the actors, I discovered aspects, perspectives and connections that I had not previously noticed. In this process, the theory of the right to justification helped me develop a distance to the preconceptions I had

²⁷⁴ Hammersley and Atkinson stress the need for the researcher to know the material well. See Hammersley and Atkinson, 172.

²⁷⁵ Bakhtin, ‘From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse’.

²⁷⁶ Alvesson and Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 210.

²⁷⁷ Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*.

developed during many years in the field. By deconstructing the validity of the social orders and norms in the field, the lens of the right to justification enabled me to discover aspects and nuances I had not seen before, discovering tensions between what is and what could be, between the established order and the transcendental, as described by Alvesson and Sköldberg.²⁷⁸

4.5. The Validity of a Contribution to a Dialogue

Validity measures the trustworthiness of a study's findings. Discussions of validity relate to epistemological questions of what knowledge is and what we can know. In this study, I apply a constructivist understanding of the social world that acknowledges that concepts and their meanings are constructed in social processes. In this understanding knowledge is not a static entity of truth that exists somewhere but rather something that is invented and reinvented in continuous social processes between relational human beings who hold their own social positions.²⁷⁹ In such processes of knowledge production, the aim is not to arrive at the final truth but to contribute to a dialogue that continues after the study is ended.

By approaching a case from different kinds of data, case studies may contribute insights into, and understandings of, the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions of life.²⁸⁰ Such complexities are difficult to summarise in theories or generalised propositions, and the aim of a case study is not necessarily generalisation or theory building. According to Flyvbjerg, a thick description that reveals complexity, contradictions and ambiguity might be a sign of quality in a qualitative study.²⁸¹ Flyvbjerg explains that he seeks to unfold the story in a case study from the "many-sided, complex, and sometimes conflicting stories that the actors in the case have told"²⁸² him. The purpose of this approach is to keep the case open, present the different actors' different interpretations of the case, invite the readers to participate in the meaning-making and interrogate the actors' and the researcher's interpretations.²⁸³ In this study, I show how the dialogue among the actors in Use Your Talents about the meaning of doing Use Your Talents is a struggle for justice and a dialogue about ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice. The relation between theory and practice is dynamic. Theory informs social practice, studies of social practice may produce theory, and theory production is a social practice. As described in chapter 2.1., in ecumenical diakonia, the dynamics between theory and practice is further complicated by the roles of theology and theologians. My description of the dialogue among the actors in Use Your Talents is developed based on my interpretations.

²⁷⁸ Alvesson and Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 209.

²⁷⁹ Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 'Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination'.

²⁸⁰ Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research', 237.

²⁸¹ Flyvbjerg, 237.

²⁸² Flyvbjerg, 238.

²⁸³ Flyvbjerg, 238.

Transparency, triangulation and reflexivity are measures of validity that may help discern the credibility and trustworthiness of my interpretations.²⁸⁴

4.5.1. Transparency Invites Critique

To enable the academic community to interrogate the validity of her study, the researcher must describe the different steps of the research process in the study report. By explaining the reasoning behind the different choices she has made, the researcher is forced to reflect critically on what her choices might mean for the findings.²⁸⁵ With my descriptions of the study design, process of data production, and analysis, I have attempted to offer a detailed and truthful description that shows coherence among the phenomenon, approach, questions, use of theory and methods I have chosen to apply in this study. To further facilitate transparency, in my presentation of the findings, I present excerpts that allow others to assess the validity of my interpretations, and I often also present the questions asked and describe the situation surrounding the specific excerpt.

4.5.2. Triangulation Navigates Diversity

Triangulation is a procedure that enables the researcher to assess the validity of her interpretations. Explaining triangulation, Robert E. Stake describes how navigators at sea depend on several points of data to determine their position and whether they are sailing in the right direction.²⁸⁶ The findings in this study have developed through a continuous process of triangulation. Already in Ngaoundéré, the interviews with the actors allowed me to test my preliminary interpretations of my observations from my participation in the conference with a diversity of actors. On my return to Norway and in the process of transcription, I continued to wrestle with the diversity of meanings and perspectives in the material from Ngaoundéré. The later interviews in Norway and Ethiopia allowed me to further develop and test my preliminary interpretations, and the dialogue between the different voices in the material has continued as the analysis has developed. My interpretations of Use Your Talents do not necessarily reflect only the understandings that are represented in other texts and documents and may challenge dominating understandings of Use Your Talents.

As my understanding of what is at stake for the actors in the different meanings of Use Your Talents has developed, the study has turned into a continuous struggle with my own authority and voice. The rules of academia demand a certain level of clarity and assertiveness, while the actors' struggles call for dialectic use of concepts. In my presentation of the findings, I attempt to account for the multiple

²⁸⁴ For an overview of measures qualitative researchers may take to assess the validity of their interpretations see Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 200–202.

²⁸⁵ Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 1995), 108.

²⁸⁶ Stake, 108–10.

meanings of Use Your Talents. The UYT-IP Annual Conference 2019 is a concrete event that took place at a given place and time. There are witnesses to this event who may testify to the truthfulness of my account of the event and who may also critique my interpretations of what happened.

4.5.3. Reflexivity and the Ethnography of life.

Reflexivity is the process of accounting for the interpretive nature of qualitative research²⁸⁷ and is often described as an attempt to account for the effects of the researcher on the research process.²⁸⁸ In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument and her understandings and vocabulary influence the process from the beginning to the end.

This study report begins with a presentation of myself and my own situatedness in the field of study. I entered the research process as a practitioner who had been part of the field that I study for years and who was struggling to manoeuvre my own privilege. My familiarity with the context may have facilitated my communication with the actors and the process of interpretation. Alvesson and Sköldberg highlight the value of a researcher's "ethnography of life" for critical studies. They argue that although the researcher's observation of a context through life is unsystematic and cannot be classified as empirical data as such, her insights can nevertheless complement the data. Such insights must however be subject to particularly rigorous reflection.²⁸⁹ Throughout the methods chapter, as well as in other parts of the thesis, I reflect critically around my role in the fieldwork, my relations to the actors, my power as the researcher and how my situatedness in the field is integrated in the process of analysis and in the presentation of the findings of the study. This thesis is written in a reflexive voice and the process could in the words of Kapoor perhaps be classified as hyper-reflexive.²⁹⁰ The study process has been characterised by critical reflection around my own role, my choices and my struggles with my own power and authority in relation to the actors' power and authority. The thesis is about the actors' reflections and experiences, and only a small part of my own reflections, experiences and perspectives are presented in the thesis.

4.6. Navigation of Research Ethics

The purpose of research is to produce knowledge that is reliable and trustworthy.²⁹¹ Since poor methodology may result in false knowledge, methodological choices are ethical considerations.²⁹² In

²⁸⁷ Alvesson and Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 328–32.

²⁸⁸ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, 15–17.

²⁸⁹ Alvesson and Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology, New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 205–6.

²⁹⁰ Kapoor, 'Hyper-Self-Reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World "Other"?'

²⁹¹ 'The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, Revised Edition' (ALLEA - All European Academies, Berlin, 2017), 3–4.

²⁹² 'Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities' (The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, 2021, English 2022), 5–6.

line with this understanding, I understand any aspect of a study to be an ethical issue. Throughout the research process, I have attempted to practice ethical judgement to the best of my ability by considering the implications of my decisions and seeking advice from the literature, the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) and my supervisors and other senior scholars.²⁹³ I will now describe and discuss my considerations in relation to some of the dilemmas I have encountered: access and consent, confidentiality, the power of the researcher and the purpose of the study.

4.6.1. Access and Consent Navigating Power Relations

Getting access to the empirical field or to potential participants is a common difficulty in empirical research.²⁹⁴ Having previously participated in an event organised by the UYT-IP and having worked many years in one of the churches that participates in Use Your Talents, I already knew many of the actors and my access to the actors did not necessarily depend on a gatekeeper.²⁹⁵ However, to participate in the UYT-IP Annual Conference, I needed the permission of the project leader. I contacted the project leader through email with a brief presentation of the study and its purpose, as I understood it at the time.²⁹⁶ The project leader welcomed the study and included me in his correspondence with the participants prior to the conference. The leadership of NMS in Cameroon organised my pick-up from the airport in Yaoundé and welcomed me to Cameroon. From my arrival in the hotel in Yaoundé until my departure six days later, I was counted among the participants in the conference.

During the official opening of the conference, the project leader introduced me as a researcher who would be taking notes from what was happening and who would be asking some of the participants to give interviews. My presence as a researcher may be seen to serve UYT-IP's aim of producing knowledge about the Use Your Talents approach, and with the approval of my participation in the conference, the project leader had approved all participants' participation in the study on their behalf.²⁹⁷ However, participation in an interview was the decision of the individual interviewee. The information the interviewees received before they signed the consent form clearly states that their

²⁹³ Brinkmann and Kvale suggest that when new researchers encounter ethical dilemmas in the field, they can seek advice from their academic supervisors or the research community. See Brinkmann and Kvale, *Interviews, Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 102.

²⁹⁴ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, 44.

²⁹⁵ A gatekeeper is a person who has power to permit a researcher access to a group of people for the purpose of research. See Tina Miller and Linda Bell, 'Consenting to What? Issues of Access, Gate-Keeping and "Informed" Consent', in *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, ed. Melanie Mauthner et al. (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 55.

²⁹⁶ Hammersley and Atkinson discuss the issue of informed consent in relation to how the purpose or focus of qualitative studies may develop or change in the research process. See Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography, Principles in Practice*, 218.

²⁹⁷ Miller and Bell describe and discuss how gatekeepers' relationships with participants may potentially compromise the freedom of participants to decline participation in a research project. See Miller and Bell, 'Consenting to What? Issues of Access, Gate-Keeping and "Informed" Consent'.

participation was voluntary with the following words: “The interview is voluntary. It is your decision if you want to participate or not.”²⁹⁸ The fact that some of the participants that I approached declined to be interviewed reassures me that the participants probably understood that they were not obligated to be interviewed.

4.6.2. Confidentiality and Credentials

The confidentiality of the participants in a study is an issue in which researchers invest much concern and energy. The breach of confidentiality is a legal matter and may compromise the integrity of the overall community of researchers and the future of knowledge production. Researchers depend on the trust of society. However, there are exemptions to the rules of confidentiality, and as in other ethical issues, the researcher must navigate the issue of confidentiality in the individual case and situation. Navigating confidentiality was difficult in this study. Those who participated in the conference and those who are active members of the Use Your Talents network may have heard each other’s stories and reflections and may recognise each other. In preparation for the study and in the dialogue with the NSD, I decided to anonymise the actors. However, I did make it clear to the actors and to the NSD that since the case and the event would be described in detail, the actors could be indirectly identifiable. Working on the analysis and writing the presentation of the findings, I have at times been thinking that maybe it would have been better not to anonymise the actors. The actors are proud of their achievements, and one could argue that the actors are co-researchers who should have been personally credited for their contributions.

4.6.3. The Power of the Researcher and Its Limits

As a producer of knowledge, a researcher is powerful. The power of the researcher is also limited. The researcher can develop strategies to share her power with the interviewee, but she has limited power to change the real social differences between the researcher and the researched.²⁹⁹ Socioeconomic differences may impact the interaction between the researcher and the interviewee and constitute power asymmetries, while the impact of power relations on interview data may be a source of insight into the social world in which the study is situated.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ Quote from the Informed Consent.

²⁹⁹ Gillies and Alldred suggest that focus on methodology and on the interaction between the researcher and the researched can distract the researcher from considering how the social and political context affect the research. See Val Gillies and Pam Alldred, ‘The Ethics of Intention: Research as a Political Tool’, in *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, ed. Melanie Mauthner et al. (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 47–49.

³⁰⁰ Charles L. Briggs suggests that the impact of power relations on interview data “should not be viewed as a source of contamination but rather as a crucial source of insight into both interviewing processes and the social worlds they seek to document.” See Charles L. Briggs, ‘Interviewing, Power/Knowledge and Social Inequality’, in *Inside Interviewing, New Lenses, New Concerns*, ed. James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 496.

My interview with Mary confronted me with my limited power to change power relations and became a demonstration of how social factors may affect a researcher, an interviewee and an interview in general, and the knowledge production that takes place in the frame of the in Use Your Talents in particular.³⁰¹ Mary and I had met on the bus from the hotel in Yaoundé to the airport the same morning, and after the end of the official programme of the day, I asked her if I could interview her. When we sat down in the living room of the house where I stayed, I talked her through the consent form and asked her to sign. I told her that I was switching on the audio recorder. Mary started talking before I got the chance to ask any questions. She told me the story of how her father had died when she was a little girl and explained that it was only with the support of her uncle that she had been able to get higher education. She further explained that she has many expenses connected to the education of her children and her niece, and now her uncle, who had paid for her own education, was ill. Her uncle was in hospital and the family had been advised to take him to a bigger hospital in the capital, but they were struggling to find money for this.³⁰² It became evident that from Mary's perspective, our encounter was a possible solution to the difficult situation she was in with the need for money to treat her uncle. The interview with Mary revealed that participation in the processes of knowledge production that take place in Use Your Talents could be seen as an opportunity to build relations that may enable actors to access financial resources.

The relationship between the researcher and the interviewee is asymmetrical. My interview with Mary demonstrates how the role of the researcher and the asymmetry in the relationship are constructed. Alldred and Gillies argue that consent to a research interview is a social contract that establishes certain normative expectations that serve to construct the researched as a modernist subject. They suggest that "(t)he taken-for-granted modes of co-operative communication that function to construct the research subject in a particular way can often only be glimpsed when they are disrupted."³⁰³ Mary did not comply with the social expectations attached to the role of being an interviewee in a research interview. She pursued her own agenda. Mary's agenda highlights the complexity of manoeuvring ethical issues when doing research that involves human beings in precarious situations. In the end, despite Mary's attempt to take power in the situation and my attempt to share power, as a researcher from Norway, I had power. Even though Mary used the interview to fulfil her own agenda of telling me about her financial challenges and appealing for my support, by not responding to her request for money, I rejected her attempt to influence me to share some of my financial resources with her. I am

³⁰¹ Use Your Talents has been described as a project of knowledge development. Sigurd Haus, 'Use Your Talents - the Congregation as Primary Development Agent - A Knowledge Development Project Based on Voluntary Work and a Focus on Local Human Resources and Networking.', April 2013.

³⁰² Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 15.10.2019.

³⁰³ Pam Alldred and Val Gillies, 'Eliciting Research Accounts: Re/Producing Modern Subjects?' in *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, ed. Melanie Mauthner et al. (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 154.

in control of the interview data; I have analysed the data and I have decided how to use and present the material from the interview to build an argument. While the material co-constructed by the actors constitute the boundaries and limitations of the study, I am in charge of the recontextualisation³⁰⁴ of the discourse. While my agenda was fulfilled and I returned with the produced material, Mary left without the share she was hoping for. In hindsight, in light of the findings of this study, I wish I had given her some money, although paying research participants is a contested ethical issue.

4.6.4. The Purpose of and Threshold for Critique

I have already highlighted that justice relies on knowledge. However, not all knowledge serves justice,³⁰⁵ and the researcher must always ask herself what purpose the knowledge she produces serves. In the tradition of the Frankfurter School to which Rainer Forst belongs, the goal of critical theory is to contribute knowledge, but also “emancipation from slavery”.³⁰⁶ The question of purpose has followed me throughout the process of this study. As the study has developed, I have been confronted with the fact that the study of justice and power is a double-edged sword. How might a critical description of Use Your Talents affect the actors and their relations? Will a critical description be used as an argument for discontinuation or will my description serve as promotion?³⁰⁷ Alldred and Gillies point to how the attention of a researcher can serve to reinforce and thereby strengthen an agenda, even when the intention is to open it up for questioning.³⁰⁸

I found myself caught in the tensions between critique and promotion as I started communicating the results of my study. I presented a small glimpse of my study at the online 8th Conference for Research in Diaconia and Christian Social Practice in September 2020. The participants were from all continents and included practitioners, policymakers and researchers. As UYT-IP is the empirical focus of the study, it was necessary to say something about the Use Your Talents approach. The questions raised by the participants after my presentation showed that the presentation had sparked an interest in the approach. People who had not heard about Use Your Talents wanted to learn more about this way of working. For me, who was in the middle of the analysis and felt unsure about what was happening in Use Your Talents, this was an issue. I was not ready to promote Use Your Talents. When one of the participants asked me to say more about how the approach could help the poor discover their own

³⁰⁴ The term recontextualization describes the process of deciding when, where, how and by whom interview data will be used. See Briggs, ‘Interviewing, Power/Knowledge and Social Inequality’, 500.

³⁰⁵ Sturla Stålsett, Arnhild Taksdal, and Per Kristian Hilden, ‘Research as Diaconia: Commitment, Action and Participation’, *Diakonia – Journal for the Study of Christian Social Practice* 9, no. 2 (2018): 165–80.

³⁰⁶ Max Horkheimer in Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta, ‘Introduction’, in *Justification and Emancipation, The Critical Theory of Rainer Forst*, ed. Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, n.d.), 2, see also page 12.

³⁰⁷ Gillies and Alldred highlight the importance of considering possible political and relational impacts of research. See Gillies and Alldred, ‘The Ethics of Intention: Research as a Political Tool’, 49.

³⁰⁸ Alldred and Gillies, ‘Eliciting Research Accounts: Re/Producing Modern Subjects?’, 154.

resources, I responded that since I was only a researcher and not a practitioner, I could not answer this question. However, I felt that this response made me sound distant from the real questions that occupy practitioners and put my research in danger of appearing irrelevant.

What is the purpose of critique? How can critique be constructive? Over the last decade, feminists longing for spaces of possibility and agency have questioned the value of critique that fails to offer constructive suggestions for a better way forward.³⁰⁹ Words participate in the construction of the world and create a threshold for critique.³¹⁰ In the field of diakonia, the longing for unity may silence critique. The demand for visionary suggestions and images of a better future may close the space for asking the difficult and troubling questions.³¹¹ The process of this study has put me in contact with the current threshold for critique in the field of diakonia. With a different threshold, the results may have been presented differently.

4.7. Summary

In this chapter, I have presented and discussed the different methods I use in the construction of this study, as a contribution to the dialogue about ecumenical diakonia. The study is an analysis of African and Malagasy actors' struggles for justice based on their descriptions produced in a context of power relations. The material has been analysed in a continuous process of triangulation between the different voices' descriptions and actions while attempting to protect what is at stake for the different actors. In commitment to the cause of justice, the study is presented in a transparent and reflexive report that invites critique.

In the following chapters, I present the findings of the study. The findings are presented as a thick description. The aim of the study is to reveal complexities, tensions and contradictions that may be hidden behind concepts, theories, norms and social orders produced in a context of power relations, and the description is the main contribution of the study.

³⁰⁹ Brigitte Bargetz and Sandrine Sanos, 'Feminist Matters, Critique and the Future of the Political', *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 4 (2020): 502–3.

³¹⁰ Butler, 'What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue'.

³¹¹ Bargetz and Sanos, 'Feminist Matters, Critique and the Future of the Political'.

5. A Struggle for Justification

Having introduced the aim and design of the study, reviewed a diversity of relevant literature, presented the theoretical framework, and described and discussed methods, I will now present the findings of the study. The findings are presented as a thick description. The description is based on my analysis of the actors' descriptions and my participant observation of the Use Your Talents annual conference 2019.

In this chapter, I describe how the actors through their storytelling and by connecting their stories to justification narratives of colonialism, Western missionaries and development donors, struggle to justify themselves as justifying beings. In the first part of the chapter, I present actors' personal stories about Use Your Talents. The actions and the purpose of the actions the actors describe in their stories are very different. The stories are nevertheless stories about how the actors are doing Use Your Talents. In the second part of the chapter, I show how actors contrast the meaning of doing Use Your Talents to colonialism, Western missionaries and development donors. By connecting their stories about Use Your Talents to the bigger justification narratives, the actors mobilise discursive power. In order to protect their own and others' interests and identities, the actors navigate tensions between different narratives of missionaries and of development. In the third part of the chapter, I describe how the actors by telling their stories about how they are doing Use Your Talents constitute themselves as justifying beings who have the right to justification.

5.1. Actors' Stories Construct the Normative Order of Use Your Talents

The programme of the Use Your Talents annual conference 2019 consisted of different actors sharing their stories about how they are doing Use Your Talents. One of my first discoveries as I entered fieldwork was that even though the participants represented churches, and the book about Use Your Talents describes Use Your Talents as an approach that seeks to utilise congregations as primary development agents³¹², the actors' stories about Use Your Talents were not necessarily stories about their churches or congregations. The actors' stories about Use Your Talents were stories about the actors' own lives.

In the words of Jakob, Use Your Talents is an approach from FLM to develop the community and the church, financed by NMS. I understand this to be Jakob's wording of the official story of Use Your Talents. However, when I asked Jakob to tell me about the beginning of Use Your Talents, he explained that Use Your Talents started when his parents died. He was 12 years old, and since his older brother had learning difficulties, Jakob became the head of the family. He asked the church for help, and the

³¹² Haus, *Use Your Talents - the Congregation as Primary Development Agent*.

congregation organised the provision of food and school material for him and his siblings from the local community. Later, when he wanted to continue his studies, he asked the parents' association of the school for support, and they helped him. Jakob said that this was the beginning of Use Your Talents. Jakob explained that when NMS cut the support to FLM for development work, together with the Norwegian project leader, Jakob developed the first Use Your Talents project document (this project was implemented in Madagascar) based on this experience from his childhood of what the congregation could do in a small village in the rural areas of Madagascar.³¹³

Several of the participants described Use Your Talents as a response to thoughts they were struggling with before they came into contact with the project. John explained that even though Use Your Talents was introduced to him by the project leader, it was a response to what he believed his community needs:

*I have been in contact with that concept (Use Your Talents) since 2015 when (the Norwegian project leader) came to (country) for an introduction workshop in December. I have to say that I have been very much dedicated to Use Your Talents since that time because it really fits the desire I had in my heart. Perhaps I should make it very clear, for me, Use Your Talents, at the beginning, before I started getting deeply in it, Use Your Talents was a kind of concrete answer to what we needed or we still need in the society, in my setting.*³¹⁴

Similarly, Isak explained that even if Use Your Talents was introduced to him by the Norwegian project leader, it is a response to questions he himself has been struggling with. He described the frustrations he faced working within the bureaucratic structures of development aid. After working for many years with the design and bureaucracy of development projects funded from abroad, he asked himself about the local church's diaconal responsibilities. He got involved with Use Your Talents after the Norwegian project leader visited his area and recognised what they were already doing:

I need to design the projects, formulate the project documents, and communicate with potential partners, and if opportunity comes, secure funds for the projects, and come back to the government offices sometimes at regional level, sometimes at zonal level and sometimes even at district level to agree on the implementation modalities. And there are many ups and downs I learnt from this process. And I was thinking especially in the church context, well the church has been raising funds for many years back and implementing projects based upon external support. And I was questioning, when shall the church start taking out some money from its pocket and then support the needy people or community? Of course, the church has been playing as a bridge, bringing funds and then crossing to the needy people, but my question was, when shall the church start generating income from its own pocket, from its own members, from its own local resource and then start supporting the needy people? The people who are in desperate situation. So, this question was in my mind, in my heart, for the last many years. And once upon a time (the project leader) from NMS was visiting the diocese and we took him to some of the congregations in the

³¹³ Interview with Jakob.

³¹⁴ Interview with John.

*highland. How they have been working both evangelism as well as diakonia aspect of the ministry. And he was so much impressed by how one of the congregations has been doing things by their own voice. And then turning back to the diocese he was so impressed and telling us 'This is what we have been doing with the Malagasy church for the last 3–4 years. And we named it Use Your Talents. And the congregations trying to mobilise their members to generate some amount of resource. And even if it is not the much material resource, they can support in many ways the peoples who are living in very difficult situations. And this is what we have been doing for the last 3-4 years. And even here this congregation, especially one congregation, this congregation has been doing very good things in its own way, but which is very similar to what we have been promoting.' And that is the point when I started discussing and engaging in Use Your Talents.*³¹⁵

In Jakob, John and Isak's stories about Use Your Talents, their contact with the project leader is described as a turning point where their own ideas and experiences were turned into action. However, many of the initiatives that are today presented as good examples of the Use Your Talents approach, including the examples of Jakob and Isak, were initiated long before the Use Your Talents - projects started or before the participants came into contact with the projects or heard about the Use Your Talents approach. Martha is a businesswoman who runs a hotel. When telling her story in the Use Your Talents annual conference, Martha connected the story of her hotel to the story of Use Your Talents. She explained that for her, Use Your Talents was a reaction against the poverty and begging in the neighbourhood surrounding her hotel. After a process where she had been struggling with the question: "Is poverty normal?" she felt that God responded to her question through Isaiah 6. The story of how God called Isaiah reminded her of her own responsibility to respond to God's calling. Today, she supports around 150 children to go to school. She explained that many of them have been baptised and that the problem of crime surrounding her hotel is much reduced.³¹⁶

Others described Use Your Talents as a practical personal initiative in response to a personal difficult financial situation. Josephine's story started with financial difficulties. In the Use Your Talents annual conference Josephine connected the story of how she addressed her financial difficulties to the story of Use Your Talents. She explained that for her, Use Your Talents started when she was assigned to be a pastor in a rural district. As her salary was not enough, she started rearing chickens for additional income. She introduced a kind of chicken that was not common in the area and that produced bigger eggs. Her financial situation slowly improved, and she was able to start rearing goats and producing peanut butter for sale. Today, she rents out the grinding machine she bought for grinding peanuts to a group of women in the church so that they can also produce and sell peanut butter.³¹⁷

³¹⁵ Interview with Isak.

³¹⁶ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 19.10.2019.

³¹⁷ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

David's story also started with an economic problem. David is a church leader. In his story he described the diocese's initiative to strengthen the church's difficult financial situation when Western mission organisations reduced their financial support to the diocese as a case of doing Use Your Talents that started before Use Your Talents:

*Actually, we in (diocese) we started the Use Your Talents before the introduction of the project. When we started, we did not know about Use Your Talents but our main strive was when the block grant and the support which has been coming from abroad was challenged, maybe stopped. It was very difficult to survive, even in the diocese, especially in the diocese level. Because for many years the diocese has been dependent on external fund. So, there was no internal attempt to be independent. There was no idea, so when the block grant was stopped it became very difficult for the diocese.*³¹⁸

Joseph told me that at first, he struggled to grasp the Use Your Talents approach. He said that it is not easy to grasp but that by the end of the two-week visit to Madagascar he had adopted the idea as his own. On his return to his country, he started the production of bricks from mud on a plot of land he had not been utilising, to generate personal financial income. For him, the identification and utilisation of resources is central to Use Your Talents.³¹⁹

Daniel explained that Use Your Talents was the first workshop he took part in after he was employed as the leader for diakonia in his church. When I first met him at the airport in Yaoundé, he said that one of the reasons for Use Your Talents is that NMS does not have money.³²⁰ In his presentation during the annual conference, he expressed great enthusiasm while explaining how he is teaching the concept to other church workers, and he shared examples of how Use Your Talents helps build relations with Muslims.³²¹ Promotion of Use Your Talents is part of his job.

As I listened to the participants' stories about Use Your Talents, I discovered that the stories were diverse and that not all the stories fit with the project leader's story about Use Your Talents. Even though Use Your Talents as a project funded by NMS started in Madagascar, the participants described Use Your Talents as a response to their own thoughts and situations. Most of the participants' practical initiatives started without prior contact with the project. The situations that the actors described were very different. Jakob described Use Your Talents as congregational volunteer work. John described Use Your Talents as a response to "what his community needs". Isak described Use Your Talents as an alternative approach to development. Martha described Use Your Talents as a personal diaconal initiative that is helping the poor children in her neighbourhood by paying their school fees and

³¹⁸ Interview with David.

³¹⁹ Interview with Joseph.

³²⁰ Field notes from Yaoundé, 14.10.2019.

³²¹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 19.10.2019.

baptising them while at the same time benefitting her business. Josephine described Use Your Talents as a practical response to personal financial difficulties. David described Use Your Talents as a response to the difficult financial situation in the church. Joseph described Use Your Talents as good utilisation of resources. Daniel described Use Your Talents as a solution to NMS' financial problems but also as a diaconal approach that helps build relations with Muslims.

The diversity of the stories about Use Your Talents were confusing. The actors appeared to be individuals, not primarily congregations. The activities (the means) were different, and the results of the activities (the ends) were also different. Nevertheless, it appeared that the participants had a common understanding of the meaning of the normative order Use Your Talents. This was evident when the leader of a church that was new to the Use Your Talents network said, "We have our own way of doing Use Your Talents," referring to the term as something familiar. He had an immediate understanding of the meaning of the normative order of Use Your Talents and had transformed the term to the verb doing Use Your Talents. To me, the meaning of this normative order was a mystery. The diversity in the participants' descriptions of how they are doing Use Your Talents suggested that the term did not refer to the project, a certain group of actors, certain kinds of activities or a given result.

5.2. Justification Narratives Located in Power Relations

In my search for the meaning of doing Use Your Talents, I noticed that the participants connected their stories about Use Your Talents to stories about colonialism, Western missionaries and development donors. Understanding the connections between their stories about Use Your Talents and these bigger justification narratives became important in the process of solving the mystery of the meaning of the normative order of doing Use Your Talents.

5.2.1. The Narrative of Colonialism

Several of the participants in the study referred to colonial history. Deborah was one of the women who had been invited to share her experiences with the participants at the annual conference. During her presentation, she described how "our colonial heritage" has resulted in a lack of confidence and low self-esteem and thereby the loss of autonomy to make one's own decisions: "From French colonialism, (...) we lack courage. Courage helps us to say things. We lack courage. We spend time living lives that others decide for us."³²² She then told the story of an initiative she is involved in where her church is working for the empowerment of women: "'We cannot do what you tell us because our brains are like the brain of a cow,' a woman told us. We worked with them, and after 8 months, they

³²² Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

had done something. They saved money.”³²³ The rural woman’s comparison of the brains of the women in her village with that of a cow powerfully expresses the woman’s lack of confidence in her own ability to reason. She did not believe that they were able to do anything about the situation in their village. The woman explained their problems in their limited ability to reason. Deborah explained that by working together with the women and showing them what they could achieve, the women grew in confidence and discovered that they have capacity and potential. Deborah described the women’s low confidence in their ability to reason to be an impact of colonialism. She described the story of the women empowerment programme she was working in as a story about doing Use Your Talents and as a struggle against the impacts of colonialism.

After Deborah’s presentation, the audience expressed great appreciation and excitement. The woman was named “Deborah who is going to liberate Africa”³²⁴ (Deborah was not her real name) and many of the participants had questions for clarification.³²⁵ The history of colonialism is a powerful justification narrative. Connecting the story of Use Your Talents to the process of liberation from colonialism served as a powerful justification of the normative order of Use Your Talents. Understanding the liberation of a group of women as a continuation of liberation from colonialism offered an encouraging sign of the possibility of a just postcolonial future.

Following Deborah’s reference to colonialism in her presentation, several of the interviewees referred to colonial history in the interviews. Peter described a struggle for healing of injuries on human identity inflicted by colonialism: “Since we have become independent (...) it is like we have to, how can I say, to struggle, to be ourselves.”³²⁶ He explained that their injured identities hinder people from taking charge of their situation, as they have become accustomed to awaiting orders and instructions. “We are determined by our historical background so that it is like we are not able to help people face the challenges of today.”³²⁷ Joseph identified participation and contribution as important factors in the development of human identity and explained that Africans’ dignity has been harmed by the domination of Westerners: “When you were here, for instance, how did you handle us? How did you handle our fathers? Did you treat them like human beings? (...) Did you look at them as people who are also able to contribute?” He further explained how his generation has inherited the pain and grief caused by colonialism:

³²³ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

³²⁴ The name Deborah refers to one of the prophets in the Old Testament who had a central role in leading the Israelites’ struggle for freedom from oppression under the Canaanites.

³²⁵ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

³²⁶ Interview with Peter.

³²⁷ Interview with Peter.

*...the truth is, we cannot run away from the fact that for a long time, people have been grieving. You see grieving is a process and the pain, and the difficulties. For some of us are reading history. For instance, in (country), we were not there when people were struggling and fighting for independence, but we are reading it in books. But you see, reading it in books and hearing the story from the people who went through it, some of them who lost their land, they lost their children, they lost their wives, they were detained, some of them lost their health. When they speak, when you see them, it evokes the pain.*³²⁸

In the participants' descriptions, colonialism has affected their abilities to make decisions and act based on a process of reasoning. The actors describe a lack of autonomy as an injury to their identity and humanity. The injury is a source of communal pain and grief. By connecting their stories about doing Use Your Talents to stories about struggles to overcome noumenal impacts of colonialism the actors describe doing Use Your Talents as a process of noumenal liberation.

The actors' descriptions of doing Use Your Talents as a process of liberation from the impacts of colonialism suggest that for them, the meaning of doing Use Your Talents is to do with emancipation and a struggle for justice. Even though the colonial period was a relatively short period in history, the historical reality of colonialism was very much present in the discourse among the participants. The actors in Use Your Talents explained their situations of poverty and suppression in their own lack of confidence in their own ability to reason. They explained their limited abilities to reason and to act, and the often dysfunctional and corrupt governance of their countries, in colonialism. When I asked Jakob about the responsibility of Norwegian mission organisations for helping the poor people in his country, he responded that the suffering of his people is not the responsibility of the missionaries but the responsibility of France, given France's historical role in his country.³²⁹

5.2.2. The Dialectic Narrative of Western Missionaries

Several of the actors related the narrative of Western missionaries to the narrative of colonialism. During her presentation, Deborah expressed her pain over the current situation in which, from a certain perspective, people do not make their own decisions. She described how "the white man sits in his country and thinks about solutions to the problems he has seen."³³⁰ Deborah explained that "what hurts" is that "NMS sees the problem from their own point of view and wants to get rid of the people who withdraw money from their pocket."³³¹ With these words, Deborah expressed ambiguity towards Use Your Talents. In Deborah's presentation she navigated different meanings of Use Your Talents and the tensions between the different meanings. Deborah's presentation was both promotion

³²⁸ Interview with Joseph.

³²⁹ Interview with Jakob.

³³⁰ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

³³¹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

of Use Your Talents as a process of liberation from the impacts of colonialism, and critique of Use Your Talents as a continuation of foreigners' search for explanations of the problems in Africa and Madagascar.

Deborah was talking to a group of Africans and Malagasy, building the argument that people in Africa and Madagascar have to take the responsibility for the problems in Africa and Madagascar. She described the situation a paradox. "We have resources, we have people. In our church, 75% of the people are young, but we are poor. Why?" She explained the situation in terms of "our colonial heritage".³³² Deborah was at the same time criticising NMS. Her reference to Use Your Talents as an initiative by NMS to justify a stop in the transfer of financial resources to Africa and Madagascar, highlighted that by providing a justification for discontinuation of Western funding of development projects Use Your Talents benefits NMS by enabling the organisation to maintain their identity as an organisation that struggles for justice despite decline of economic support to churches in Africa and Madagascar. Both the two meanings of Use Your Talents that Deborah navigates suggest that poverty may be explained in African and Malagasy actors lack of faith in their abilities to reason and to act and that actors by rediscovering their abilities to reason and to act can solve their problems and liberate themselves from the suppressing powers of poverty by using their talents or resources.

Peter connected the narrative of colonialism and the narrative of Western missionaries with the following words: "I said we are determined. I am determined by my colonial history. I am determined by my missionary (...). In spite of the willingness of the mission to build the church, sometimes they use what I can call today the colonial method."³³³ A discussion between Moses and Mary about their church offers a glimpse into how Western missionaries may affect the autonomy of mission churches in Africa and Madagascar today. Mary described the church as a Norwegian church, while Moses argued that the church is a national church: "Because the leadership is (national). There are no missionaries from abroad. We do what we want."³³⁴ Moses's way of expressing himself suggests that the presence of missionaries from abroad would have prevented them from doing what they want. Mary insisted that even though there are no missionaries today, the church is still Norwegian because it was founded by Norwegians. She said that when guests from Norway come to see how they are doing, the actors follow up by doing what the Norwegians ask: "'Do you start new churches?' And so we start new churches."³³⁵

³³² Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

³³³ Interview with Peter.

³³⁴ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

³³⁵ Interview with Mary.

The actors' narratives of Western missionaries were simultaneously narratives of domination and narratives of development, narratives of inequality and narratives of fellowship.

Peter explained that his feelings related to Western missionaries are difficult and full of ambiguity: "Because I am what I am because missionaries helped me a lot. I became also a Christian because I went to the missionary or church school. And I am coming from a poor family, but I received a lot of support. So, I received a lot."³³⁶ The participants' narratives recognised that Western missionaries have brought good things. Primarily the gospel, which they described as a source of empowerment, but they also pointed to how Western missionaries have contributed to building educational institutions, hospitals and other diaconal work. Several of the female participants appreciated the missionaries for encouraging girls' education. At the same time, some of the participants said that the help has become a crutch that hinders their walk and prevents them from taking responsibility: "Since the beginning of the mission, the missionaries have carried the church and don't allowed the people to walk by themselves. And everybody knows that 'No, the missionaries are there, we do not have any effort to do'."³³⁷

Ruth's narrative described how Western missionaries were living protected lives inside a compound with all facilities, under very different conditions from their national colleagues. The gap in living standards was something that could not be addressed:

*They have their homes, they have their cars, they have all what can help them to be well in the body, in their feeling, but it is not the same, not the environment for the others, for the church. But we are not going to say, 'Why are they like this?' You cannot tell the missionary, 'Don't go with your car because I do not have car.' Is it possible? He cannot buy a car for all of us.*³³⁸

Eve revealed that her neighbourhood's narrative of Western missionaries was humorous. The neighbours made jokes about how one of the missionaries who was always on the road appeared to be more in love with his car than with his wife, and they started referring to the car as the missionary's second wife. Eve further explained that it was only after she visited Europe and realised what the Western missionaries had chosen to leave to come and live in a foreign country that she became more appreciative of their choices:

*Missionaries who came to (country) left their family, even in the church their Bible studies, their culture, their life. Everything they gave up. And living there. Why? Really, I was really debating and digging in myself. This is really being a missionary. It is not preaching. It is not as we think, it is not like preaching the gospel. Living by itself is evangelisation of the gospel.*³³⁹

³³⁶ Interview with Peter.

³³⁷ Interview with Ruth.

³³⁸ Interview with Ruth.

³³⁹ Interview with Eve.

Eve further explained that after getting to know individual missionaries personally, she realised that Westerners have weaknesses, challenges and struggles, and the narrative of Western missionaries' superiority was modified.

Joseph said that Westerners have a tendency to look down on people from Africa because they have fewer material possessions: "...and he is trying to show you are lesser, or you do not have what I have, but in a negative way. It is true, yes, you can have something that I do not have, but do you want to say it in a negative way?" Several times during the interview, Joseph referred to a narrative of a divided world by referring to persons from Europe or Northern America as "someone from the other side". He further described how he feels that Westerners, and maybe even some Africans, think and behave as if Westerners know better and can do everything better than Africans:

There was a mentality (...) that there is only people from the West who can do it right. (...) They are the ones who have the knowledge. They are the ones who have the skills. They are the ones who can be missionaries. They are the ones who can be good trainers. They are the ones who can be good speakers.³⁴⁰

In Joseph's narrative, encounters with Westerners might make Africans feel inferior and thereby lose confidence in their own abilities and skills. His narrative of Western missionaries did at the same time appreciate missionaries' struggles to express mutuality and fellowship. In his family's narrative of Western missionaries, not all missionaries behaved as if they were superior to Africans:

...my grandfather was a pastor, who worked with the missionaries from (Western country). And they used to stay in his home. When my mother was a little girl. She used to tell us. They stay in their home. They eat what they are eating. They sleep where they are sleeping. So not all of them came for selfish reasons. Some came and they had a good heart.³⁴¹

In the actors' stories, narratives of liberation and narratives of domination were closely connected and parts of the same framework.

5.2.3. The Ambiguous Narrative of Development Donors

Like the project leader, the participants described Use Your Talents as "a new approach for development".³⁴² The actors related Use Your Talents to the narrative of development in a dialectic way, manoeuvring the different meanings of the concept of development and the tensions between the different meanings. They described Use Your Talents as both a break with and a continuation of development. In her narrative about Use Your Talents in her church, Tabita explained that every congregation in her church should have a "development project" and she told the story of a group of

³⁴⁰ Interview with Joseph.

³⁴¹ Interview with Joseph.

³⁴² Interview with Eve.

women who are running a fish shop.³⁴³ Silas said that “the traditional development approach will gradually change to Use Your Talents, but it takes time”.³⁴⁴

The participants expressed mixed feelings and views on the role of money in development. In John’s narrative about Use Your Talents he compared the impact of receiving money from development donors to that of colonialism. He described the receiver as powerless and suggested that receiving financial support threatens dignity:

*You see it (Use Your Talents) is much more about dignity. In (country), we have a saying: we say that the hand which gives is above the one which receives. You are powerless in front of the one who gives you. And then we have been taking that position of a receiver for a long time. I think that this has been one of the colonial heritages we had. And then it is something we want to get rid of.*³⁴⁵

In Luke’s narrative of development, he explained that when decisions are made by others, development may limit participation, freedom and ownership:

*...when we talk about development in churches before, many things were designed at the...not at the remote area but in the office, and then we go and plant them where they were, where we were asked to put. (...) in the development it was not free. It was not the needs of the beneficiaries. (...) we say, ‘Have we seen somewhere it would be nice or good to put a health structure or to put education?’ So, I think, that is what we were doing before. And I think that it was that many beneficiaries were not been involved and were not thinking that it is for their means.*³⁴⁶

Luke further described how development experts used to tell people what they should do and what they need:

*...usually what we were doing before is that we design a project, we ask for the means coming from abroad, and we go and implement the project. Usually without the beneficiaries, without those who are benefitting from the project, so there we came and then we said: this is good for you, this, this this, this...*³⁴⁷

As Luke described it, the decision-making power in donor-funded development has been shared between the development experts in the national organisation who design the project and the donor organisation, but in the end, the donors have the final say:

As the designer you are the man who can say this is the needs in the area (...) the funding partners can tell you, ‘This is not going into our goals. We cannot finance this, we can finance for this. And also, even if we can finance, we cannot give this amount of money.’ So you have to design a project

³⁴³ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

³⁴⁴ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 15.10.2019.

³⁴⁵ Interview with John.

³⁴⁶ Interview with Luke.

³⁴⁷ Interview with Luke.

*to meet the objective of the funding partners and also to meet the amount which can be available for you.*³⁴⁸

According to the participants' narratives, a lack of sustainability is a major problem in donor-funded development:

*We have a long history of development because of the support from abroad. But the impact has been diluted. The church is not able to continue the project. We have talked about development meaning to be autonomous, but we have not looked around and worked on it.*³⁴⁹

John' narrative described autonomy as a pre-condition for sustainability:

*I was one of those who really believe that we cannot achieve a sustainable development based on external aid or based on some people else ideas and so on. We need to think on our own, think about what we can do. We need to take things from our perspectives.*³⁵⁰

In Isak' narrative he explained that the bureaucracy and structure connected to development projects funded from abroad "is consuming time, consuming resource, consuming energy". He argued that even though the relationship between the donor organisation and the implementing organisation in a development project is termed as partnership, which in his understanding implies mutuality and interdependence, the donors force them to change the projects to fit their own policies and priorities, thereby reflecting how the narrative of partnership may also serve paternalism:

*I personally learnt that theoretically, we say partnership, if it is partnership, if we are discussing on partnership then in principle it leads us to mutual interdependence. I have something to give you and then you have something to give me, I need something that I learn from you, and you need something to learn from me. But in the partnership we have been discussing and talking and promoting in development aid-supported projects, this is practically missing. So those, the source of the money, the original source of the money, always they do have their own policies, their own rules, their own interests. So, they tend to guide you, they tend to tell you to do something. And I faced many challenges in that. For instance, I designed a kind of project that we assumed is very much helpful for the people. It might be for instance securing water, maybe irrigation, maybe medical, health-related projects. Then some donors tell us if you want to get money from us, you need to design projects like democracy, good governance, rights and so on and so forth. So since we need something, then we are going to be forced to change our projects and then fulfil what they need. (...) we have nothing to give for the donor, for Norad, but they are supporting these development projects. So, they want us to fulfil things that they are very much interested in.*³⁵¹

Even though money from abroad causes problems and challenges, several participants expressed that financial support from abroad is necessary. Hannah explained that even if the idea comes from yourself, you need the means to implement it. She described money as a necessary means, even for

³⁴⁸ Interview with Luke.

³⁴⁹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

³⁵⁰ Interview with John.

³⁵¹ Interview with Isak.

the implementation of Use Your Talents, since international workshops, meetings and conferences rely on financial support from Norway.³⁵² Peter questioned the claim that Use Your Talents is something different from development. He argued that the movement in development “from helping people to capacitating people” is not unique to Use Your Talents but can also be observed elsewhere, including the United Nations.³⁵³

Other participants said that money from abroad is not necessary for development. Sarah did not want to use the term project in her narrative about Use Your Talents, but she agreed that Use Your Talents is connected to development:

*I do not want to use the word project. We have to tell the people that we can use our talents to create an impact for us, for ourselves, and the community and for the congregation. And the word that I like is Use Your Talents, you use what you have in your environment, what we have right now, to serve development.*³⁵⁴

In Ester’s narrative she called Use Your Talents “the right development”. She explained that people connect the word “project” to money and white four-wheel drive cars, “but when you say Use Your Talents, people think we should start with what we have. And they don’t just think about money, but they think about skills. And they want to share and to join for this development committee. Because it gets start locally.”³⁵⁵ Jonas explained that development is not mainly about money but rather to do with knowledge. He said that the most important contribution of Use Your Talents is the sharing of knowledge and experience:

*...the major problem is not the money, but the knowledge. The skill. That is the major problem. Even for spiritual as well as for development. Money is not that much major thing. If you have money, if you do not know how to use, then are you going to achieve the goal? No! So still, we need the training, the education, again working together just to share to learn from others.*³⁵⁶

In summary, the participants’ narratives expressed ambiguity towards funding from development donors. In their narratives development funds were described as both a suppressing force and a necessary means. In a coffee break, I asked Job what he thinks about Use Your Talents. His response reflected ambiguity. “Use Your Talents is good,” he said. “It is better when we can train our own people to use their own talents.” I sensed pain or sorrow in his voice when he continued by saying, “But we still need help from outside. Spiritual help, financial help, moral help.”³⁵⁷

³⁵² Interview with Hannah.

³⁵³ Interview with Peter.

³⁵⁴ Interview with Sarah.

³⁵⁵ Interview with Ester.

³⁵⁶ Interview with Jonas.

³⁵⁷ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 19.10.2019.

5.3. Actors Justify Themselves as Justifying Beings

During my work with the material and my struggle to solve the mystery of the meaning of doing Use Your Talents, approaching the material through the lens of justice as the right to justification, I discovered that the material consisted of actors' stories about themselves as autonomous human beings who have ability to reason and to act based on their own processes of reasoning. The actors' told each other narratives where they constituted themselves as autonomous human beings who are free to act based on their own processes of reasoning. They connected the poverty and suffering in their countries to loss of the ability to reason and to act. They explained loss of the ability to reason in colonialism, encounters with Western missionaries and reception of development funds. The actors' narrative of Use Your Talents may be described as a narrative of a process of noumenal emancipation where they argue that by rediscovering their own resources, capacities and talents, their ability to make their own decisions, they can regain their freedom and overcome the suppressing powers they describe.

In their narratives about how they are doing Use Your Talents, the actors described a process that begins with the identification of a problem, a challenge or resources. While some actors' narratives began with the discovery of own or others' resources or resources to which they have access, other narratives began with the description of a problem, a difficulty or a challenge. Adam's story of how a congregation is doing Use Your Talents demonstrates the connection between the identification of a problem and the identification of resources, in the narrative of Use Your Talents. Adam is a church leader. He explained that after attending a workshop on Use Your Talents, he identified "a project". In this case, the project began with a challenge. Adam said that when Christians are travelling, they struggle to get good accommodation since Muslims own all the guesthouses. He described the lack of guesthouses owned by Christians as the challenge. To address the problem of lack of guesthouses owned by Christians Adam decided that the congregation should build their own guesthouse, he said. They estimated the costs and made a plan. After consulting an engineer, they started to raise the material resources. Adam explained that the choir members were making bricks for sale and families in the congregation were giving bags of cement. He was proud to be able to tell the other participants at the annual conference that they succeeded. They have completed the guesthouse, which is now a source of good income for the church. Adam further explained that he is now initiating the building of a guesthouse in another town.³⁵⁸

Matthew shared another story of how problems can be addressed through the identification of resources. He told the story of a woman who came to a pastor complaining that she had no money to

³⁵⁸ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

pay the school fees for her children. The woman had heard about Use Your Talents, and she asked the pastor, “We do not have talents. What can we do?” Matthew said that even though the pastor knew that the woman was illiterate, the pastor responded by asking her: “What have you been doing?” The woman answered that she was trying to learn to knit, but she was unable to master knitting. Another woman who knew everything about handcrafts had been trying to teach her, Matthew explained. The pastor and the woman discussed the situation together, and the pastor blamed the teacher of handcrafts for not teaching the woman knitting properly. However, the problem was also that the woman lacked materials for knitting. As the pastor and the woman were thinking about how to get materials for knitting, they realised that they could collect old clothes from people. Matthew concluded the story by telling the participants in the Use Your Talents annual conference that today, the woman earns the income to pay for the school fees of her children by weaving carpets from old clothes. After Matthew had told this story, other participants expressed excitement and raised practical questions about how to make carpets from old clothes.³⁵⁹

Isak explained that people think they are unable to address their problems because they think they lack resources. When Use Your Talents helps people to discover their resources, this helps them to realise that they are already able to address their problems, he said. In this way, Use Your Talents fulfils its purpose of helping people to realise that they have resources and that they are good enough to address their own problems, Isak argued:

I think the purpose as to me is just changing the attitude. The attitude that existed for many years, the attitude that someone can solve my problem, my village's problem, my church's problem. So this is, changing of this attitude as to me is one of the purposes, and at the same time, eh, promoting people to use their resources, because from biblical point of view, we say God has given us all gifts. Maybe not for one person all gifts, but I am specialised in one gift, you are specialised in another gift, and if we combine our gifts then we can positively address the problem we do have. So this, the main purpose, is to work with the people to make them understand what they have in what they are good enough. Because that thing is already there.³⁶⁰

Isak described how the discovery of one's own resources evokes a mental process of realisation of one's own ability to address one's own problems. The narrative of Use Your Talents is a narrative about actors' ability to reason and to act. During the Use Your Talents Annual Conference one of the coordinators gave a lecture on learning where he reminded everyone to do their own thinking: “Everything comes back to thinking about what we ourselves can do. Learn from each other. The objective of learning is always to make decisions for yourself. Begin from what you can do. Think

³⁵⁹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 18.10.2019.

³⁶⁰ Interview with Isak.

individually about how you can start.”³⁶¹ John used the word consciousness to describe the process of reasoning:

*What we are doing now is to make it conscious. Not just do things because of resisting a situation or because of looking for answer to a situation. But now you must be conscious of it. That you have something in you that you can use. Even in a situation where you decide by yourself to start something new (...) as something coming willingly from your heart.*³⁶²

Isak explained that Christians often respond to their emotional reactions when they see somebody suffering. He argued that even though the feeling is important and that it is right, good and necessary to respond, the correct action cannot be identified only as a response to emotions. To identify the best action, thinking is necessary to consider the consequences and cause no harm, he said:

...there are community groups, individuals suffering from different economic and social and other problems. And I am a Christian. Maybe I am a church leader. A church leader maybe in (his country), maybe in Norway, maybe somewhere. And then, if I see people are suffering, immediately it is a Christian value to think first: how can I share his burden, her burden, his problem. This is one thing. And you need to take care of that feeling. If you feel something is wrong in that community or person, then you immediately run to start giving something which you think may be good to address the problem of that guy, that group, that community. Then the question is here, you need to think do no harm. If I give something to somebody, some group, does it give some negative effect, or not? This should be there, I think. And then after raising that question and responding to that question you raised, then you think, ‘In what way shall I share the burden of this group?’³⁶³

Luke pointed to how our ways of thinking are influenced by our environment. He said that in his experience, “foreigners” have different ways of thinking. He explained the differences in reasoning in two factors. The first factor he identified was the impact of poverty:

*I think the experience, working with the foreigners, first, we do not have the same way to think. We do not have the same way to think...and I think also that usually we do not have the same tools to manage and also we are not... it seems is not only the... how do we say... technically, it is not because we do not have the technics, but I think we are not in the same thinking of things, to say for instance this this this. Yes, I think that is the main problem. And also, because, we have been in, let’s say that we have been in poor environment. Which seem for us we were in a poor environment, not seeing how to transform with what we are.*³⁶⁴

Luke further explained that if you grow up in poverty and are able to improve your standard of living, it becomes important to show people around you that you have many things, as a witness of your ability to improve that shows that the poverty in which you grew up was not the truth about who you are. His second explanation for the differences in thinking relates to ideology. He said that while

³⁶¹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

³⁶² Interview with John.

³⁶³ Interview with Isak.

³⁶⁴ Interview with Luke.

Western thinking is guided by individualism, in Africa people make decisions considering what is best for their family or community.³⁶⁵

Use Your Talents is a normative order that instructs actors to act. Several of the participants said that their people have a tradition or culture of talking, discussing and theorising, but that the action is often lacking. They described Use Your Talents as an approach that challenges people to take action rather than waiting for others to tell them what to do or waiting for others to give them what they need or to take care of their problems. Deborah connected the lack of action to an authoritative upbringing. She explained that parents think that the children of white people are better than their children. She called for a change in mentality to encourage children to do what they want to do; not what others want them to do. She further said that “the community suffocates its members by having the hands in the pockets (not acting)” .³⁶⁶

Several participants explained that the emphasis on action in Use Your Talents has challenged them to take action in their own lives. This has become particularly important because of their leadership roles in their churches or communities. They have a passion to spread the idea of Use Your Talents, and to be trustworthy and show integrity, they cannot only talk about Use Your Talents. They must act. John has taken action by buying a plot of land that he is farming. He explained that the main benefit he has gained from this action is the experience and what he is learning. The land has not given him much financial surplus yet. His main motivation for this initiative was the need to walk the talk:

...it has triggered me also to start something concrete, because I said, ok, now, I am talking about Use Your Talents, reason to Use Your Talents people walking around, but I do not want to show like others' examples about it, I do not want to be theoretical about it. But I want to be practical. And I want also to tell people something that I have experienced myself, and that was a very good point also. It helped me now to start concrete things, like even in farming, business, some other things. Actually, up to now, my purpose was not to succeed on those activities, much more to learn from it. Because the results have not, are not yet, like what we could expect from those activities. I invested a lot in farming and so on, but yet not real results. But it is something that I know it is coming. The purpose is, yes, I bought some land so it is like to try all my best to do everything that is coming up in my mind in just the little portion. And then after I assess how far I went with it, or what I learnt as experience from it could be now implemented in a very larger scale. So, this is critical for me because I really need to learn things. I am doing to learn now. Not really to get benefit of it. No, I know that I will get benefit. Much more of what I could even imagine, but as I am teaching, as I am talking to others, I need to see, to feel things, so that I can be real in what I would telling them. Because the issue is not, now I am coming back again to my person, the issue

³⁶⁵ Interview with Luke.

³⁶⁶ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

*is not making Use Your Talents popular or making people getting know Use Your Talents, but it is to make a kind of shift in the mind-set.*³⁶⁷

John further explained that the aim of the shifting mind-set is “to make things happen”. Similarly, David explained that as he was teaching the congregations to take diaconal responsibility, he realised that he himself needs to engage in diaconal action. After discussing with his colleague, they initiated a fund where students from poor families can get financial support for education.³⁶⁸

Jonas referred to the high unemployment rates and suggested that Use Your Talents may contribute to addressing this problem. He would like to employ somebody to support the process:

*Many people have different skills, but they have not come across how to work, how to start, so there are, as I already said, there are different professionals there, we let them to share their experience to show what they have been doing, so some of the active youth can join something. Whether shopping, a small project, cottoning, poultering, so by that case, now still I am thinking why don't we make employed few of them. You know, we can do. Still, what is in my heart is if somebody is there and communicate with us and mobilise this resource then we can make change. We can create employment, generate income, and in this also will let progress of the church. That is what I am thinking.*³⁶⁹

Jonas told me that Use Your Talents has given him many ideas about things he would like to do. He told me the story of a visit to another African country to learn about how they are doing Use Your Talents there. During the trip he had told himself: “Let me commit to implement this. So, when I implement, my neighbours, those who are in the church, also easily can copy, you know, if I make a progress there.”³⁷⁰ However, the step from thinking to action has taken time. Jonas justified the lack of action in shortness of time. He said that with his job in the church structure, the commute to the office and his position as an elder in the congregation, he does not have any time left for other initiatives. Jonas further explained that he wanted to copy the saving scheme for women that he observed during the trip in his own congregation but that the oral presentation did not provide enough information. He said that it has been difficult to start the saving scheme since he does not have access to the documents they were using:

...you know the presentation is little but if I can get document I can go through, you know they have prepared passbook, some financial, not complicated. As easy as possible that they can manage, because women are not that much, many of them are not that skilled, or educated, but simplify to their level. If you simplify to their level, if they have the book, then if they have the passbook, then they can easily collect the money and put. You know their (the saving group he observed abroad) progress is very, really very encouraging. So why not we do that. But at the

³⁶⁷ Interview with John.

³⁶⁸ Interview with David.

³⁶⁹ Interview with Jonas.

³⁷⁰ Interview with Jonas.

*moment, you know I am at the position of co-ordinating this and that. So I have to do that. That is my plan.*³⁷¹

Jonas wants a recipe or instruction for how to implement the saving scheme that he can use to instruct women, whom he describes as having limited abilities. His intention to implement Use Your Talents through instruction and his description of women as a group of people with limited resources and abilities conflict with the idea of doing Use Your Talents as a process of freely discovering and using one's own resources based on one's own reasoning.

Hannah has taken action through the initiation of a number of activities in her congregation. Since she attended workshops on Use Your Talents, she has challenged the congregation to have a monthly church offering for "supporting the poor, children" and "those needy", and a church committee has been established to take responsibility for this. She has also initiated a women's group. Hannah said that before, her congregation did not have any women's work. After she participated in workshops with UYT-IP, Hannah spoke to the elders and got the go-ahead to start. The first women's gathering took place the week prior to the interview. Hannah realised that she did not need to wait for others to start:

*Not always waiting for someone to help you. You maybe, finding some solutions. Problem solving. You will look around to solve your problem. You can organise yourself and you can co-operate also. That mental also will come. And unity will develop. When you saw how to help each other. What you have, what you can contribute, if you bring it together that things. It helps also for the country to develop.*³⁷²

The participants' descriptions of Use Your Talents and of how they are doing Use Your Talents show that the concept of doing Use Your Talents can be described as a three-step process. The first is the conscious observation of resources and problems—the situation. The second step is the process of reasoning. The third step is to take action based on your own reasoning. The steps are not a linear process. They are closely intertwined and dependent on each other. The process of reasoning can be separated into two different elements. One element is to think about the situation to identify a solution, and the other element is the realisation that you have the freedom and ability to do something about the situation. According to the actors, these two elements of reasoning are closely connected and intertwined with the other two elements. If the realisation of one's own ability to reason and act is lacking, it may be a hindrance to starting to think about the situation and how it can be addressed. This may again prevent action. At the same time, according to the actors, a person who has not had the experience of acting autonomously may not believe in their own ability to reason. The

³⁷¹ Interview with Jonas.

³⁷² Interview with Hannah.

three steps in the process of doing Use Your Talents can be compared to the three elements of recognising own and others' vulnerability, reasoning and acting freely, identified by Forst as the building stones of human autonomy.

Both Jonas and Hannah were thinking about their own contexts and made plans of action after attending workshops about Use Your Talents. Hannah has implemented these actions. In Use Your Talents, she found justifications for acting that liberated her to take responsibility. She is experiencing that through her initiation, she is growing in confidence, relations are strengthened, and she is contributing to the development of her country. The process of reasoning as a source of autonomy involves several steps. The identification of a reasonable solution is one step. However, the identification of a possible solution does not amount to autonomy. For the person to exercise her autonomy, she must also recognise her own ability, responsibility and space of freedom to act. She must identify a solution that corresponds with her abilities, responsibilities and space of freedom. In this way, the indicated two elements of reasoning—the identification of a solution and the realisation of one's own autonomy—is a dynamic process. During a presentation, one of the co-ordinators of Use Your Talents described this dynamism in this way: "Everything comes back to thinking about what we ourselves can do. Learn from each other. The objective of learning is always to make decisions for yourself. Begin from what you can do. Think individually about how you can start."³⁷³

Jonas has not yet taken any steps to implement his plan to establish a saving group for women in his congregation. However, this does not suggest that he is not acting as an autonomous human being. On the contrary, he has chosen not to act based on his own process of reasoning. Action is a crucial element in the normative order of Use Your Talents, and with me coming and asking about Use Your Talents, he experienced a need to justify what can be perceived as a failure of Use Your Talents. However, if doing Use Your Talents means acting as an autonomous human being, his choice of not acting is not a failure. There are reasons behind his decision not to act.

The participants in Use Your Talents described doing Use Your Talents as a liberating process of being an autonomous person who acts based on her own decisions grounded on her own reasoning. They argue that colonialism, Western missionaries and development donors in different and similar ways have limited their ability to make their own decisions by influencing how they think about themselves and their own ability to assess the situation, identify the solution and act.

Peter summarised how doing Use Your Talents helps rediscover his own identity and dignity with the following words:

³⁷³ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

I want to underline the fact that if we look at Use Your Talents as a tool to start to change, to solve the poverty problem, it is like reduce, reducing this concept. For me, Use Your Talents is more than solving the problem of poverty. (...) Use Your Talents, for me it is like a tool that, if it is well used, will help us to have self-consciousness of our situation, to reflect and to find our way to... I can say to address challenges and to do something to be ourselves.³⁷⁴

In the normative order of Use Your Talents, human beings' identities are measured by their abilities to reason and to act.

5.4. Summary

In this chapter, I have described how the actors construct the normative order of Use Your Talents. By telling each other stories about how they are doing Use Your Talents, the actors struggle to justify themselves as human beings who have the ability to reason and to act. The actors explain their problems of poverty in their countries in a loss of faith in their abilities to reason and to act. The loss of faith in their abilities to reason and to act is explained in colonialism, encounters with Western missionaries and reception of development funds. The normative order of Use Your Talents argues that through the rediscovery of their abilities to reason and to act the actors can solve their problems themselves.

By tying the justification narrative of Use Your Talents to their personal narratives and to the grand narratives of struggles against colonialism and imperialism, the actors construct a normative order that is difficult to criticise. Questioning the validity of Use Your Talents could raise the question of actors' abilities to reason and to act.

³⁷⁴ Interview with Peter.

6. Faith and the Bible as Sources of Noumenal Power

In chapter five, I described how the actors in construction of the normative order of Use Your Talents struggle to justify themselves as justifying beings who have the ability to reason and to act. In this chapter, I describe how the actors use their faith and the Bible as sources of noumenal power. In the first part of the chapter, I describe how the actors reason with God and with each other in prayer. In the second part of the chapter, I describe how the actors use the Bible to construct and negotiate justifications and normative orders. In the third part of the chapter, I describe how normative orders constructed with reference to the Bible are negotiated in dialogue with social expectations and other normative orders.

6.1. Prayer as Reasoning with God and Each Other

From the beginning to the end of the UYT-IP Annual Conference, it was evident that the gathering was a fellowship of Christians with a shared faith in the triune God. The first official event in the annual conference was the opening service in the cathedral during which readings from the Bible, worship and prayer for the conference were central elements. Every morning, the programme started with devotion and prayer. At the beginning of every meal, one of the participants led the fellowship in thanks and blessings for the food. In addition to these scheduled points of expression of faith, participants initiated prayer throughout the day. The first evening, we were praying for people who are part of the Use Your Talents network and who had planned to participate but who, due to illness or death, had been prevented from coming.³⁷⁵ Throughout the week, participants shared stories of people and events that called for prayer. One morning, the participants from Congo received news that one of their colleagues who, had participated in the UYT-IP Annual Conference the previous year and who had been sick in hospital, had died. The participants from Congo were trying to organise support for the family to bring his body from the hospital to be buried in his hometown. They called for the fellowship to “carry us in prayer” and to “think of the family”. In response to the sad news, a bishop from one of the churches led the fellowship in prayer. After the prayer, a woman stood up and said she would like to sing a song of worship to comfort everyone. One of the other days, one of the participants from Cameroon told the fellowship that rebels had attacked his village two times in less than a week. Two people had been killed and families had been robbed. He asked for prayer.³⁷⁶ Another of the participants asked for prayer for one of his colleagues whose son had died a few days ago.³⁷⁷ The fellowship of the participants in the annual conference acted their faith through prayer. The situations that called for prayer were situations that confront the vulnerability of human beings,

³⁷⁵ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 15.10.2019.

³⁷⁶ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

³⁷⁷ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 18.10.2019.

such as illness, death and other people's acts of evil. It was evident that for the participants, prayer was a meaningful response to their sufferings and vulnerability. The participants share faith in prayer, and through their joint action of prayer and the comfort they experienced through this joint action, they re-enforced each other's understanding of prayer as a meaningful response to vulnerability and powerlessness. For the actors in Use Your Talents, to be human means to live in relationship with God.

A participant's description of how he and his colleagues had responded when they heard the story of how one of the other churches had become self-reliant highlights how prayer was identified as a meaningful response to financial difficulties. "Shells fell from our eyes." he said. "We are not going to ask for money from anybody." He explained that today, when the church leaders gather, instead of arguing over resources, they pray together.³⁷⁸ Their decision to no longer depend on financial support from abroad confronted them with a shared condition of vulnerability. Instead of asking mission partners or development donors for help, they asked God for help, and they took action themselves. Based on their shared faith in prayer, they identified prayer as a meaningful response, and they experienced that prayer gave a positive result, as it strengthened their fellowship and urged them to act.

For Mary, trust in God and in prayer goes hand in hand with her own initiatives and is not a contradiction to asking for help. During the interview, she told me that her uncle was ill and in hospital and asked me for financial support to pay for his treatment. She made it clear that in addition to praying, her family was doing what they could themselves. Mary invited me to be part of the answer to prayer:

*We are praying to God, to open for us a way so that my uncle can get healed. Because he is the one who took care of me. He took me to school when my dad died. When my mum could not take me to school. So, I am always praying. (...) Every month then I send him small money, for upkeep. This time that he is down, I am just praying that God may do some miracle. That my uncle can walk again. Because he is in hospital, he is in bed. But I know God will do miracle. And God will open a way for us.*³⁷⁹

In her appeal for my support, Mary refers to the power of God as a source of authority.

The topic for the UYT-IP Annual Conference 2019 was entrepreneurship, and one afternoon, a businessman held a presentation on entrepreneurship. The presentation on entrepreneurship took place in the church outside the compound and was open to congregants and the community. The entrepreneur made many references to the Bible and to promises of success during the presentation. However, he made clear that success does not only depend on prayer. According to him, financial

³⁷⁸ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

³⁷⁹ Interview with Mary.

growth requires hard work. After emphasising the value of reading books and hard work, the presenter encouraged people to have faith: “We make our plans, but God has the last word. If you take an initiative, God will answer.”³⁸⁰

Isak has been offered an opportunity for further studies abroad, but due to work commitments, he has not yet started his studies:

*...secured funds (...) is waiting for me. That is ready. It was in the 2019 budget and now they referred it to 2020. They are waiting for me. It is my side, which is... So, we will pray and see how it works. If it is the will of the...if it is from God, then no one can block it. If it is not from God, then I do not know. I do not know.*³⁸¹

Isak's explanation suggests that the understanding of God's plan can be interpreted in light of conditions and events in the world. Isak does not clearly distinguish between God's plan for his life and his life as he lives it. By referring to the will of God, he can justify events to himself as well as to others. Reference to the will of God provides him with a frame of reference that is meaningful to him.

Another story from Isak demonstrates how reference to God's will and power can be used to influence others' thinking and action. Elders in his congregation had contacted Isak because they wanted him to lead the project of raising funds from mission partners for a new church building. However, Isak suggested that the congregants themselves raise the funds. In the process of reasoning with the elders to convince them that they were not dependent on financial support from abroad for a new church building, Isak described the idea of raising funds from the congregants as a message from God that could be completed with the help of God:

*I told them 'Yes, Holy Spirit told me one thing.' 'What is that?' 'It is of course we can construct the building, but we knock our pockets, we see our pockets, we look into our members, we look into the gifts of our members and then we raise local resource and finally we can manage the building, we can cover the cost of this building.' Some of them: 'No, this is a big building, 14 million. We know the economic status of our members and that is, is that could be possible for us?' Some of them: 'Yes, it could be because we are we and what we have is from God. So, let we put the responsibility, the entire responsibility on God, and then we start.' And finally, everybody convinced, and we started. (...) So, practically I saw that the resource is with us and upon us. So, God is there to bless our resources if we are volunteer enough...*³⁸²

According to Isak, the understanding of who they are in God gave the elders the courage they needed to embark on the big project despite the limited financial resources of the congregants. In this

³⁸⁰ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

³⁸¹ Interview with Isak.

³⁸² Interview with Isak.

understanding, the fulfilment of the project without external funds was not their own work. They understand their own work as the work of God.

6.2. The Justificatory Power of the Bible

The Bible is a resource that the participants frequently referred to in their reasoning. A central biblical text in Use Your Talents is the parable about the talents from Matthew 25, 14-30. The term Use Your Talents is derived from this text.³⁸³ In the following section, my task is not to offer an interpretation of what the text might mean but to describe how the participants in Use Your Talents use the text to justify the normative order of Use Your Talents.

John told me that when he leads workshops to promote the Use Your Talents approach, he often starts by reading the text from Matthew 25, 14-30. The story is a parable about a master and his three servants or slaves. Different translations of the Bible use different words here. The actors in Use Your Talents refer to the story as the story about the talents and appeared to be less interested in the possible distinction between servants and slaves. Servants and slaves are part of the same framework of actors who take orders from a master. In the story about the master and his servants or slaves, the master is going on a journey, and before he leaves, he shares the responsibility of looking after his possessions between the servants or slaves according to their abilities. He gives the first servant or slave five talents, the second servant or slave two talents and the third servant or slave one talent. When the master returns, the first servant or slave has earned five more talents. His master is happy with his work and invites him to “enter into the happiness of his master”. Since the servant or slave has proven to be a good and faithful servant or slave, the master promises the servant or slave that he will be assigned greater responsibilities in the future. The second servant or slave has earned two more talents and thereby also doubled the possessions. He gets the same reward as the first servant or slave: “Well done, you good and faithful servant, you were faithful with small things; I will put you in charge of many. Enter into the happiness of your master.” When the third servant or slave comes before the master, he explains that because he was afraid that he might lose the talent, he buried it. He has kept the talent safe and returns it to the master. The master’s response is harsh:

*You evil and lazy servant, you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered. Therefore, you should have given my money to bankers and having returned, I would have received my own with interest. Therefore, take from him the talent and give it to the one having ten talents. For everyone who has, it will be given and it will be abundant, but from the one who does not have, it will be taken from him. And throw the worthless servant into the darkness outmost. There will be bitter crying and grinding of the tooth.*³⁸⁴

³⁸³ Haus, “‘Use Your Talents’ Knowledge Development Project – Introduction Article’, 18.

³⁸⁴ Matthew 25, 26–30.

John told me that after reading the text, he challenges the participants in the workshop to apply the text in their own lives, either asking them to reflect freely on the text or asking them questions about what they think the text might mean.

...the first thing we usually do is to go from the Bible perspective. Just to define talents from the Bible's perspective. And then making everybody know that God has an intention while entrusting us with talents and with gifts and everything. (...) Sometimes, we can give a kind of guideline. Guideline questions, questions that just help them to go through. But some other times, we just help them to reflect. The way they will read it. Freely. (...) ...we understood that while they are reflecting on the Bible verse, they relate to their spiritual life. It is something that they know, and then from that we end up to practical issues. And that helps them also to make the connection between their beliefs and their daily life. It makes this approach very relevant to them. At that point, when they start reflecting about their daily life now, they have a strong foundation. Because they are going from something they believe that is true, and something that they build, or they built, their lives on. And at that point, when now we give the definition of use our talents or their talents and then coming now to the use of those talents, they strongly believe in that. (...) They are the one now leading us. According to their local setting, local reality, and context and so on. And then afterwards, they will find out real stories related to the use of talents. And they will also, they will be like very challenged, much challenged I mean, by these local stories they identify themselves and they start reflecting on, and then from that they take now initiatives.³⁸⁵

John describes how the use of a text from the Bible provides justification for the normative order of Use Your Talents. He explained that the use of the story is effective because the participants understand the Bible as the truth. They read themselves into the story about the talents and they apply the story to their own situation and context, he said. John uses the story to exercise power over others by influencing their thinking. The message he wants to communicate is that God has an intention for everyone. He invites people to participate in a process of reasoning with the aim of discovering God's intention for their lives. The normative order that they construct is a normative order from God. By grounding the normative order in the Bible as authoritative scriptures, John uses the authority of the Bible as a source of power that lends authority to the normative order. The story from Matthew 25 leaves little room to question the order. In the story, the servant or slave who did not follow the order lost what he had been given and was left to suffer in darkness and poverty.

Isak also uses the text from Matthew 25 in workshops where he promotes the Use Your Talents approach. During my interview with Isak, I asked him if the text means that people who use their resources well will not be poor. Isak said that he agrees with this interpretation: *"If you properly use your resource, you cannot be poor. I agree."*³⁸⁶ He elaborated on his understanding of Use Your Talents:

In Use Your Talents, we need to think in this way; there are people who failed to grow by not using God-given resources, and there are poor people, no, there are people who have resources, worked

³⁸⁵ Interview with John.

³⁸⁶ Interview with Isak.

*on it and gained profit. And at the same time, there are people who are endorsed with ample resource, not properly worked on it, and misused. So, these all things are there, and then, then the point is Use Your Talents as a model is working with people to well aware all people they have already gifts given by God and they need to work with the resource they have already. So, this is... the model is working.*³⁸⁷

When I pointed out that there are many poor people, especially women, who are struggling from early morning to late night and working very hard but are still poor, he agreed. He explained that the model of Use Your Talents does not fully account for external factors. Nevertheless, he defended the potential of Use Your Talents:

*Even though one poor woman, even though she is very clever, even though she works well, there are some other external factors beyond her that can affect her. But, many poor people if they use their resources properly and they are committed that they can bring change in their lives, hopefully they will escape.*³⁸⁸

My discussion with Isak highlights that the text from Matthew 25 may be interpreted as suggesting that poverty is a result of laziness and may be seen as a punishment from God.

Eve said that she does not believe that God punishes people for not using their talents. She explained that church leaders and the culture hinder people from using their talents and from discovering their gifts by not telling them that they have talents that they should use. In her understanding, Use Your Talents addresses this issue, not by condemning but by inviting people to discover their talents. Eve has used the text to argue that women who have talents for leading can be church leaders. The connection to Matthew 25 offers a justification for the normative order of Use Your Talents, which, in Eve's understanding, is liberating, while the story's description of what might happen to people who do not use their talents enforces the message:

For example, women who look like church leaders, in their congregation, they are just a member, they do not do it (lead), but they are very intellectual, in their office, in somewhere, they are highly wonderful and intellectual women, they know a lot, but in their congregation, silent. It is the church leaders; we let that position for them. So who is killing the church, for these women? So I blame the whole culture. That then, use your talent also again, if we understood it, filled the gap. You know Use Your Talents did not judge. Did not say 'you have this', but when we train, everybody start to think about themselves, start to reflect, discuss and then start to ask themselves: 'Oh I have to use my talent, If I am not using, it will die.' It is a gift and responsibility. Once it is gift, it is responsibility and accountability. I cannot say, 'I do not know and I do not want.' I will be accountable. You know. I will be asked by God. And that part we are afraid to teach, but Use Your Talents directly shows. You know when we discuss this text, it remind, ok, if I am not serving, I will

³⁸⁷ Interview with Isak.

³⁸⁸ Interview with Isak.

be asked some day. So Use Your Talents helped to think, to use our gifts, I think. When the Bible itself is condemning. How can I say no?³⁸⁹

Hannah told me that she used to think that the text from Matthew 25 only referred to “spiritual gifts”. After participating in workshops in connection with UYT-IP, she thinks the meaning of talents is broader. Hannah explained that any skill that a person has is a talent and she has realised that she also has talents:

Spiritually, you see, my understanding before I participated in this academic workshop, talent, what I knew from this Matthew 25, is only spiritual. What I knew, this is the Holy Spirit’s gifts. Making miracles, teaching, those listed there, I just only knew that. But it is not only that. There are talents also in the way of doing something, helping yourself, helping others. After that, I got this idea. Before my understanding also, only spiritual. But not only that. My talent is also gifted. That means many people have many, maybe have knowledge of solving the problem at ground. And some may have also the talent of doing some handcrafts. It can be learned also, but there are many people who have talents. How to do something, how to approach people, how to handling even conflict. Many things. Not only spiritual. My understanding is now wide.³⁹⁰

Hannah thinks that everyone has an obligation to identify and use their talents. She thinks God will question those who do not use their talents. For Hannah, the purpose of using your talents is to help others:

For example, if I have a talent, and people around me are maybe suffering from many things, if I have talent and able to solve that problem, and not using in helping them, I am considering myself that I will be condemned. (...) And also I am just teaching like that. Yeah, for the talent given to us, we will be asked by God, so from now on we have to search our talent, look inside ourselves, what can I do? What can I help? What can I contribute? Not only money. Not only this... Because you see in the church, I have not those gifts, so people say that talent is only the spiritual practices, they consider like that. So, if someone cannot preach, coming to the pulpit and preach, and making some healing service, miracles and...they are just considered, ‘I have no talent’. But we do have talents. That was wrong. And before I also understand it like that. But after these two trainings, my understanding widened. Not only spiritual gifts.³⁹¹

Hannah used to interpret talents as spiritual gifts, which she says she does not have. After participating in events about Use Your Talents, her understanding of the meaning of talents has changed. When I asked Hannah what the punishment might mean, she said that she does not know and that she would like to discuss the text with the church leaders. However, her main concern is not the meaning of the punishment, but the meaning of talents:

That was also my idea to discuss spiritually with pastors and elders also. I have programme also to discuss on that. ‘What do you think theologically? (...) Is it this spiritual gifts only that practices healing, making miracles and, or everything inside us, this is the talent? If we do not use these

³⁸⁹ Interview with Eve.

³⁹⁰ Interview with Hannah.

³⁹¹ Interview with Hannah.

things, take out and use in the fellowship, in the church, so what is your understanding?’ To know that. I have plan also to discuss with my church leaders. The pastors, evangelists and with the... that is why also, the first day I approached my church elder and also my pastor.³⁹²

Through participation in Use Your Talents, Hannah has discovered that the text about the talents is open for interpretation, and she has started to question the interpretations of the leaders in her congregation.

For Eve, the theological justification for Use Your Talents is broader than Matthew 25. For her, Use Your Talents means diaconal ministry and the theological justification for diaconal ministry relates to her understanding of human beings as created by God and the lives of Christians as followers of Jesus. She explained that Use Your Talents is about sharing and that this “ideology” serves God’s purpose for humanity effectively:

For me, it (Use Your Talents) is God’s purpose. That is why we are created. I theologised it. God creates us that way. We have to share. It is about sharing our gifts. (...) Jesus himself is asking people to serve, physical, mental and spiritual. (...) It (Use Your Talents) fasten it (the diaconal work). (...) It (Use Your Talents) is ideology to transfer our biblical responsibility. (...) If you use your talents, diakonia ministry will be effective according to purpose.³⁹³

Eve told me how she uses Use Your Talents to strengthen the diaconal ministry of the church. She explained that when she visits a congregation, after telling the congregants about Use Your Talents, she divides them into ministry groups, depending on their talents and interests. After listening to her theological justifications for Use Your Talents, the congregants happily participate in the ministry of the church according to their talents. She said:

So, they are not doing something they do not know, it is their interest. Supporting elderly people is their interest. Planting and taking care of plantation is their interest. And collecting the garbage is their interest. It is their field. They are very younger teenagers, but they are very enthusiastic to do that. And cleaning the toilet, they are very interested. So, my responsibility is the consistency to give training and making have discussion together.³⁹⁴

Eve was very enthusiastic about how Use Your Talents offers justifications she uses in her reasoning with people, as the leader for diaconal ministry and as a woman. She told me that Use Your Talents helped her to reason with a woman in an attempt to convince the woman that marriage is the purpose of a woman’s life, arguing that to be a wife is a woman’s talent:

I push also again one woman. ‘You have to marry. It is a gift to marry. It is a way to develop ourselves to God. To love other, to live for others. It is linked with Christianity,’ I said. ‘As Jesus gave his life,’ I said. ‘Marriage is also giving self.’ I really picked that from Use Your Talents. So, she was arguing: ‘Why not to live single life and then I serve God?’ ‘Yes, we serve God in different

³⁹² Interview with Hannah.

³⁹³ Interview with Eve.

³⁹⁴ Interview with Eve.

*method, but serving in the marriage is completely different', I said. 'So, if you ignore that talent, serving in the family as in the marriage, if you ignore... It is a gift. It is not something only you can choose and give. You can choose the man, this is not for me, this is not what I prayed, this is not with... You can choose the man, you can choose the life you live, but I cannot totally, I do not say I do not like marriage life. It is a gift.'*³⁹⁵

David has also discovered the noumenal power of the Bible. When I asked him about the value of participating in the Use Your Talents projects, considering that in his church they had already discovered the value of using their own talents,³⁹⁶ he pointed to the theological aspects:

*You know when we were starting, we were not, we did not look to the Bible as a base of Use Your Talents. I think the main contribution of joining this Use Your Talents project is just when we joined the project, we started to look everything from the biblical point of view. For instance, in Matthew about the talents, in Genesis what God intended people when he created. We saw these things.*³⁹⁷

In addition to the theological justification that offers a strong motivation, David explained that visiting Madagascar and seeing how the people of Madagascar are using their talents helped him realise that poverty is not a justification for not using your talents. If the people in Madagascar can use their talents, anyone can:

*I went to Madagascar to visit, and we saw how people are trying to change their lives. It is difficult place. They are in difficult situation, but they are struggling. We looked in different handicrafts, and what the people are doing, and what the churches are doing, and we learned so much from that. And I think from that point we started to teach the congregations to strengthen already what the stand... started to strengthen what they are doing, and we have started to show that from the biblical point of view. That is, really, Use Your Talents is biblical. So, I think this is really maybe one, two things we learned from joining the project.*³⁹⁸

For David, to struggle means to exercise autonomy through action despite constraining conditions. In his description of how the people of Madagascar are struggling, he recognises their moral authority as human beings.

Mary described Use Your Talents as a process where she, using her own financial resources, is teaching others to use their talents. Mary finds encouragement and strength to persevere in situations of resistance in stories from the Bible:

At times you also have to move all round, with your money, because it is a volunteered, voluntary work, so you use your money, you move around, creating awareness, mobilising people, you even go there, you preach the word of God. And you know, mobilisation is very difficult also. You have to talk and talk and talk. And even creating awareness is also very difficult. You have to convince them. You convince them. The good part of it. So, at times, it becomes very difficult. Others will,

³⁹⁵ Interview with Eve.

³⁹⁶ See chapter 5.1.

³⁹⁷ Interview with David.

³⁹⁸ Interview with David.

*you know like, even in the Bible, there are those who will discourage others, they will tell others, 'That thing is not good, they will disappear with your money' (...) So after they see the fruit, is when they come back, and it is a long time. If you involve them in poultry keeping, so you have to wait, the eggs are laid, then the hatching, then you have to keep, you feed them until they grow, it is a long time, like even educating a child. But you have to persevere, and you commit yourself.*³⁹⁹

In one of the morning devotions at the UYT-IP Annual Conference, a bishop from one of the churches encouraged the participants to persevere in their struggles by referring to the Old Testament book of Exodus about the Israelites' journey through the desert from domination in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. He reminded the participants that God is with us and invited them to see their own process of doing Use Your Talents as part of a bigger story of liberation.⁴⁰⁰ By applying the story of Exodus to the lives of the actors, the bishop constituted the actors' identities as people on a journey of liberation.

The following morning, a woman who holds a PhD in theology held the devotion. She started by saying that she had really struggled with the text from Matthew 25 and explained that the text did not speak to her. She continued by explaining that when she heard the devotion from Exodus the previous day, she had realised that the message God wanted to convey to the participants in the annual conference was not in the text about talents, but in the story about David and Goliath from 1 Samuel 17, 1–51. Paraphrasing the story about David and Goliath, she pointed out that David's weapons were very simple, but because of the presence of God in his life, he was able to defeat Goliath. In her application of the text on Use Your Talents, she emphasised that to succeed in Use Your Talents it is necessary to call upon God:

*When we read the story of David, we try to make a comparison with all what we have learnt since the beginning of this conference. We have learnt to identify our talents. We have learnt to defile our difficulties. Because we were told, every problem is an opportunity. And we were shown how to make useful our talents. This is what David did. But in addition to that, David called the Lord Almighty to fight with him. This means, whatever talents we have, whatever kind of project that we can put in place. If we do not have the Lord Almighty with us, we cannot succeed.*⁴⁰¹

The woman continued by applying the text to the social reality of the participants and explaining how thought patterns may hinder the use of talents:

It is true that today our giants are not human beings. How many people like Goliath can we find today? But our Goliaths are our everyday difficulties. They are our fears. They are our distress. They are even our prejudice. They are our financial challenges. Sometimes we have abilities, we

³⁹⁹ Interview with Mary.

⁴⁰⁰ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 18.10.2019.

⁴⁰¹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 19.10.2019.

*have talents, especially the women: 'Because I am a woman, I am sure that I will not succeed,' and this is a weakness that destroys our talents and even makes them to disappear.*⁴⁰²

The devotion concluded by suggesting that human being's hope of a solution to the problems of destructive thought patterns may be found in the presence of God: "Whatever our weakness is, whatever our smallness is, as an individual or as a church, if we call upon the presence of God in our lives and in what we do, we are sure to have success in everything we do."⁴⁰³ This woman is well aware of the limitations of Use Your Talents. In a struggle to make meaning of experiences of suffering and powerlessness, in the midst of a system in which the problems of poverty are explained in actors' own reasoning, she continues to do what she knows best, namely, to encourage people to trust in God.

6.3. Negotiation of Normative Orders

The actors in Use Your Talents use faith and the Bible as resources in their struggles to make meaning of the limitations, hindrances and powerlessness they experience. Normative orders constructed with reference to the Bible may be both of hindrance and of help for a better life.

In Salome's understanding, the Christian faith has been a hindrance to financial growth among Christians in Ngaoundéré. During the trip from the airport through Ngaoundéré town, she told me that the Muslims are clever businesspeople who have gained power through their wealth, while she described Christians in Ngaoundéré as poor and lacking power. In Salome's understanding, political power is connected to financial wealth, and a person's financial situation is connected to their faith.⁴⁰⁴

Daniel has a different understanding of Islam's relation to poverty and wealth. He told me that the Muslims in his town believe they are born to be poor. He explained that the Use Your Talents approach challenges this message by telling and showing people that they have talents and opportunities and that they are free to pursue a better life:

*(W)e said that you, in yourself, God gave you some talent. Try to know it and use it. Try to know it and use it. Do not say I am born to be poor. No! This is not it. You are not born to be poor. You are not born to be lame man or like that. You can do something. You can change your life and the life of your neighbour.*⁴⁰⁵

Peter said that business and wealth used to be taboo among Christians. "... it was a taboo. Talking about the money ... it was like the good Christian, will be the Christian who is not attached to the money."⁴⁰⁶ Peter thinks that the unwillingness to address financial issues is an impact of the

⁴⁰² Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 19.10.2019.

⁴⁰³ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 19.10.2019.

⁴⁰⁴ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 15.10.2019.

⁴⁰⁵ Interview with Daniel.

⁴⁰⁶ Interview with Peter.

missionaries. Like Salome, he thinks that the understanding of money as something sinful has put Christians in an inferior position:

For me, maybe I, maybe it will be a false impression, but for me it is like the education the first missionaries have given, it is like you have to look for God's Kingdom, the other things will come after. It is good, but it seems that the way we people look at people we learn a sin, that the riches, or the wealth, all these things, it is bad. (...) when we compare the Muslim community and the Christian... It seems that we Christians, it is now that we are, we begin to talk about the possibility to change our condition, we start to talk about money freely, (...) it is recent.⁴⁰⁷

Peter further explained that since the missionaries were there to address their problems, the Christians could relax and did not worry, and they accepted the idea that spiritual matters were more important than the material:

...the ideology which structured what the church, what the missionaries have done, is like we have to pay attention that our spirituality will not be destroyed by the material, by all these things. And we say... We sleep, we say, 'It is okay, because missionaries are here with us, and they have solved our problem.'⁴⁰⁸

According to Luke, poverty has been a Christian ideal that the missionaries were furthering. A development project should not create a surplus:

What the missionaries were telling people is that you know in the church we have to be poor. The poor environment, because blessed are the poor because they will see a lot. (...) ...sometimes the missionaries were telling you: No, you can't even have a project which is lucrative. Not lucrative, at least that will have you gain money that you don't have. The missionaries are there for social, so you cannot do something to have a surplus.⁴⁰⁹

Luke is asking why the missionaries have not told the people to use their talents earlier. He wonders if the missionaries did not want the people to be transformed:

The missionaries cannot tell that to people at that time. Because that is that you can do something, it can bring means, and then to transform you. No. (...) People were not be allowed to think, to do so many things before. So, you have to concentrate on God.⁴¹⁰

Even though the missionaries were telling people not to worry about life in this world, Jonas thinks that by preaching the gospel the missionaries have contributed positively. "I have been saved, that is the first thing, I have been saved," he said. For Jonas, salvation has to do with life here and now. When I asked him what he has been saved from, he said that Christians live better lives:

You know those who did not come to the God they spend their money, they spend their time, for rubbish things, they drink, they smoke, they chew khat, they go to you know unwanted things, so these are socially, economically, many people are failing. So, if they come to the gospel, or to the

⁴⁰⁷ Interview with Peter.

⁴⁰⁸ Interview with Peter.

⁴⁰⁹ Interview with Luke.

⁴¹⁰ Interview with Luke.

God, you know it is the saviour, they can prepare for the heaven as well as living in this world. (...) Because if you are Christian, and then if you follow, if you implement the word of the Bible, so you are the best example in this world. Also, you can lead your family, your life in better way. (...) You know Jesus, you know if you read the Bible, if you participate in worship, you allocate your time for better things rather than rubbish things. Also, you will be shaped. And also, your children will be shaped in the way that we are living. Because your children directly imitate what you are doing. You are the first to share for your children. So, you know the way of your living is based on the biblical. So, you are the teacher for your children as well as the community. So, you manage your resources and whatever it is, your time, your money and other material resources properly.⁴¹¹

Jonas refers to how Christians use the Bible to construct ethical norms. He thinks that ethical norms have liberated the men in his area from social expectations and understandings that negatively impacted people's lives and contributed to poverty and domestic violence:

You know if I see my father and grandfather, you know what their slogan was? 'How can men sit at home?' After work, you know people went together and chat together you know. What they said is, 'How can a man sit at home?' So, what their slogan is: 'We have to go far and drink.' Then intoxicated. They spend money. But then on the other side, the women at home, they have been running after money, they had shortage of money, to manage resources. (...) And you know, every day whenever the husband drink in the night, they quarrel, children are not going to sleep, normally. Because they push, and they do like this because the one that is intoxicated disturb. And this is normal in the culture. Because those who have house, can drink. Those who do not drink they are poor, they say. So, this attitude is not easy, and this has been changed through missionaries, those who brought Jesus Christ. And everything has been changed.⁴¹²

Jonas further explained that the gospel has also liberated people from traditional beliefs that have been suppressing them. He said that in the tradition of his tribe, there was an understanding that unless the leader of the tribe had blessed a new calf, no one could drink the milk from the cow. With Christianity, this norm was de-constructed:

Again, there is a tradition, you know a cultural tradition. There is a leader, for that tribe, whenever a cow gives small cattle, they collect the milk maybe for 15 days or a month. And then unless that leader come and pray for that, they do not drink. Even the small children. So due to Christianity, due to the missionaries, this has been broken.⁴¹³

When I asked Jonas if he feels that the missionaries have been suppressing the local people, he said that even though Christianity has changed people's ways of thinking and living, it cannot be described as suppression. In his understanding, the changes are positive and liberating, and the gospel is a source of power that the people have received: "There is no suppression. Because, you know the word of God

⁴¹¹ Interview with Jonas.

⁴¹² Interview with Jonas.

⁴¹³ Interview with Jonas.

itself is empowering. So, they came with these words of God, and it is empowering, not suppression. To me.”⁴¹⁴

Jonas has an expectation that when the gospel arrives in an area it should lead to social change. For him, the social change that he understands to be an impact of Christianity is a good change. However, according to Jonas, presence of Western missionaries does not always serve civilisation. He explained that in the rural areas of his country, some tribes of pastoralists still live their lives like before, despite the presence of Western missionaries. Jonas blames the missionaries for a lack of change:

But the problem is, you know, in some places missionaries have been living for more than 30 or 40 years, but the people around them have no significant change. Because you know this people they are living, of course they are not agrarian, they are pastoralists, they move from one place to another place, and they rotate and come back to the previous place. But the changes in their life are really minimal. Sometimes you know when I was working as a government employee, we are complaining (to the Western missionaries): ‘You have been living here for long time, but the community around you have no significant change, why?’ This is the question sometimes we raise. Because some projects are agriculture, some projects are health, so also this gospel is there. But still, they are living for long time the same. ‘So why is that... your effort was not that much?’⁴¹⁵

In Jonas understanding, the pastoralists in this area are uncivilised. He thinks the presence of Western missionaries should instigate social change. However, in this area, according to Jonas, the presence of Western missionaries has not served civilisation.

6.4. Summary

In this chapter, I have described how the actors in Use Your Talents describe their faith and the Bible as sources of power. The actors use the Bible to construct different kinds of theologies. The first kind of theology the actors construct is the kind of theology that produce representations of human beings as actors who have the ability to reason and to act and God as a master who punishes or rewards actors on the basis of the outcomes of their actions. The second kind of theology the actors construct is the kind of theology that produce representations of human beings as vulnerable and God as a saviour who liberates human beings from suppressing powers. Both these kinds of theologies are part of the same framework that construct norms and social orders for how actors should think and act with reference to the Bible. References to the Bible lends authority to the norms and social orders actors construct while the room for interpretation of biblical texts and the diversity of stories in the Bible provide resources for negotiation of normative orders.

⁴¹⁴ Interview with Jonas.

⁴¹⁵ Interview with Jonas.

7. Relations and Structures as Noumenal Capital

In chapter five, I described how the actors, constructing the normative order of Use Your Talents through storytelling, justify themselves as human beings who have the ability to reason and to act. In chapter six, I described how the actors integrate their faith in processes of meaning-making. The actors use the Bible as a source of noumenal power while the diversity of texts and interpretations are resources in negotiation of norms and social orders.

In this chapter, I describe the networks of relations and structures in which the normative order of Use Your Talents is constructed. I present three different levels of relations and structures in Use Your Talents. In the first part of the chapter, I describe a network of interpersonal relations between actors who recognise each other as co-authors of norms and social orders. In the second part of the chapter, I describe how church structures structure relations and power. In the third part of the chapter, I describe relations and structures in UYT-IP as a development project that is led by a Norwegian, organised by a Norwegian mission organisation and funded by a development donor. There is tension between these different levels of relations and structures in Use Your Talents. The different levels are at the same time dynamic and interrelated.

7.1. A Relational Network of Actors who Recognise Each Other

The normative order of Use Your Talents is constructed in a global network of actors who co-author Use Your Talents. The network grows through interpersonal relations between actors in the network. Luke told me that his interest in Use Your Talents was ignited through his relationship with his friend and previous colleague Benjamin. Benjamin had been telling Luke about Use Your Talents and during one of the project leader's trips to Benjamin and Luke's country, Benjamin introduced Luke to the project leader. Luke holds a central position in a network of churches in his country, and after meeting the project leader, Luke was invited to participate in the annual conference.⁴¹⁶ The project leader has a central and influential position in the Use Your Talents network. When I asked the project leader to describe his own role in Use Your Talents, he said that a big part of what he has been doing is to connect people. In invitations to international meetings and conferences, the project leader indicated that it would be good if the participants were people who hold positions of leadership in their churches, either at a central senior level or locally as volunteers, he said. However, he argued, the churches decide who they want to send.⁴¹⁷

In his leadership of the network, the project leader delegates responsibility and makes every effort to recognise others' efforts and contributions. In the annual conference in Ngaoundéré, the opening

⁴¹⁶ Interview with Luke.

⁴¹⁷ Interview with the project leader.

service in the church was led by the leaders of the EELC and the leader of NMS Global greeted the participants. In the official opening of the annual conference in the meeting hall, four people were sitting on the front stage: the National Bishop of EELC, the assistant to the National Bishop of EELC, the NMS representative in Cameroon and the leader of NMS Global. The project leader sat by the wall on the front row. Apparently, the workshop was an event organised by the EELC and the NMS together, although the EELC leadership did not prioritise participation in all of the programme of the annual conference. The UYT Co-ordinator for African French-Speaking Countries led the official opening where all the participants introduced themselves with their name, nationality, church affiliation and profession. The co-ordinator turned to the project leader for reassurance, asking: “Do you have any comment?”, and the project leader responded: “No. It is very good. I do not have anything to say.”⁴¹⁸

John expressed happiness about how the project leader has seen his potential and wants to work with him. When I asked John about his experience of working with the project leader, his response shows that their relation and the project leader’s recognition is important to him and has contributed to developing his confidence in his role and identity:

Actually, I do not know if it is me who discovered the project leader, or if it is the project leader who discovered me. I think actually it is the opposite. It is he who discovered me, who met me. I saw him at the very first introduction workshop he had in my country in December 2016, but afterwards it seems like he is the one who knew me before I really knew him. Because afterward it has been a very long process and when I was just called, I was just told that he needs me to join in his team. I did not understand. Why? But afterwards, I also asked why he wanted me to join his team. But from his answer made me understand that he observed me, and he knew me before the time and that was the first thing I wanted to say.⁴¹⁹

In leading the construction of the normative order of Use Your Talents, the project leader emphasised the roles of others. In my interview with the project leader, he explained that Use Your Talents started with observations of how some congregations in Madagascar were actively working to improve the living conditions in their communities by building schools, planting trees, organising co-operatives, running primary health care services and so on and so forth.⁴²⁰ During his introduction of the Use Your Talents approach at the annual conference, the project leader explained that it was his relation with the UYT Co-ordinator for Madagascar and his observation of the work of a woman in Madagascar that opened his eyes to the potential of local resources and human capacity in furthering development. The project leader referred to this man and this woman from Madagascar as the father and mother of Use Your Talents.⁴²¹ Similarly, the project leader emphasised the role and competence of the UYT Co-

⁴¹⁸ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 15.10.2019.

⁴¹⁹ Interview with John.

⁴²⁰ Interview with the project leader.

⁴²¹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 15.10.2019.

ordinator for East Africa: “(The UYT Co-ordinator for East Africa) is a key person in Use Your Talents. He has background from government development. He has been leading development projects in the church. When he heard about Use Your Talents, he found it very interesting.”⁴²² By referring to how an African development expert acknowledges Use Your Talents, the project leader recognised the competence and potential of the actors, and he built the credibility of the Use Your Talents approach. The project leader presented Use Your Talents as an approach from Madagascar and referred to the actors as experts on Use Your Talents. The narrative about Use Your Talents that he promotes is a narrative about the capacities and abilities of the actors.

While the project leader recognised and affirmed the actors’ actions, he also offered guidance by sharing his knowledge and insights. John explained that he has learnt a lot from the project leader. The project leader has invested time in their relationship and is sharing his knowledge. John values the project leader’s competence:

*I really learnt much from the project leader. You know, as he is an organisational psychologist you see. (...) when I talk to him, he has some tips that are very precise, very clear and that really works. I have to confess that what I learnt just from our conversations helped me also a lot in my way of conducting workshops and so on. (...) The greatest lessons that I got from him and that really, I can say what really made things different in my life is those three points for making change, you know, the emotional part, the intellectual part, also the knowledge and also the action, but then we know that it was fixed that you have to make people decide first. No. Make people know, then decide, and then take action. We have this order, but he was tending to tell me that, no, we can actually start by any of those three points. And I said, ‘oh, this is incredible’, and I tried. You know sometimes with some people it is when you are acting that you say something to them. Some other people it is when you touch their emotion, this is what is happening for instance when we are showing examples with videos or telling stories of other people to get them started. For other people, they need to understand first. What is going on and so on. Have all the knowledge before starting. So actually, we do not need to have the same approach for all the categories of people, and that, that I learnt from the project leader.*⁴²³

In the book about Use Your Talents, actors tell stories of how they are doing Use Your Talents. The project leader is the editor who wrote the introduction article in which he describes Use Your Talents as an initiative to strengthen and utilise the roles of churches as primary development agents and identifies seven characteristics of the Use Your Talents approach.⁴²⁴ The project leader’s role as the editor of the narrative or normative order the actors co-author was also evident in the annual conference in Ngaoundéré. The project leader referred to Use Your Talents as something big and significant. In his introduction of Use Your Talents in the official opening, the project leader described

⁴²² Field notes from Ngaoundéré 15.10.2019.

⁴²³ Interview with John.

⁴²⁴ Haus, *Use Your Talents – the Congregation as Primary Development Agent*.

the gathering of people from so many different countries and churches as “a dream coming true”. He quoted a person from Cameroon who after visiting Madagascar said, “I did not know that Use Your Talents was this big,” thereby communicating to the participants that they are part of something big. He identified the participants as the actors in Use Your Talents. He recognised their efforts while he credited their acts to the Use Your Talents approach: “When you came back (from Madagascar), you started to work hard with Use Your Talents in Cameroon. You have not only worked hard in your own church. You used the Use Your Talents strategy.” The project leader further set the rules for the conference: “In Use Your Talents we do not argue, we just show people what is going on.”⁴²⁵ In these words, the project leader pointed to the recognition of each other’s stories and efforts as an integrated element of Use Your Talents and he limited the room for critical discussion. The introduction served to create a safe environment for sharing stories and experiences without the risk of criticism. The connection made between the actors’ stories and the Use Your Talents approach made it difficult to criticise the approach. Critique of the approach could jeopardise actors’ understandings of their capacities and abilities. Protection of actors’ understandings of their capacities and abilities is paramount for the project leader.

The actors followed the example and norms set by the project leader. The interaction between people in the conference was characterised by mutual recognition of each other. Sharing his experience from a trip to Madagascar with the other actors in the workshop, John recognised the people of Madagascar: “We were amazed. The Madagascar people they do not just talk. They took us to the field and showed us what they are doing.”⁴²⁶ The participants in the workshop listened attentively to each other’s stories. They cheered and applauded the stories, and their questions expressed affirmation and recognition of the storyteller and of the actors in the stories.

In my interview with Joseph, he pointed to how recognition from others contributes to constituting people’s identities. He explained that recognition is essential for the development of human identity and identified the development of self-awareness as a central aspect of Use Your Talents. Joseph described how the project leader leads and influences the participants through recognition, while he maintains the power and position as the editor:

I think the way the whole thing (Use your Talents) has been introduced, it is not from the position of ‘This is it! Take it or leave it!’ It is ‘This is what we are thinking. How do you see it? Do you have anything different?’ And I think that to me has... Because even when you know something, for instance, the project leader is not a difficult man, several times I have told him: ‘We did this, and I have this idea.’ And you know he just ‘Yeah, yeah, we can look at it.’ And sometimes he has come back and said, ‘Joseph, what you thought, I think it is right, we can do it, but I think we can modify

⁴²⁵ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 15.10.2019.

⁴²⁶ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

it this way.' And I think that is, that should be, because I have looked at the Use Your Talents concept. It must go hand in hand with the issue of self-awareness. The issue of helping people to understand themselves, and also the issue of the self, self-esteem, self...how do people look at themselves? What is their value? So, there is no way we can move ahead with the Use Your Talents approach and leave behind issues of self-esteem, self-awareness and such concepts. They must go, you know, together. People must feel that you appreciate that they are not blank slates, they have something.⁴²⁷

Joseph thinks that recognition can be a resource in a process of healing of Africans' identities. Joseph described how during his travels with Use Your Talents, he has come across cultural practices, ways of cooking and works of art that has been foreign to him, but he has chosen to express appreciation and recognition of what people are doing:

I think, for me, the first thing is what is happening now, for instance with Use Your Talents. Where first of all you appreciate the people who are there. I know some of us we came from cultures where people used to beat the drums, but the missionaries would come and tell you this is demonic, you do not have to do this. So, some of the missionaries when they came to preach the gospel, they made you feel like everything African is demonic. So, what is it that our people have that you can appreciate? If we have our own way of expressing ourselves. If we have our own way of doing art. If we have our own way of communicating. How does that resonate with the modern, you know, world? And what is it that we can enhance? What is it that we can appreciate about it? I think for me that is the place to begin. Some may say, 'Oh, you, apologise!' But, I do not think, because these are very many generations. So I think for me, the first thing is to appreciate the people, appreciate their culture, appreciate that if you don't eat fish where you come from, and if I eat fish, like I have been here in Cameroon and there are things we do not eat where I come from, and if we eat we cook them differently, but I had an opportunity to taste and appreciate. Oh! Wow! There is a new way of cooking this thing. And it will still be sweet. It will still be good. So, for me, I find that very important. And that is where the issues of self-esteem and self-respect, we can start by exploring, what do you think about yourself. But I think at the end of the day, the more thing is how do we help people to appreciate what they have? How do we help people to appreciate what they have? Because the moment they recognise that you appreciate what they have, it may not look like what you have, but they have it. That is what they have. Because not all of us grew up sleeping on a mattress. But you appreciate. Because for me who never had a mattress. I had a cow skin. I had no problem, but until someone comes and tells you, 'Oh, this is what you are using???' Oh! This is bad.' Then I start thinking this is not good and I start not to appreciate what I have. I think when we appreciate what people have... (...) So, to me this is very, very important. It does not matter how we appreciate. People will do it differently.⁴²⁸

Joseph does not think that Westerners today can be blamed for the historical wrongdoings. In Joseph's understanding, demanding an apology is not appropriate. He argued that experiencing others recognition of your values, culture and ways of doing may contribute to building actors' self-esteem

⁴²⁷ Interview with Joseph.

⁴²⁸ Interview with Joseph.

and confidence and be a source of healing. He thinks that appreciation and recognition of local traditions, practices and norms are ways of affirming the other's identity.

The appreciation and recognition or even just acceptance of the other's ways of doing is not easy. For Westerners in Africa, the way many Africans relate to time schedules with flexibility might be difficult to accept. One day, the participants were presenting group works about opportunities in their local contexts. The group presentations took time, and as lunch time was approaching, one of the mission leaders whispered to the project leader: "Delay is a problem for the people in the kitchen. They neglect this problem." Prompted by the mission leader, the project leader went over to the UYT Co-ordinator for French-Speaking Countries, who was leading the programme, presumably to discuss time and lunch. On returning to his seat at the Norwegian table (I was part of the Norwegian group in this group work), the project leader explained that since it was raining, we could not go to the dining hall now, and therefore, we might as well continue the presentations. Following the next presentation, the leader of the programme asked the participants: "Shall we continue or take a break?" One of the participants from Cameroon responded: "We will continue." The mission leader was stressed. "We need to inform the kitchen," she said. "The kitchen is also behind," responded the project leader. "This is how it is." For the mission leader, however, timekeeping is an important value. She would like to teach the Cameroonians to become better timekeepers: "Yes, but it should not be like this," she said to the project leader. "We are trying to work on this. Then, I think it is not good when our own meetings are behind. Not followed up." The presentations continued. Forty minutes past the scheduled lunch time, the Norwegians were hungry, tired and impatient, while the Cameroonians were still full of enthusiasm—clapping, laughing and engaged in the presentations and discussions.⁴²⁹

While Joseph explained that it is important to appreciate what people are doing, even though it might be difficult, Isak has experienced how others' recognition of one's achievements can build confidence. Isak visited a church in another country to share experiences about how his church has been working to increase financial independence. After hearing about the experiences from Isak's church, the leadership in the other country asked their Norwegian partner for financial support to visit Isak's church to learn more about how they are working. In this way, the leaders in the other church were encouraged by seeing that it is possible for an African church that was previously dependent on financial support from abroad to become financially independent. For Isak's church, taking the role of showing others how things can be done was a confidence boost:

...they came to our diocese. And we showed everything there. Not only theoretical part but they saw how the congregations are doing things, how people are doing things. And they saw everything! And so amazed to tell you. And they went back, and they mobilised their community

⁴²⁹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 18.10.2019.

*there. Which is really interesting for me, and I felt very, how can I express! So, this is..., this is it! Yes.*⁴³⁰

Appreciation and recognition of each other's stories and efforts contribute to constituting and affirming actors' understandings of their own capacities and abilities. The participants in Use Your Talents listened attentively, expressing appreciation and recognition of each other, both during the programme and in informal conversations. On the last day of the annual conference, the project leader gave special thanks to the two main people who had organised the event and recognised all the participants for their contributions:

*You cannot imagine how much work they (the two main people who organised the annual conference) have done. Worked day and night. I am so happy for the work you have done. While I am thanking them, they are still working as translator and administrator. Thank you to all of you! You are special (...) Believe me, I have appreciated all the presentations and contributions.*⁴³¹

The project leader led the authoring of the normative order of Use Your Talents by inviting the actors to contribute and to share their stories. By recognising their stories, the project leader recognised the actors' capacities and abilities. His recognition of the actors' stories authored the social order of Use Your Talents. The actors co-authored the normative order of Use Your Talents as a story of actors' capacities and abilities by telling their stories of their capabilities and abilities and through recognition of each other's stories, thereby performing the social order of recognition. The social order of recognition served to protect the normative order of Use Your Talents, preventing the actors from addressing the limitations of the Use Your Talents approach.

7.2. Church Structures Structure Noumenal Power

The book about Use Your Talents describes Use Your Talents as an approach to development that utilises the potential of congregations for the local community. In Pastor Rakoto Endor Modeste's (president of FLM 2004–2016) story about Use Your Talents, which is presented in the foreword to the book, he describes how employees and volunteers in parishes and church departments use their talents, and he describes Use Your Talents as a movement from "inside the church to the community".⁴³² My analysis of the actors' stories shows that the movements between the actors, the congregations and the church structures are multi-directional. Power relations affect, and may also be affected by, Use Your Talents.

In some churches, the normative order of Use Your Talents is implemented through the church structure. In his presentation to the Use Your Talents International Annual Conference 2019, Matthew

⁴³⁰ Interview with Isak.

⁴³¹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 19.10.2019.

⁴³² Haus, *Use Your Talents – the Congregation as Primary Development Agent*, 9–11.

explained that in FLM, Use Your Talents is implemented through the church structure with “development committees in every community at all levels,” where “the pastors are obliged to be the leaders of the development committees”. According to Matthew, the co-ordination office (Fanilo) makes decisions.⁴³³ Use Your Talents is also the diaconal approach used in MELCI, Tabita’s church (a small and young church established in Ivory Coast by the NLM). Tabita said that they have created a normative strategy for the implementation. The strategy has five points: each congregation should organise a workshop on Use Your Talents and have a social project for assisting vulnerable people, a development project in the community, a project for women and a saving scheme.⁴³⁴ In FLM as well as in MELCI, Use Your Talents is implemented through a normative policy that has been created, or at least formally approved, by a body of decision makers in their churches’ structures. The other participants referred to the work of Fanilo in FLM as a good model for how Use Your Talents can be implemented in the church structure. In the presentation about how they are working with Use Your Talents in his church, one of the participants said that they are trying to copy what they have seen in Madagascar. “It is working there,” he said.⁴³⁵ Connecting the normative policies promoted in the church structure of FLM to observations of how actors in Madagascar use their resources served as evidence of the potential of the approach.

Not all church leaders have embraced the Use Your Talents. John is frustrated that the Use Your Talents approach is not implemented through the structure of his church. He said that the church leaders are not fully aware of the potential of Use Your Talents and argued that this is one of the main hindrances to utilisation of the approach in his church.⁴³⁶ In John’s understanding, successful implementation of Use Your Talents rests on the leaders’ will of promoting the approach. Similarly, Isak explained that one of the main challenges in the implementation of Use Your Talents in his church is the lack of enthusiasm from the top church leaders. Even though they have spent time together talking about Use Your Talents, the leaders of Isak’s church do not use their influence to promote the approach, he said:

The first challenge is from top leaders, church top leaders. They could not be able to take it as a very important approach. Theoretically, they say, ‘Yes, this is very important,’ but they could not be able to come to the front and play proactive role. This still is a paradox for me. Because I took several times with them. (...) I spent time with them. The management members. I spent time. (...) And I spent time with top leaders, but they appreciate it, they are impressed by what I am telling them, by what I am showing them. Then when they go back, they do not take priority for it, they do not take responsibility to co-ordinate and to promote further and to go to take this approach

⁴³³ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 18.10.2019.

⁴³⁴ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

⁴³⁵ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

⁴³⁶ Interview with John.

*spread further out down to the congregations. (...) So, if the national church takes it into consideration and they follow it up, it will be very good but unfortunately it did not go like that.*⁴³⁷

Isak explained the lukewarm reception of Use Your Talents among the leaders in their busyness and the impact of the “dependency syndrome”:

*The challenges are there with top leaders. One, I think one is this, even though the root cause is not well known, I know that (Isak’s church) is a very big church growing dramatically, dramatically growing and then at the same time dramatically growing challenges are there in the different areas. And the church leaders are too occupied with these problems to solve. So, these are there. Maybe this can be one of the factors taking the attention of the leaders maybe. And the other thing is, the other thing I experienced is, you know, as I said, we have been, for a long time we have been supported by external finances, and people have a conviction, or a belief that it is obvious that it is natural for them to be supported from some areas. And this is kind of what the development practitioners say dependency syndrome. And this is still a big challenge to be tackled, the dependency syndrome. So, without working in depths on the attitude of the people, you cannot solve this problem. But the dependency syndrome, just a feeling to be supported by someone, is there.*⁴³⁸

Eve thinks that Use Your Talents can do better without the church structure and institution. “If it (Use Your Talents) is not institutionalised it will go faster,” she explained. She thinks that Use Your Talents “loses the purpose” when it is institutionalised, because the approach requires personal commitment. With commitment, it will be easy, she explained, but she thinks that when the approach is implemented in the church structure, consistency is lost, and the purpose is weakened.⁴³⁹

However, since Eve’s position is part of the church structure, she finds that the lack of support from her leader hinders her work in promoting Use Your Talents as much as she would like. Eve is frustrated that her leader and the leadership in the church have not fully discovered the great potential she sees in Use Your Talents: “My boss is not interested, or he has not really understood Use Your Talents. So, it weakened me. The more I work, if it is not really interested by him, how can I proceed? Nobody can pull me for me.”⁴⁴⁰ Eve explained that if she had a budget for travelling around to the different congregations to train congregants and follow up on their activities, she could achieve great things. However, since the leadership of her church is not interested in allocating resources for this purpose, it is difficult. Eve said that although the congregants have capacity, they need follow-up and encouragement and sometimes guidance and advice. She further explained that all the leaders in the different dioceses have been trained in Use Your Talents, but she does not think that the diocese employees have taken the approach to the local congregations. Eve explained that since the church

⁴³⁷ Interview with Isak.

⁴³⁸ Interview with Isak.

⁴³⁹ Interview with Eve.

⁴⁴⁰ Interview with Eve.

leaders are busy with decision-making processes, they are not able to spend time with the congregants and are therefore not the right people to promote Use Your Talents:

People who design the strategic plan or people who are leaders, it is not their responsibility to mobilise grassroots. It is a decision. Telling for others. (...) You know this Use Your Talents has to get the right people. The right people not personally but because of their job, because of their responsibility. (...) If a congregation pastor thoroughly taught Use Your Talents, they (people in the congregation would) easily catch it. (...) But who take this training? The diocese presidents who are always making decision, decision, decision, who are always extremely busy. Finance, general secretaries, they are busy. They have little time to think about grassroots (...) development. Because of institutional responsibility.⁴⁴¹

Eve is also frustrated that in her church administration, the responsibility for Use Your Talents has been placed under church economy, since in her understanding Use Your Talents is about diakonia. "I have not really fully understood why they let it there. For me, I do not know the real reason why they placed it there."⁴⁴²

Eve said that talents are given to us to share with others:

Use Your Talents is something God-given natural ability or talent. It could be handwork, it could be mental work, it could be education, wisdom which we have to proceed, we have to continue or share for others. We have to transfer our talent for others according to our environment according to our situation. So, it is a talent, a gift for me, I have to use it to help others, to transform for others what blessed me. The more I use my talent, it could be for environment, human being, church or for anybody, that bring blessing and growth to me when I use my talent that is how I understood Use Your Talents.⁴⁴³

While in Eve's understanding, Use Your Talents is about sharing, in the understanding of the leadership of her church, the purpose of Use Your Talents is to strengthen the economy of the church.

Like Isak, who emphasised that he had spent time with the church leaders, Eve identified spending time with the congregants as important in promoting Use Your Talents. According to Isak and Eve, spending time together may increase actors' influence.

Jonas suggested that the implementation of activities through power structures in which leaders tell people what to do may actually demotivate people. He thinks that volunteers have a better working morale and are more motivated than employees. He has identified church members as a great resource that has not been utilised, and he has observed that people are motivated to work voluntarily for the church:

⁴⁴¹ Interview with Eve.

⁴⁴² Interview with Eve.

⁴⁴³ Interview with Eve.

(T)he best thing in the church is, many people they want to work on volunteer base, not on payment. So that is, you know, very much interesting. Also, as to me, people who work are more interested in working voluntarily rather than employed. So, when we employ, sometimes we could not find the employed one in the office. Sometimes, they may not work properly. But there (in the congregations), since they are working on volunteer basis, they did not reserve their energy, their time, so that is huge resource, that is what I have seen.⁴⁴⁴

While Jonas has discovered the resource of church members' volunteer work, David explained that the church members' offerings are important for the church economy. In the past, the congregations, parishes and dioceses of his church used to get financial support from higher levels in the structure. The flow of money was coming from abroad to the central office of the church and then distributed down to the dioceses, parishes and congregations. Some years ago, the church made a policy in an attempt to change the direction of the flow. The policy said that 10% of the income of congregations should go to the diocese and then 10% of the diocese income should go to the central office to run the administration of the church. However, according to David, this was not implemented in practice. Policies from above did not have the power to change the direction of the flow of money:

So, when the church said: 'No, now the donations (from abroad) was stopped, so you can give the money to the evangelism work, to the diocese and to the upper level,' it became very difficult. But what we did was strong biblical teaching. We have started teaching the congregation leaders, parish leaders and even members. Every member should know giving money is very important part to stand as a church in this country. So, by doing so, I think great significant change has come.⁴⁴⁵

David said that after the church leaders spent time in the congregations teaching from the Bible, the congregants began to give money to support the church organisation. According to David, the church leaders' influence was strengthened through their presence in the congregations and through utilisation of the noumenal power of the Bible. David explained that although his church has an income-generating scheme, from a biblical perspective, the purpose of life is not to gain money. In his understanding, the purpose is to help each other:

If gain is just being productive, there are many people who are exploiting and corruptive and gain and gain and gain. That is not, does not fit with the biblical gain. So, the biblical gain is being blessing for others. Helping the needy, helping the poor, and then you gain your brother.⁴⁴⁶

Isak explained that when resources come from abroad, transparency down to the congregations is poor, while the resources that are collected locally are followed closely by the congregants. In contrast

⁴⁴⁴ Interview with Jonas.

⁴⁴⁵ Interview with David.

⁴⁴⁶ Interview with David.

to traditional development projects, in the raising of resources for a new church building in his hometown, there was full transparency:

I think in raising local resources, it is very easy for the members to know how the resources are being implemented. Because what we do, what I did was, we list all members who raised whatever kind of resource, it could be carrying water, it could be money, it could be something else, we listed everything, and we put on the notice board. (...) Everybody knows how much money is generated. And we do have periodically, quarterly, we report everything for our members. So, it is very, very transparent. But you know, this is a kind of downward accountability, downward accountability. (...) If we see the traditional projects, the money is for the local people but including me, our main focus is for upward accountability. So, there are clear distinctions. Even the people, they do not know the amount of money came into being, they do not know what percentage of that is utilised, how it is reported they don't know, so it is the leaders who know these things. But in case of local resource generation, if I raise something, I need to know how it is implemented and it is easy for me to detect if it is misused. Even it minimises the misuse of resource.⁴⁴⁷

The transparency that Isak promoted through the social order of posting all contributions on the notice board constructed a normative order among the congregants. Congregants who did not contribute did not get their name on the notice board.

Jonas sees great potential for churches in business development. The purpose of engaging in business is to strengthen the church in her ministry, he said. He explained that if women participate in a saving scheme organised by the church, they will attend church more frequently. He further told me that in the new church building of his congregation, they have a plan to buy computers and set up an internet connection. He thinks classes in information technology may attract youth to come to church and there might be a possibility that they may also stay for the church programme, thereby strengthening the church economy to equip the church for her ministry while attracting youth to come to church. He explained that while in the past it was easy to share the gospel on public transport, this time people do not listen:

So, before 10 am, we are planning to, you know, give secular computer training, experience sharing, and the friends invite, no, the members of the church, invite their friends. Just: 'we have computer training for half an hour in the morning, may you come?' Then they may come. Then, if they are interested, they may not go back home. Just after that, the worship programme is going to start. So, this is one of the ways that, you know, they have to know their saviour, the Jesus Christ (...) This is one of the ways, because nowadays, you know, if you speak for someone in the way on the transport: 'Jesus is your saviour, you have to believe', many people respond adversely, wrongly. So, this is one of the ways that we are planning that the people have to know about Jesus, that Jesus died for them, so this is one of the things that we are going to do.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁷ Interview with Isak.

⁴⁴⁸ Interview with Jonas.

Jonas said that money is not really the problem. For him, knowledge is of greater value: “You know, the major problem is not the money, but the knowledge. The skill. That is the major problem. Even for spiritual as well as for development. Money is not that much major thing.”⁴⁴⁹ In his experience, it is possible to raise funds locally. He explained that in his local congregation, although the congregants are few, they have collected enough money to buy a piece of land to build a church:

*We have collected (amount in local currency) and, you know, constructed, bought the area. So, we bought by (amount in local currency). Again, we constructed a big hall in the same compatible to the area, the worship hall. So, this all has been done and all things are on voluntarily basis. We did not pay for any engineer, except exceptional skills we employed. Rather than that all has been done, the money is mobilised, by the church members. But the church members are very few.*⁴⁵⁰

Buying a piece of land and building their own church was important for the congregation. Renting a property always had a risk attached, since the neighbours could complain about noise from the church and the owner could decide to terminate the contract:

*So now it is our property; it is the church property. So now we can plan. Because that was our risk. People who worship and gather in that place. If that person (the owner of the land) fails to rent, so you have to move to a very far place. Even you may not get easily. Because people do not want to rent for the church. Because they say our neighbours may be disturbed, they say like this, so we have strongly struggled to retain there and then we achieved that, the next step now, the most important is we have to work on human capital, we have to work on them.*⁴⁵¹

Ester explained that Use Your Talents invites church members to get involved, and when people use their own skills and resources for the benefit of the congregation or the community, they feel ownership. When I asked Ester if the purpose of Use Your Talents is to develop the people or to develop the church, she rejected the dichotomy between the well-being of the community and the well-being of the church:

*How can you develop the church if you cannot develop yourself? For example, if the people in the women’s group use their talents, they have income for their kids. They send them to school, they can buy food for their family, so, and this kind of things they have money for the offering. Because they have money, they have food, they have some kind of doing small business so when they come to church, they can give more money.*⁴⁵²

For Ester, the church exists for the community and the well-being of the community benefits the church and the community. According to Ester, the “purpose of Use Your Talents is like to let people to use wisely their resources around. And use it as an asset and teach people not to complain.”⁴⁵³ With

⁴⁴⁹ Interview with Jonas.

⁴⁵⁰ Interview with Jonas.

⁴⁵¹ Interview with Jonas.

⁴⁵² Interview with Ester.

⁴⁵³ Interview with Ester.

these words Ester revealed that the normative order of Use Your Talents may serve to silence certain voices and perspectives and hide truths about poverty and injustice.

7.3. Development Funds Construct Structures and Networks of Relations

In the introduction I presented UYT-IP as a development project run by NMS, with governmental funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). The funding is channelled through Digni, an umbrella organisation of Norwegian mission societies and churches engaged in long-term development cooperation. Digni accesses and distributes funds from Norad for Norwegian mission societies and churches that run development projects in co-operation with organisations or churches in other parts of the world. Projects from Norad must fulfil certain standards for the planning and reporting of results in line with Norad's policies, and according to the Digni website, "Digni ensures that the money is well spent and that projects are performing well."⁴⁵⁴ For the flow of reports and funds between UYT-IP and Norad through the channel of NMS and Digni, see the attachment.

In chapter five, I described how the actors justified the normative order of Use Your Talents by arguing that the system of development aid undermines their abilities to reason and to act. Although UYT-IP is funded through the system of development aid⁴⁵⁵, the actors described Use Your Talents as different. The relations between the different actors in Use Your Talents is best described as a network.⁴⁵⁶ In the first part of this chapter, I described Use Your Talents as a network of relations between actors who recognise each other's abilities stories, actions and contributions.

Telling me how Use Your Talents developed into an international network, the project leader explained that based on the experiences from congregational development committees in Madagascar, "we" contacted other organisations in the Digni network and asked them if the approach could be interesting for some of their partner churches. Three of the other Digni member organisations responded with interest and contacted some of their partners in Africa. During my interview with the project leader, he frequently used the pronoun "we". When I asked him to whom "we" referred, his response reflected the tension between him seeking to uphold the other actors as the actors in Use Your Talents while he is leading the project himself:

*NMS and FLM in a way. Or (name of co-ordinator for UYT in Madagascar) and those we were working with in Madagascar. But it was NMS or me who, in a way, asked the Digni members if anyone would like to be part of developing this.*⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁴ See www.digni.no, accessed 01.06.2021.

⁴⁵⁵ For a model of the flow of money and reports in UYT-IP, see the attachment.

⁴⁵⁶ Boberg, Johansson and Andriamisarisoa provides an overview of churches and organisations in the Use Your Talents network. See Boberg, Johansson, and Andriamisarisoa, 46.

⁴⁵⁷ Interview with the project leader (my translation from Norwegian).

According to the project leader, the co-ordinator for Use Your Talents in Madagascar is the most central person in Use Your Talents. He explained that the co-ordinator is the one who has developed and established the approach in the structure of FLM after travelling around in Madagascar together with the project leader showing the project leader how actors in Madagascar use their resources. However, the project leader explained, the co-ordinator was not in the position to approach Digni. For the project leader it was easy to access Digni, and according to the project leader, the encounter between the co-ordinator and the project leader became a catalyst for Use Your Talents.⁴⁵⁸

Throughout the interview, the project leader navigated the tension between his own role as the project leader and the ownership of the actors. He explained that there are four to five key persons from each country who have been regular participants in the international gatherings. When I asked him how these people were identified, his response reflected the tension between his own role and the ownership of the actors:

*What we said something about, or I, or the project in a way, was that one desires people from somewhat varied backgrounds, active and passionate people (ildsjeler), preferably some in leadership positions and some who in a way are ordinary members, but who are active and passionate (ildsjeler) in their own churches.*⁴⁵⁹

While in most development projects funding from development donors is transferred to and managed by actors, in UYT-IP the budgeting and accounting was managed by NMS in Norway. When I confronted the project leader with this paradox, he argued that since the funding in Use Your Talents is not continuous, the budget is mainly for travelling, seminars and pedagogical tools, he could not develop a system for financial management. Furthermore, he said, "Since the activities are localised in so many different countries, I am thinking that it is the most practical way of doing it. Because we are relating to sooo many. (...) The point is where the money is being used, where the accounting takes place is not..."⁴⁶⁰ The project leader explained that the competence and capacities of the different organisations and churches that receive funding through Digni vary. The project leader is concerned that if, or when, the requirements from Norad become tighter, one may not be able to use funds from Norad to support certain groups that may not have the capacity to provide satisfactory documents and reports.⁴⁶¹ For him, Use Your Talents is an attempt to address this risk, by encouraging actors to use their own resources. He explained that in some cases, the attachments provided by the actors for covering expenses in connection to the organisation of workshops and field trips organised by UYT-IP have not fulfilled the standard that Digni and Norad require. In such cases, NMS has covered the

⁴⁵⁸ Interview with the project leader.

⁴⁵⁹ Interview with the project leader (my translation from Norwegian).

⁴⁶⁰ Interview with the project leader.

⁴⁶¹ Interview with the project leader.

expenses from NMS' own budgets, not risking the reputation of Use Your Talents and NMS in the Digni/Norad system.

While there is little room for creativity in financial reports to Digni, there is more flexibility and room for innovation in the development of results indicators. The project leader explained that he prepared the project document for UYT-IP together with a development advisor at the NMS central office in Stavanger. They developed a framework with indicators that the results should be evaluated and reported against themselves. He is not sure the indicators they identified in the planning process preparing the documents have always been the best, but the process has been instructive, he said. Preparing the annual reports, the project leader is contacting the 12–15 different churches that have been involved in Use Your Talents, asking them questions about what is happening and summarising their responses in the report to Digni/Norad. Some respond to the questions while others do not, he said.⁴⁶² In cases where no external funds are involved, the churches are not accountable to the donors. The project leader nevertheless asks them. By inviting actors to participate in events and to co-author the normative order of Use Your talents, the project leader has established a kind of accountability, and some respond to his report request. The project leader collects the actors' stories and uses the stories to legitimise the UYT-IP in his reports to Digni and Norad. With UYT-IP, the project leader has established a network where actors by telling their stories account for how they use their own resources. In the absence of financial transactions, the reports are voluntary, and the actors can pick and choose their involvement with Use Your Talents.

In January 2020, Use Your Talents was the topic at a public seminar organised by the Church of Norway diocese of Oslo in co-operation with NMS. The seminar, which raised the issue of bureaucratic requirements in development projects, was a panel debate with representatives from Norad, Digni, NMS and UYT-IP with the topic, "How does locally developed methods like Use Your Talents fit Norwegian Development Governance?"⁴⁶³ The representative from Norad argued that accountability, transparency and control are important to ensure that limited resources are spent wisely on what produces results. The Secretary General of Digni followed up, saying that the structure that is needed to accommodate the bureaucratic requirements of Norad is lacking in many places and asked if actors have the capacity to manage even their own resources.⁴⁶⁴ His question suggested that they do not. In this understanding, development funds are not only the transfer of financial resources to enable actors to develop but also a way of monitoring and controlling activities, implying that actors have limited capacity to "perform well". According to the Digni website, the mandate of Digni is to ensure that

⁴⁶² Interview with the project leader.

⁴⁶³ «Hvordan passer lokalt utviklede metoder som Use Your Talents inn i norsk bistandsforvaltning?»

⁴⁶⁴ Field notes from Oslo, 31.01.2020.

“money is well spent and that projects are performing well”.⁴⁶⁵ The legitimacy of Digni rests on the understanding that actors’ reasoning and actions needs monitoring.

While Norad and Digni are bureaucratic organisations located in offices in Oslo, the mission organisations are present in Africa and Madagascar. Isak explained that Norad and the mission organisations are different. Mission organisations being closer to the actors and building relations, their potential influence is greater than the policies and requirements communicated on paper or during short visits. Mission organisations and churches serve as bridges between the development donors and the actors and the encounters between the missionaries or church leaders and the actors provide opportunities for the actors to influence the use of funds:

*I do not see as equal Norad and NLM. NLM is a bit closer to the communities through its regional or national offices. And NLM should fulfil the needs of Norad, the interest of Norad. So NLM also wants from the local partners that the things requested should be fulfilled. But the good thing is, since NLM is very close compared to Norad to the community, they have a very good chance to travel and to share things with the community. And sometimes even though the rules and the principles are there, sometimes they compromise. So sometimes they give focus for the benefit of the people in the way that the people want it. But there is a possibility for them to be guided by where the fund is coming from.*⁴⁶⁶

In Isak’s understanding, there is a tension between, on the one hand, what benefits the actors and what the actors want, and, on the other hand, what development donors wants. While development donors produce requirements and instructions in offices far away from the actors’ daily lives and experiences, the mission organisations and churches are present in Africa and Madagascar and participate in the daily life of the community. Interpersonal relations offer opportunities for the reciprocal influence and negotiation of the implementation of a project. However, in Isak’s experience, mission organisations and churches can always refer to the guidelines from the back donor if they do not agree with or accept the reasoning of the actors.

Twenty-five percent of John’s salary is from UYT-IP. When I asked John if he can influence the direction of UYT-IP through his position, he explained that his influence in relation to the project leader is limited. John’s responsibility is mainly practical issues, while the project leader manages the project, he said. John justified this (lack of) sharing of responsibility in the project leader’s accountability to NMS (and Digni and Norad):

I am not sure directly. No. No. Perhaps the way I could influence him is just when he sees some result I am bringing out and take other decision accordingly. Yes, in that sense, I think perhaps it is possible. But going directly and saying I want this, or I want that, no. (...) There are things that are upon his responsibility. Because he is the one who is responsible upon the project and

⁴⁶⁵ ‘Digni | 20 Christian Organizations Against Poverty’.

⁴⁶⁶ Interview with Isak.

*everything. He is the one who will respond to NMS and so on. But technically, in the technical issues I mean, at that point we work together, we really work together.*⁴⁶⁷

John explained that he did not want to talk about financial issues: "...the administration and the financial part, he (the project leader) is taking it and I am not even willing to say much about those things because it is not from my responsibility."⁴⁶⁸ However, John did reveal that he does not fully agree with the way the project is run: "I am not very good in assessing money and things like that. I do not want to enter those, because there are many things I feel, that we could have done in another way."⁴⁶⁹ Voicing his critique by referring to his own limited ability, John protects the legitimacy of, and his loyalty to, the project leader. John's ambiguity was further revealed when, later in the interview, he said that he thinks he should have been employed full time in UYT-IP to maximise the potential impact of the approach in the region. He further explained that his work is difficult since he does not have a budget: "I do not have a budget for my functioning. So, everything that I am doing, I need to rely on the project leader, so I don't have any independency in my functioning."⁴⁷⁰

Isak is one of the other co-ordinators whose salaries were partly funded by the UYT-IP through the church structure. When I asked Isak if he is accountable to the project leader, he explained that their relationship is more about sharing and exchanging ideas:

*I do not have definite accountability to him. My accountability is here to (the leader of a church institution). But we are co-workers, we do have the same heart feeling towards promoting Use Your Talents. So sometimes I wrote something that I feel, and then he feels something and then write to me, and we freely exchange ideas. When we meet, we clearly discuss everything, and we freely express our feelings. So, so far, I did not see...but you know he is a psychologist, and he thinks in different direction and then bring the idea on the board and then we discuss. And the good thing with working with him is he never undermines any idea that come from someone. So, we bring things freely and discuss together.*⁴⁷¹

Isak values the project leader's ability to listen and discuss, while he describes their relationship as co-workers, implying mutuality.

Jakob stressed that the project leader does not make decisions in Jakob's country. The project leader is only a consultant who shares ideas, he said. Jakob explained that he does not like to work with Westerners. In his experience, when actors see Westerners, they prefer to listen to the Westerners, and Jakob's own authority is undermined, he explained. I asked Jakob if he sometimes disagrees with the project leader. Jakob explained that it is not only sometimes; they disagree a lot. However, he said,

⁴⁶⁷ Interview with John.

⁴⁶⁸ Interview with John.

⁴⁶⁹ Interview with John.

⁴⁷⁰ Interview with John.

⁴⁷¹ Interview with Isak.

since they have different responsibilities, their disagreements are rarely a problem. Jakob is responsible for running Use Your Talents in his country, while the project leader is responsible for international events. In summarising his relationship with the project leader, Jakob said that they are brothers and that he relates to the project leader as his brother in Christ.⁴⁷²

However, building mutual relationships across financial inequalities is not easy. The project leader is employed on a Norwegian salary, while the co-ordinators are paid according to the salary scales of their national employers. Isak justified the gap between the project leader's Norwegian salary and his own local salary in terms of the difference in living standards between Norway and his country. He explained that in his country many people are suffering and relative to them he is ok and therefore he cannot complain. He said:

*(T)he living standard in Europe is very different from the living standard in my country. (...) I justify in that way. Because there is high standard of living, so you can as a person, as an individual, you should cope with this condition. In my country we do have our average living standard, anything to be paid it should help us to... to yah. To live and something like that. So, at this time for me (my employer) is paying (...) 30% is handed by NMS at this level. It is... for me it is good. Because there are many people who are living in a desperate situation.*⁴⁷³

Although Isak, in his conversation with me, attempted to justify the differences in salary, his choice of words show that he also recognises the injustice in the economic inequalities he describes. In interpersonal relations between the Norwegians and the other actors, economic and material differences are constant reminders of, and confrontations with, injustice. Although Jakob strongly argued that it is not good to give money to people since people should use their talents, when I asked him if he had ever asked the project leader for financial support, he said that, yes, once he had asked for money for a particular private purpose and the project leader had given him money. Jakob stressed that it was only once. The money was for a journey, and Jakob said that the project leader had made it clear that although he knows that Jakob always talks about Use Your Talents wherever he goes, the money was a private gift from the project leader's family, not project money.⁴⁷⁴

While the programme of the annual conference was led by the Cameroonians, the project leader did not delegate the responsibility for financial transactions and receipts. Informing the participants in the annual conference about re-imbusement of travel expenses, the project leader emphasised the importance of documentation through provision of proper receipts.⁴⁷⁵ The project leader and the leader of NMS Global received the receipts and made the payments in the corner of the dining hall

⁴⁷² Interview with Jakob.

⁴⁷³ Interview with Isak.

⁴⁷⁴ Interview with Jakob.

⁴⁷⁵ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

after dinner one evening.⁴⁷⁶ The project leader's practice of promoting the idea that the participants have capacity and ability and actively involving the participants while maintaining full financial control was noticed by the participants, and they reacted with ambivalence. Joseph explained that making a white person the project leader could be perceived as a sign of mistrust. The narrative of Blackness is a heavy burden:

I know people may have different views about a white person being the project leader. But you see sometimes you also sense some negative, some people will have some negative connotation about 'so the project was developed there, they sent us a leader'. The question: Is it because they do not trust us? So, I think the question of trust has also to come into the connotation. Because people, 'so they are here, because they feel they cannot trust us, either with the resources'. But I am very sure Mirjam, there are people, if it has happened once, that someone has broken the trust, it does not mean that everyone is unfaithful. And if one person has messed up, I believe, if there are ten other good people who can do things right. So sometimes, it may also send a signal like they don't trust us in a way. They have given us money and then they are following the money. Cause I have heard such comments sometimes. People say: 'Ok, you have given us the money. You also want to show us how to use it? You also want to be there and monitor where is it going?' (...) So, I know some people will have that view, that you have given us, or you brought in resources to do this, and at the same time you want to do it. Is it because you don't trust us? (...) I think the challenge that people have is that when Joseph does something wrong, it is a mistake, but it is taken as a culture for everyone else, it is blanketed for everyone else. And some even say, we cannot trust you.⁴⁷⁷

Joseph's words highlight how the lack of structure in Use Your Talents, where the limited budget and the reports are managed and edited by the project leader and the NMS, may actually communicate mistrust and contribute to reproduce a narrative of the Black as dishonest and lacking in ability and capacity to manage financial resources.

Filip described how a narrative of Blackness affects his interactions with Norwegians. He feels that some Norwegians mistrust all black people:

...sometimes some Norwegians think that all the black people are not honest. They are always doubting on our honesty. It is a very, very big problem. Sometimes, when you come if you have expenses, a bill of expenses, you look at their face, it is like he is not convinced. It is like the bill is not correct, you think that something is hide behind, that is not clear. It is like lack of confidence. If you want to work with somebody in a very good atmosphere, I think you have to trust him. If not, you cannot work together.⁴⁷⁸

Filip recognised that different narratives participate in the construction and deconstruction of power relations. He described how the Black narrative of white imperialism, a narrative of whiteness, may be

⁴⁷⁶ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 18.10.2019.

⁴⁷⁷ Interview with Joseph.

⁴⁷⁸ Interview with Filip.

a source of tension where the church may see the missions' support as a way of controlling them.

According to Filip, the tension is based on a misunderstanding:

The problems. If I take the case of the church, there are some misunderstandings from the local church. Many persons can see this support like a control, they think that through this support the missionaries control the life of the church. It is a problem. I think it is misunderstanding of this partnership, and it creates sometimes some friction between the mission and the local partners, and this is the big problem. (...) Because they think, they interpret, it is their interpretation of this support. They think that through the support the mission can impose their point of view to the church.⁴⁷⁹

7.4. Summary

In this chapter, I have described how actors in Use Your Talents exercise power in networks of relations and structures. Networks of relations and structures enable mission organisations and churches to influence actors' reasoning and actions. By arguing that actors can use their own resources, Use Your Talents provide a justification for acceptance of economic inequalities. Mission organisations and churches do, at the same time, through recognition of actors' abilities to act, access financial resources.

⁴⁷⁹ Interview with Filip.

8. Economic and Relational Struggles for Justice

In chapter five, I described how the actors by telling each other stories about how they are doing Use Your Talents construct the normative order of Use Your Talents. In chapter six, I described how the actors in Use Your Talents use the Bible to construct and negotiate normative orders. In chapter seven, I described how mission organisations and churches by recognising the actors' abilities to act, access financial resources. In this chapter, I describe how the actors in Use Your Talents struggle to negotiate economic inequalities. In the first part of the chapter, I describe the actors' economic struggles and in the second part of the chapter, I describe how the actors struggle to negotiate economic inequalities.

8.1. Economic Struggles

Many of the actors' stories about how they are doing use your talents are stories about how they struggle to access financial resources. Josephine told the story about how she found ways to supplement her income as a pastor.⁴⁸⁰ Joseph' story is about how his family saves money by producing bricks for house building themselves.⁴⁸¹ The woman in Matthew's story is weaving carpets to get money for the school fees of her children.⁴⁸² Isak refers to the problems in communities as socioeconomic.⁴⁸³ Mary is struggling to find money to pay for her uncle's treatment.⁴⁸⁴ Eve explains that her ability to strengthen the diaconal ministry in her church is limited by the lack of a working budget.⁴⁸⁵ Ruth describes how economic differences impact families' well-being.⁴⁸⁶ Mary describes how the mobilisation of communities requires money for travel expenses.⁴⁸⁷ Ester describes how the development of the church depends on the economic situations of the congregants.⁴⁸⁸ Isak told me how he mobilised elders and congregants to contribute to the building of a new church building.⁴⁸⁹ David described how the church leaders convinced the congregations to support the running of the church administration when the support from abroad was discontinued.⁴⁹⁰ Financial resources are necessary for human beings to feed and educate children, take care of the sick and elderly, build houses and churches, and develop themselves, their congregations and their communities. Actors' ability to act based on their own ability to reason is not only a question of recognition of their own

⁴⁸⁰ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

⁴⁸¹ Interview with Joseph.

⁴⁸² Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 18.10.2019.

⁴⁸³ Interview with Isak.

⁴⁸⁴ Interview with Mary.

⁴⁸⁵ Interview with Eve.

⁴⁸⁶ Interview with Ruth.

⁴⁸⁷ Interview with Mary.

⁴⁸⁸ Interview with Ester.

⁴⁸⁹ Interview with Isak.

⁴⁹⁰ Interview with David.

ability to reason. Actors' abilities to act based on their own ability to reason rests on their access to financial resources.

The topic of the Use Your Talents Annual Conference 2019 was "Use Your Talents: How can Entrepreneurship Transform Yourself and Your Community". The title suggests that one of the aims of the conference was to learn more about entrepreneurship as a way to access financial resources to improve individual and communal well-being. The meaning of the concept of entrepreneurship and the potential tensions between the interests of the individual and those of the community were negotiated throughout the conference.

On the first morning of the conference, all the participants were divided into groups that visited different local entrepreneurs to learn about entrepreneurship. My group visited an entrepreneur in a village outside Ngaoundéré. The entrepreneur explained that there is food shortage in the area. In January and February, people do not have enough to eat, he said. He connected the story of his business to a struggle against famine. On a piece of land that he bought many years ago when plots of land were still available, this man has developed a successful business. He explained that to be successful in business, you need knowledge. After reading books about farming, he decided to combine different kinds of farming methods, seeking to utilise all potential resources, he said. He explained that ginger is easy to transport and gives good returns, corn can be used to feed chicken, and the chicken produces manure for the ginger. He has also planted some lime trees, and he has some beehives. For a sustainable water supply, he has built his own water pump running on a generator. The entrepreneur has employed a few people to work on the farm and he has developed a small factory producing juice from ginger, lemon and honey. He sells the juice in a small shop he has set up in town. The businessman has further discovered that since people cannot afford to buy a whole chicken (in markets in Africa and Madagascar, it is common to trade with chicken that are alive), there is a market for selling smaller pieces of chicken. After investing in a fridge for his shop, he is now selling pieces of chicken that have already been slaughtered, giving him a better return per chicken. He has thereby turned the poverty of the people in his community into a business opportunity. The participants were impressed and excited to learn about what this entrepreneur had achieved. They were asking specific and detailed questions, seeking to tease out the secrets of his success. Josephine said that when she returns to her country, she will begin to farm ginger.⁴⁹¹

In general, the participants expressed appreciation for the chosen topic of entrepreneurship. In a conversation I overheard, two of the participants were discussing how entrepreneurship may be a

⁴⁹¹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

response to the problems of unemployment among young men in the capital of their country.⁴⁹² In my interview with Jonas, he elaborated on how entrepreneurship may address unemployment:

Even you know one of the problems in this country is unemployment. So, this is also one of the answers for this unemployment. Many people have different skills, but they have not come across how to work, how to start, so there are, as I already said, there are different professionals there, we let them to share their experience to show what they have been doing, so some of the active youth can join something. Whether shopping, a small project, cottoning, poultry...⁴⁹³

Several of the participants used financial terminology when they were talking about Use Your Talents. They were talking about business plans, production, surplus and utilisation of resources. After his visit to Madagascar, Joseph employed somebody to make bricks from the soil on his own land. This will save him $\frac{3}{4}$ of the cost of buying bricks for house building:

After Madagascar, I also had something to go and do. Because I said, yeah, what do I have? But I realised I had a piece of land that was just lying there. Lying there! It is my father's land, but I have the freedom to use it. It was lying there. And when I went, I got someone to do bricks on that land, and as I speak, I have a number of bricks that I am going to use to build a house, and if I was to buy ready bricks, one will cost 12 (local currency), 12 (local currency), but when I made them myself, it costed me 3 (local currency). So, the difference is 9 (local currency). That is huge. Ok?⁴⁹⁴

In the actors' lives, economic and spiritual aspects are integrated. In her presentation to the conference, Josephine summarised the lessons she has learnt in eight points that reveal how she is integrating the economic and spiritual aspects of life:

1. Hardship pushed me to use my talent.
2. God enlightened me to notice what surrounds me.
3. Start small.
4. Use the resources that surround you.
5. Identify resources for opportunities.
6. Aim at being a producer, not a buyer.
7. Being a pastor does not mean that you should be poor. People do not listen to you if you are a poor beggar.
8. Leading by example is most important.⁴⁹⁵

One of the afternoons at the conference, a business entrepreneur gave a lecture about entrepreneurship. The lecture was held in the church and was open to the whole community, not exclusive to the participants in the annual conference. The lecturer presented a recipe of 21 points for

⁴⁹² Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

⁴⁹³ Interview with Jonas.

⁴⁹⁴ Interview with Joseph.

⁴⁹⁵ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 18.10.2019.

how to succeed in business, with references to books written by American businessmen and to the Bible, as well as practical examples from his own successful business. The business entrepreneur pointed to the accumulation of financial resources for investment as a necessary foundation for developing a business:

*To accumulate money, you need to know your revenues and your necessities. Necessities are not needs. Needs are broad. Manage your resources. Save 5% of your salary. Buy shares. Activities that create money is active. Avoid spending money as passive investment. An active puts money in your pocket, creates money.*⁴⁹⁶

Jakob did not like the emphasis on business development. During my interview with Jakob after the presentation from the businessman, he explained that in his opinion, the ideology presented by the business entrepreneur had been in conflict with the idea of Use Your Talents:

*I do not like the teaching from (the business entrepreneur) now. It is not the idea for the Use Your Talents. It is idea for the entrepreneur generally. But not for Use Your Talents. I think. And I say for (the project leader), I will say it for (the project leader) when I have time.*⁴⁹⁷

While the actors seek to participate in the economic system, they expressed critique of the social impacts of capitalism. After the presentation of the business entrepreneur, several of the audience's questions raised issues related to potential conflicts between financial growth and relationships. The first question was asked by a man who explained that he had experienced his family commitments as a hindrance that prevented him from succeeding in business. He asked the presenter to talk more about "external conditions that discourage us". In his response, the businessman recognised that there are many factors outside the individual's own motivation that may influence the business, and he agreed that family can be a limitation. The second question raised the issue of the aim of entrepreneurship: "Many succeed and become wealthy, but they become miserable. They do not benefit from their wealth. Someone who was born into poverty becomes rich but is not happy. Why?" The presenter refuted this critique by referring to selected verses in the Bible, arguing that financial growth is from God and therefore good: "It is a blessing of the Lord to be rich. God does not give us sorrows." A third question reflects dissatisfaction with the answer to the previous question: "Is the goal of entrepreneurship just to create wealth?" The entrepreneur responded that the aim is improvement in lifestyle. He further explained that failures and making mistakes are "part of the game" and opportunities to learn. However, he agreed that entrepreneurs may face loneliness and difficulties.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁶ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

⁴⁹⁷ Interview with Jakob.

⁴⁹⁸ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 17.10.2019.

Jonas is concerned about how women's participation in the economic system may affect social and biological reproduction. During a trip to Zimbabwe, he learnt that chickens can be a good source of income for women that can be easily combined with childcare. In his country, most households have a few chickens. Increasing the number of chickens will increase the income while the women can still be at home and look after the children, he explained:

You know, one of the things that I have learnt from Zimbabwe is that the housewives were rearing chickens around, 50, 100, because she is looking after the children, again she is rearing. In my country, very few. Still, this activity has to be done. Because most of the women, housewives depend on their husbands' income. In everything. They ask, they do not get. So, if they have their own resource like this. If someone has 50 chickens. 50 egg means huge amount per day. (...) It is huge amount. So, still this is one of the areas that makes it possible to generate income and again she cannot go far. If she goes far, you know the house the children, again the sheep the cattle, who is going to look after them? So, still we have to invest on women small project like this. It may not cost much.⁴⁹⁹

Jonas described how fellowship may protect people from the suppressing powers of capitalism. During a visit to a women's saving scheme, he observed that by helping each other save money together, the women did not become subject to the harsh rules of the banking industry. In the church's saving programme, according to him, the women treated each other with grace and if one of them faced financial difficulty and could not pay according to plan, the women would gather to pray, he said. He explained:

If somebody borrow the money and unable to pay on time. So, at that time they do not push: 'Now you have to pay at this time'. They do not do that. They visit her and they say: 'do not worry about that. Whenever you get the money, you can pay back.' So that is, you know, people will not go far if you do like this. But if you go by giving collateral or something that is very..., again, the interest is high. You know many people are failing, you know. We see in TV or in newspaper. They fail to pay. Then their house or their building are going to be sold by bid. So many lost that. So, this by the church gathering, especially the women, they are benefitted, again they have good relationship, they worship together. Again, based on that collection, they can use that money. So, you know, this is the best idea that I have got from Use Your Talents and even I am going to implement in my congregation. So that is really the potential. They have money, but the problem is there is no saving habit. If they save in this way, so they can properly use the money. Again, they can make small business.⁵⁰⁰

Mary has experienced that access to money can help strengthen and improve interpersonal relations. During her presentation, she explained that when women have their own money, they gain more respect with their husbands and the relationship between husband and wife may improve:

Before we did not have voice, we could not even sit where men are, we could not even be involved in discussion, but nowadays because we are involved in Use Your Talents, we can do business, we

⁴⁹⁹ Interview with Jonas.

⁵⁰⁰ Interview with Jonas.

*can get money, so we have a voice, we can put food on the table. So, the men, they respect us nowadays because we supplement their efforts.*⁵⁰¹

Many of the participants in the Use Your Talents Annual Conference emphasised that resources should be used for the common good. Individualism was mentioned among factors that may be a hindrance to the implementation of Use Your Talents.⁵⁰² In a question to the project leader, one of the participants asked: “What is your suggested solution for overcoming individualism?”⁵⁰³ In the presentation by a church leader, it was evident that in his understanding, Use Your Talents is a way of fighting individualism:

*Change is a process; it is not an event. Individualism continues. This is the second year of Use Your Talents in (my country). We have started to teach people to fight individualism. At first, people were only taking care of their own problems. There is progress. This year, contribution is increased. There is some change. Sensitise people to eradicate individualism. Continue to work to change people’s mentality.*⁵⁰⁴

The actors referred to individualism as a Western ideology. For Luke, it was an important point that Use Your Talents was presented as an approach from Madagascar. On explaining what he perceives to be a difference between African and Malagasy thinking and Western thinking, Luke told me a story that demonstrates a dilemma between financial management and relational commitments. Some years ago, Luke had been working in a hospital with a Western director. In a conversation with Luke, the Western hospital director pointed to a dilemma African hospital directors face when their family members fall ill:

*He tells me: ‘Luke, you know, we can’t have the same way of managing, because you know, if, for instance, you are the director of the hospital, will you be sure when your sister, your cousin, your aunt, the sister of your father, the mother of your father, when she came in the hospital. Who will pay? Are you sure you can ask them to pay? And then, if you are the director of the hospital, all the family will come and then you will have to see them. But you have to know that when you take it on yourself that you will pay. Of course, in a month, your salary will not be able to pay all. And usually, you will ask that you will let them not pay, and you will see that someone has to pay it. After that the hospital will break down because you have. For us, the people of the West, we do not have that. Even if my sister came, she will pay.’*⁵⁰⁵

In Luke’s understanding, this story demonstrates a difference between African and Malagasy thinking, and Western thinking. However, the dilemma of the hospital director to which Luke referred may be explained in the health and welfare system. In many Western countries, health and welfare is covered

⁵⁰¹ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 18.10.2019.

⁵⁰² Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

⁵⁰³ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

⁵⁰⁴ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 16.10.2019.

⁵⁰⁵ Interview with Luke.

by public funding through the tax system. In Luke's country, a person's health and welfare system is their family and neighbourhood:

Me: Yes. In Africa you are responsible for your family.

Luke: Yes.

Me: Of course.

*Luke: Yes. Who else?*⁵⁰⁶

Luke further emphasised that in his country people are not only sharing, but sharing is without barriers:

Luke: Because we are very sociable within the community, but even people will live within communities, sharing, without any barriers.

Me: Yes. Sharing.

*Luke: Sharing without barriers.*⁵⁰⁷

Matthew pointed to relations as resources. During his presentation, he suggested that when families meet, they should sit down together and map their resources, asking themselves:

- What skills do you have?
- What do you have?
- What is your responsibility?
- How will you use your money?
- Who can be a trustworthy friend to work together with you?

The same questions can be asked when people gather in bigger groups, such as an association or a church, he said. In addition, he explained that the group could ask themselves and each other:

- What kinds of products can we sell?
- Apart from the church, which other groups are you a member of?
- Who is the most influential person you can work with?

There are resource persons in every congregation that the pastors are not aware of, he said.⁵⁰⁸ While the businessman was talking about how individuals can succeed in business, Luke emphasised that Use Your Talents is not an individual act. During the interview, Luke used the term 'together' 16 times:

*Now it is together, and how can we do. And how can we put together to do it. How will we do it together and who has what to do it together. (...) And we together, are we going together put our means, not only in finance, but all what we have, what we can do, what practice we can put in, together, to meet the needs, and together to make all of us grow.*⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁶ Interview with Luke.

⁵⁰⁷ Interview with Luke.

⁵⁰⁸ Field notes from Ngaoundéré, 18.10.2019.

⁵⁰⁹ Interview with Luke.

According to Jakob, Matthew and Luke, Use Your Talents is an act of working together. For these three men, the relational aspects of human beings' lives are resources that enable them to influence others.

8.2. Struggles to Negotiate Economic Inequalities

A lack of financial resources hinders people from acting based on their own processes of reasoning. Luke explained that a shortage of money may hinder people from being who they are: "Many of our salaries are not at the level that you can be very independent and at ease to try to do what you have."⁵¹⁰

Joseph explained that the pastors in his church complain that their salaries are too low. Their salaries are so low that he hesitates to call them salaries. He thinks that pastors must also learn practical skills that can help them address their economic situation:

They are complaining because they feel like, let me call it the support, they are getting from the church in form of a salary or a stipend or something like that, they feel it is not enough. So, the question comes in, if you feel it is not enough, it is not helping you, you are not able to educate your children, not able to have a good house. So, what can you do about it? And so, for me, that was very interesting. Because for me, we have a role as an institution as we train pastors, we are not just training them to know how to interpret scripture or make good sermons, or how to sing hymns. We also want to, it was of interest to me also to see, how do we give them some knowledge, but not just head knowledge, but practical knowledge, so that even as they go out, they have something that they can do it, and practice for purposes of personal development, for personal growth. So, they do not really have to look around, who can pay for their school fees, who can give me money to do this... They are able to say: What is it that I have that I can use to generate income for example, and how else can I empower the people that I am living with.⁵¹¹

Hannah experiences that it is difficult to address economic inequalities. When I asked her how she feels about the salary differences between national employees and expatriate staff, her response expressed powerlessness:

Their money is their money. If they are hiring somebody with millions and hiring me with thousands, it is their right. What can I say? Look, now even if you are hiring someone to serve you in this house, if you like, you can pay more for one, or pay less, that is up to you, I think. Yes, our salary is not comparable.⁵¹²

Hannah has experienced that in the organisation where she works, resources are not necessarily utilised for the well-being of everyone, and sharing is not without boundaries.

Eve said that when seeing the lifestyle of the Western missionaries, the people in her church want to live like them. They get the impression that Westerners' lives are easy. Apparently, the wealthy

⁵¹⁰ Interview with Luke.

⁵¹¹ Interview with Joseph.

⁵¹² Interview with Hannah.

Westerners do not have any problems. They have everything they need. The differences in living conditions create divisions. As a neighbour, colleague and friend of a Western missionary, Eve gradually discovered that although Westerners do not lack material resources, their lives are not always easy. Despite their material wealth, Westerners are also vulnerable human beings:

We always want to live like missionaries. The the...how can I say, not spiritually only. Physical life... Life situation. (...) Materially. (...) We wish. (...) In the beginning, it is not even a question. We thought that it is like nature divided. In the beginning. But that when we grow up, especially I have this best, best, friend in my life, (name of Western missionary). When we live together, we share everything almost. Even our kids. The kids where they play, the church, that time we feel, oh, they are human, I think we can share. I think we really (became) close. When we cry, we go to each other house and we cry together.⁵¹³

Ruth said that although the economic differences between the Western missionaries and the church employees create a gap, the Westerners cannot be blamed for their wealth and the missionaries' power to change the situation is limited:

They have their homes, they have their cars, they have all what can help them to be well in the body, in their feeling, but it is not the same, not the environment for the others. For the church. But we are not going to say: 'Why are they like this?'. You cannot tell to the missionary: 'Don't go with your car because I do not have car'. Is it possible? He cannot buy a car for all of us.⁵¹⁴

However, Ruth thinks that more can be done to address injustice. She is frustrated that the church is not doing enough to help the poor. She explained that outside the church compound, there are many children who are orphaned due to HIV/aids. For their own security, the missionaries who were living inside the compound built a wall around the compound to protect themselves, she explained. In Ruth's understanding, the wall and the church's failure to address the suffering of the neighbours is a threat to the church's identity. She referred to a conversation she had with a person about how "nothing is done" for those who live outside the church compound:

...one day, he asked me, 'If now', he said, 'ok take an example: so, if now you go and you tell this people here that the church is going to leave this place, that we are going to another place, what are going to be their reaction?' I said: 'I do not know'. And he says: 'It is two. They can react in two ways. If you are very kind, if you are good for them, they are going to say: 'No! You are church, you are going, you are leaving, how are we going to do?' And if you are not useful to them, they are going to say: 'Oh, you can go! You are not useful to us!'" And I think, if one day, the church said we are going to leave, these people are going to say: 'Oh, you can go'. Because there is nothing visible that made to help them to come out of their situation. This young people are always fellowshiping in the chapel here, their mothers and fathers all are fellowshiping here, but they are not cared. And it is something...⁵¹⁵

⁵¹³ Interview with Eve.

⁵¹⁴ Interview with Ruth.

⁵¹⁵ Interview with Ruth.

While the actors struggle to access financial resources, they do not like begging, and they have mixed feelings about giving and receiving money. According to Daniel, people who do not believe in themselves may end up begging, and begging will hinder them from living the lives they want: “And then we try to tell them it is possible if you try in yourself. If you believe in yourself, you can do what you like. Don’t be every time to stretch your hand and asking something. No!”⁵¹⁶ Daniel further explained that terrorism is a problem in his country. Daniel believes that if people believe in themselves and see their own value, resources and potential, maybe they will not become terrorists:

*And, in our, a big part of (my country) there are terrorism, and we teach Use Your Talents to the youth to stop them to go in the terrorism. Because in (my country), the terrorism, the actor of terrorism, many is (from my country), many is (from my country), and when we teach, we say: ‘Try to do something! Try to do something in your own! You can develop yourself. Don’t go into terrorism! You can be what you like.’ Because many young now is in the terrorism.*⁵¹⁷

Jakob explained that when he goes to rural areas, people are disappointed when he comes alone, without foreigners. They have experienced foreigners giving them money, while Jakob is not in the position to do that. “I do not give money. I do not have money for them. And that experience is...” I was struggling to understand Jakob’s reasoning on this. As an orphan, Jakob had himself grown up with support from his community and he had also told me that he had asked the project leader for money for a private journey. Jakob explained that in his childhood, the congregation had not given him and his siblings money, they had worked together with them, and they had shared their food with them:

*No. The congregation don’t give money for us. Don’t give money for us, they bring their spade, and they bring the like that and they bring...rice, and they bring food. And they work for us, and they cook... When I was a child. And they cook and in one rice and something like that. But I eat with them. Do you understand me?*⁵¹⁸

For Jakob, giving money is significantly different from working together, eating together and sharing what you have. He said that in his country, when people see foreigners, they behave like children towards Santa Claus.⁵¹⁹

Working together was also a value highlighted by Luke. He explained that people have to accept that they need each other and then they have to work together to achieve what they need together:

Firstly, people can accept to be together, to accept first, and in a kind of equality just accept this is our really needs. It is not something that you can say. Because this is what we need effectively. And what we need effectively, together we will accept to achieve it. Using our means, our

⁵¹⁶ Interview with Daniel.

⁵¹⁷ Interview with Daniel.

⁵¹⁸ Interview with Jakob.

⁵¹⁹ Interview with Jakob.

*resources, financial resources, material resources, and then our brain. And not only our brain, but technically what everyone can do.*⁵²⁰

Joseph told me that on visiting churches in Europe, some of his colleagues have discovered that churches may have rooms full of old equipment that are no longer in use. Searching for a justification for this misuse of resources, he suggested that there may be policies saying that equipment should only be used for a certain amount of time. He explained that such equipment can come to good use in his country, but not if the one who receives feels that the giver disrespects what the receiver has and is:

*I do not find it a bad thing if you are saying: 'We have something here that we are not using. Is there a way this can be useful where you are?' I have friends who have travelled to other countries. And they have gone preached in a church, only to realise that their store is full of instruments that they were using before and that they are not using them because they got new ones. And here, back at home, they don't have. And he is looking at this; it is not because they are not functioning. It is because there is a policy maybe saying that we use this thing for two years or three years. So, some of them they will say, 'Is there a way you can help me to get this to my home? So that it can help us to do something else.' So, I think it is a question of that which you think can be used for others. How do you give it out? Do you give it out with a heart of I am just giving this because we know you do not have? I may not have the instruments, just like those that I saw in that store, but I have my skin, my drum made of goatskin. And I have been okay using it. But I am feeling like you have this that you are not using, I think we can use it somewhere else. So, for me, the question of also how do you proceed, also how to give it out with...how do I put it...with a... You know, someone they can give you something but the way they are giving it to you, it is like they are sneering at you. So, if we begin by appreciating what we have and that whatever we are giving we are giving out of a clean heart, we are giving it, while appreciating what you had before.'*⁵²¹

Joseph explained that being in the position of someone who needs help may impact your self-esteem. He stressed that the help he himself received was not as a result of begging:

For me, the way you bring it out, does it injure my self-esteem? Does it make me look at myself as someone who is sinking, begging...? But for me, as a young man who grew without any help from anyone, apart from what I did, and I am proud of that. I am not saying people have not helped me. But they have not helped me because I asked them to help me. They helped me because they felt positive in wanting to support me. Ok? 'We have seen what you are doing, we want to... Is it okay?' 'Yes!'

Joseph explained that in situations where he has needed money, he has asked friends to lend him money; he did not beg. When people have given him money, it has been after the establishment of a personal relationship, not begging. In Joseph's understanding, begging affects not only the freedom and self-esteem of the beggar but also the freedom of the one who encounters the beggar. A beggar

⁵²⁰ Interview with Luke.

⁵²¹ Interview with Joseph.

may exercise noumenal power by influencing the other's thinking and action:

I went to a university and one of my professors was from Canada. He was a visiting professor. And one day, after, he told me he wants to visit our church. And we went, he preached, he had a message, actually I am the one who went and picked them from the house. They did not have a car and I took them to church and took them back. We never talked about anything to do with what are your problems, what are you going through. We did not talk about that. But after they left, one day I saw an email, it said, 'Joseph, we are thinking about you, we are happy we have been friends. And we just feel we just want to send a small gift to you. To help you pay. Even if it is one person.' And that was the end of it. We have never even talked again. Not because I cut the relationship. But you know they were old, so sometimes I try, I email them even just for greeting, but they do not respond. So, I do not know what happened. Ok. There are many others. But all in my list, unless I went to someone and say, 'Can you borrow me this money? I want to do this, then I will be in challenge with money.' All the other people are people who gave me because they felt. They were not coerced. They were not pushed by anyone.'⁵²²

Recognising the similarities and differences between Joseph's life and his own, to the professor, the economic differences between them became unbearable.

8.3. Summary

In this chapter, I have described how the actors in Use Your Talents struggle against the idea that actors can use their own resources. The actors struggle to access financial resources and they struggle to protect their families, communities, congregations, and relations against the impacts of their economic struggles, negotiating economic inequalities. The impacts of economic inequalities are unbearable and may be devastating.

⁵²² Interview with Joseph.

9. Two Kinds of Ecumenical Diakonia

Ecumenical diakonia is a concept that churches use to describe and discuss their social ministries. The concept is promoted by the World Council of Churches and is gaining momentum in the global ecumenical movement. In the introduction of the study, I described how the concept of ecumenical diakonia, as presented in a recent document developed by the World Council of Churches, is an attempt to address certain effects of diaconal theory and practice, such as institutionalisation, marginalisation and secularisation. The document provides a normative description of ecumenical diakonia as ecclesiological, prophetic and holistic social practice with reference to systematic theological reflections. The aim of the study has been to contribute to the dialogue about ecumenical diakonia as a struggle for justice based on empirical study of the social reality to which the concept of ecumenical diakonia refer.

In chapter two, I described how ecumenical diakonia, located in a global context of pre-existing power relations, participate in the reproduction of power relations, and I described different attempts to address the issue of power relations in ecumenical diakonia, based on previous research.

In chapter three, I presented the main theoretical framework of the study. Rainer Forst's theory of justice as the right to justification constructs an idea of justice that may serve to deconstruct the validity of social orders and norms, including the researcher's own norms and what is taken for granted in the field of study. Forst's idea of justice is a world where human beings recognise each other's vulnerability and abilities to reason. The study has revealed that Forst's idea of justice is far from the social world in which human beings live. In the social world in which human beings live, despite human beings' struggles to recognise each other's abilities to reason, processes of practical reasoning participate in the reproduction of unjust norms and social orders. The social world in which human beings live is perhaps better described as a world of Black reason where human beings instrumentalise each other for the purpose of accessing financial resources. In this world where human beings are measured based on their capacity to serve a purpose, recognition has become a source of power. The possibility of a reason, or Logos, that has the power to justify human beings however cannot be excluded.

In chapter four, I described the process of production and analysis of the empirical material. The material is limited and focused, allowing in-depth analysis of both the participants' descriptions of their reasoning and actions, and the situations and relations in which their descriptions were produced.

I have presented the findings of the study in a thick description that provide the answers to the research questions. The first research question asked how actors in Use Your Talents describe their struggles for justice, and in chapter five, I described how actors in Use Your Talents describe their

struggles for justice as a struggle to justify themselves. The second research question asked how actors in Use Your Talents describe power relations, and in chapter six, I described how actors in Use Your Talents describe a power relation between human beings and God. The third research question asked which sources of power actors in Use Your Talents describe, and in chapter seven, I described how the actors in Use Your Talents describe recognition as a source of power. The fourth research question asked how actors in Use Your Talents negotiate power, and in chapter eight, I described how actors in Use Your Talents negotiate the power of financial resources by describing how human beings' struggles to access financial resources compromise their lives.

The study has identified two kinds of ecumenical diakonia. The first kind of ecumenical diakonia is the kind of ecumenical diakonia where theologians and development donors construct norms and social orders for how actors should think and act. The actors in Use Your Talents compare this first kind of ecumenical diakonia to colonialism. They describe how colonisers through instrumentalisation and domination of the colonised, threaten human's experiences of themselves as vulnerable beings who have the ability to reason and to act. The actors in Use Your Talents argue that the first kind of ecumenical diakonia, through construction of norms and social orders for how actors should think and act, limit their abilities to act based on their own processes of reason and thereby their freedom. The second kind of ecumenical diakonia is the kind of ecumenical diakonia where actors themselves construct their own norms and social orders. Both these kinds of ecumenical diakonia are located in a complex network of power relations.

The study has identified different sources of power in ecumenical diakonia. The first source of power in ecumenical diakonia is theology. The actors in Use Your Talents describe two kinds of theology. The first kind of theology constructs representations of human beings as servants or slaves who have the ability to reason and to act, and God as a master who rewards human beings based on the outcomes of their actions. The second kind of theology constructs representations of human beings as vulnerable, and God as a saviour or liberator for the suppressed. Both these kinds of theologies are part of the same framework that justify norms and social orders with reference to the Bible.

Relations and structures are the second kind of power in ecumenical diakonia. The actors in Use Your Talents describe how networks of relations and structures enable mission organisations and churches to influence actors' reasoning and actions. Further, the actors describe how mission organisations and churches, through recognition of actors' actions, access financial resources. The actors do however, at the same time, experience that mission organisations and churches fail to recognise their abilities to reason.

Financial resources are a third source of power in ecumenical diakonia. The actors describe how they struggle to access financial resources that will enable them to act based on their own processes of reasoning. The actors describe how access to financial resources enable them to protect their families, communities and churches while their struggles to access financial resources may also have relational costs. The actors struggle to negotiate the power of economic resources. Human beings' abilities to influence others' reasoning and actions are however related to their access to financial resources, and economic inequalities construct and reproduce unjust social and normative orders.

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Attachment: The Flow of Reports and Funds in Use Your Talents Innovation Project

