

# Empowering through making: re-thinking development cooperation as a co-creative, participatory design process to foster healthy, sustainable communities

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## Abstract

Rote education is outdated as it only serves the purpose of turning us into obedient task rabbits. As a holistic approach to learning it is fundamental to activate self-efficacy and self-responsibility in addition to creative and social skills, all crucial to successfully cope with the current global crisis and to tackle the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). This project assumes both the importance of our physicality (embodied cognition) and of bilateral cultural exchange for the process of learning and of decolonising awareness. The project implies that shared experiences based on relationships support a healthy learning environment including fun and playfulness, concentration and focus, as well as long term (muscle) memory.

The setting for this co-creative project was a one-semester teamwork focusing on craft-based designs between design students from Berlin University of Arts and pupils from Love School in Nairobi's slum Kawangware. We started by collaborating online during the semester project to eventually meet face to face in a hands-on workshop at Love School (which was on a voluntary basis without support by the University). The interaction with the children, which happened through Skype and WhatsApp, of course set in motion a communication and thinking process that concerns itself with the cultural and social backgrounds of the children and the students, questioning luxury, standards, needs and access by setting these very different environments in contrast. By exposing the design students to an open cooperation setting they were forced to experiment, question themselves and iterate their approach.

By passing on and explaining their ideas, processes and findings to the Love School pupils in a child-appropriate way, they had to reflect on their work and thinking, then abstract and simplify it, thus being able to quickly discover flaws in order to adjust their process. These tasks were embedded in a craft-based design process where students and pupils shared and applied different artisanal techniques emerging from both cultures. A challenge was the material supply. As a student in an arts university it is rather easy to work with any material the design idea requires. As a child in a slum with no financial possibilities, yet being surrounded by waste material, thinking about upcycling seemed obvious. The playful habits of children to tinker, craft and create decorative art objects on the one hand and the more reflected, systemic, strategic process of the design students on the other, lead to new hacks and hybrid approaches of making.

On a meta-level, the methods applied in the project aimed at re-designing development aid by pushing it towards empowerment through making. The participants integrate new knowledge on a physical level through

co-creating makeable and sellable design objects, which support the school's endeavour of buying their own grounds to sustain a proper learning environment. The goal for The Love School Project is to perfect the objects the pupils develop and to sell them through the Love School Brand that is currently being set up. The vision on a bigger scale is to create methods and settings of creative learning that can be applied in short, mid or long-term workshops and classes all around the world.

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### **On the need for decolonisation**

Since the definition of the SDG no doubt remains that we are facing complex challenges, or “wicked problems” (Rittel, 1973; 2013), consisting of the intertwining of dysfunctional economies, finite resources, climate change and thus an increasingly nomadic and growing population. For humanity to survive, it is obvious that we need to address these challenges by implementing new strategies and alternative structures (Fuller, 1969). Many people in the Global North fear the loss of entitlement and supposedly exclusive privileges resulting in the increase of nationalistic or fundamental movements (i.e. Brexit, Trump). They react with cognitive dissonance of different intensity, while sharing the retreat into a passive position, which expresses itself in distancing from taking responsibility for action and projecting this onto the outside. The effects vary from relativising personal consumption (flying, eating meat, etc.) to falling back into conservative or – worst case – racist positions. Even though the SDG call for global action, they consequently focus on the Global South, representing the most urgent need for action in the countries affected by catastrophes due to climate change and the exploitation of capitalism. Many people live below the poverty line and are exposed to precarious living conditions in the slums and favelas of this world. These conditions are the consequences of colonialism and capitalistic industrialisation with its inherent, indisputably destructive profit maximisation and ideology of growth. Hence the Global North is duty-bound to take responsibility for these conditions, which up until today is still manifesting in a top-down approach, where supposed experts develop and implement project goals. Typically, these projects fail, which rarely causes the executing organisations to critically reflect on their specific approaches. Poverty and lack of access to education and resources is a profitable business that countless NGOs and help organisations have committed themselves to. However, their activities mostly aggravate the precarious conditions (Miller, 2014) due to lack of sustainable and/or participatory concepts, and a frequent disappearance of funds. The downward spiral into poverty increases through the vicious circle between development aid and omnipresent corruption (Moyo, 2009). One example is the transition of short-term humanitarian help after natural catastrophes into compulsory long-term supply with subsidized – cheap – resources that destroy local entrepreneurship, be it the endless stream of American rice in Haiti or the concept One for One of the supposedly exemplary shoe project TOMS. Yet it is also rooted in the deeply wrong, repressive attitude these projects are implemented with. Officially Apartheid may have been abolished, yet it is still powerful and dominant in people's minds.

The implications of colonialism can still be felt in the internalised self-perception of suppression and devaluation. The generally hubristic attitude of the Global North's imperialistic development aid continuously reenacts suppression, instead of creating true decolonisation. Decolonisation can be understood as the attainment of self-determination through a process of realisation of, and liberation from, suppressing structures and the consequential awareness of the individual value and competences (Hooks, 1994; Freire, 1974). Top-down processes are not only questionable due to their patronising effect, but also simply dysfunctional when it comes to solving complex problems. Already in the 1970s Horst Rittel described the necessity of trans-disciplinary settings due to the “symmetry of ignorance”, namely an equal distribution of knowing and not-knowing of all participants of a systemic planning problem (Rittel, 1972; 2013). Brasilia, a city completely designed on the drawing board by Oskar Niemeyer, is an example of planning hubris and consequently disposes multiple problems immanent to its specific urban planning concept. Thus, trans-

disciplinary and cooperative settings with participating actors of the North and South are indispensable for finding solutions, especially because the SDG represent the global, complex dependency and interconnectedness while they describe the worldwide defects of a daily, individually lived reality of actors within their local communities. This experience-based knowledge is an indispensable expertise in the process of finding solutions, integrating the affected individuals through participatory processes, leading to verifiably higher success in long-term implementation of new concepts. Thus, new solutions need to first be developed bottom-up and experimentally in local initiatives and real-life laboratories, to then be scaled in efficient systemic planning processes or implementations by policy makers (Welzer, 2013).

### **Social Design as political activism**

Design, understood as activism and protest against the established system (Banz, 2016), as a problem solving strategy and creative methods toolbox, with a critical mindset questioning the status quo and aiming towards a qualitative improvement of the wellbeing in commons, is imbued with ideal premises to design and moderate such experiments with their vast concrete questions. To the moderating designers the specific problem in this context is secondary since they do not need the competence of the problem but, similar to classic systemic coaching, only the competence of the process. On the surface, the challenges of people in the North and South might differ, but upon closer look however it becomes clear that it is about two sides of one coin. They share the necessity of a transformation in perception and awareness towards self-responsibility and self-determination with the highest goal of public welfare, which means equality on a local and global level.

Understanding the necessity of the participation of everybody in the realisation of the SDG while claims of possession for knowledge of universal answers must cease, international development work has the opportunity to be rethought and reestablished as a culture of bi-lateral experience and knowledge transfer. Design can and should play a central role in these processes by supporting the reciprocity of exchange while deconstructing monopolies. One example is the need for massive reduction of usage and consumption of finite resources through the Global North. The spirit of innovation found in movements like Jugaad (India) and Gambiarra (Brasil) resemble the idiom of “necessity is the mother of invention”. What is striking about this is how little people actually need for living and how much they think they have to consume due to capitalistic obligations.

For the Global North, the opportunity of collaboration with the Global South lies in learning to moderate and reduce, if not to end the externalizing habits of hyper-capitalism with its multilayered exploitation of the Global South. The necessity of becoming an actually credible role model is crucial for countries like China, which is just in the process of discovering their productive, consuming (thus destructive) power. About surviving without labour, cohesion of communities and care for one another, the Global North will learn no later than once the vision of the Zero Marginal Cost Society (Rifkin, 2014) materializes and will demand for new value relations, or in which the consequences of digitalisation and automatisisation (Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, Big Data) will lead to ever more decreasing production costs, concurrently making labour obsolete.

### **Cooperative Economics**

The uniting requirement for the accomplishment of the SDG is a respectful and esteeming cooperation of Global North and South that can already be witnessed in the worldwide emergence of “glocal” (global to local) projects and initiatives. These movements share the goal of establishing alternative structures, to regain control and to decentralise. The currently most promising technology to help accomplish this is the blockchain, which is finally gaining attention for its potential to shift the global economy far beyond an incorruptible and community based exchange, by using a combination of encryption, decentralised data storage, plus smart contracts and micropayments.

More applied developments move towards makerspaces and makerhoods, glocally-networked communities that avoid the use of Fiat-currencies and instead work with timebanking, sharing or exchanging goods. The industrial mass production of food is being increasingly protested while the number of solidarity-based agriculture coops and urban gardens are continuously growing, aiming towards healthy, pesticide and GMO-free produce. Even in the political arena the demand for participation in policy and decision-making is rising. All these are signs of a global change process and new self-conception of society whose humanistic mindset presents itself as critical activism. This is very much the contextual framing of the social design term of the network DESIS (Manzini, 2015), and the transition design term introduced by Terry Irwin (Irwin, 2012) at Carnegie Mellon, which in turn refers to Fritjof Capra's definition of systemic, living organisms (Capra, 2014).

### **A new role of Design?**

At this point, the question emerges of how the mindset of a passive, fearful person who feels their privileges are threatened in the Global North resembles the one of a not-yet-decolonized person in the Global South and how it differs from the globally active avant-gardists and innovators of the transformation process. Which role does education, access, regard/value, and creativity play? And asking as a (social)designer: could this mindset be disseminated by adjustable, yet universally designed, processes and methods to both people in the North and the South?

What are the key experiences that bring about change? To change one's awareness an altered perception of both the self and the external is necessary (Mannemann, 2014; von Borries, 2016). Self-efficacy can be most easily achieved through creative processes. Through supposedly banal, craft-based work, the subject manifests itself with its efficacy through the created object and thus proves the reciprocity between subject and environment (Arendt, 1958; Aicher, 1991). Hence, who is learning to craft aesthetic and functional objects that are personally and generally useful, brings sustenance, food and shelter and thus autarky – literally takes one's life in one's own hands by designing it. This thought is by no means new: Beuys developed the social sculpture and Papanek called everyone a designer (Papanek, 1971). From this unfolds a new awareness for self-efficacy and the possibility to step out of a self-perception – whether North or South – that is powerless, discriminated, victimized. The same reciprocity can also be found in subtle conceptual contexts, like the design of social processes or systems. It is one of many qualities of social (or transition) design, which always acts in the interplay of subject and environment and thus has a holistic perspective on social processes.

Hence, due to their complexity, design innovative strategies and alternatives need trans-disciplinary settings. Social designers ideally have a wide set of competences to be able to moderate the described co-design formats: they learned to think critically and with vision. They are comfortable handling constant change and have a systemic understanding for complex challenges. By using scientific methods and creative cultural technologies they develop innovative and sustainable solutions. They build prototypes and visual models to envision and test three-dimensional ideas and they work in an interdisciplinary fashion, with human centered methods and participative formats. They learned to distance themselves emotionally from their ideas, enabling them to be the critic of their own work and thus to kick off design iteration themselves. Professional design competency is therefore a multilayered, long-term established mix of creativity, aesthetic and social competence, constructive and systemic understanding, process thinking and visionary force, to name just a few.

The here-defined design expertise clearly distances itself from the IDEO initiated marketing strategy called Design Thinking which tries to introduce a new culture of working to conservative environments by offering short workshops in which a small, rigid choice of methods is applied using white boards and post it's. The cause for irritation and misunderstandings is the hope to gain real design competence through a design-

thinking workshop.

The research interest described in this paper is dedicated to the question of the efficacy of co-creative formats (methods, concepts and processes) as disseminator of designerly ways of thinking (critical, creative and innovative), as well as poly-technical agency for tackling real, local problems with the goal of creating a sustainable change of consciousness and behavior (self-efficacy and self-determination). Thereby, the efficacy of design as method, mindset and procedure should be accounted for and by observing trans-disciplinary teams, while new knowledge about cooperative problem solving processes will be produced.

## **5. The Love School Project**

During my guest professorship for social design at Berlin University of Arts, I offered the co-creative design project The Love School Project in the winter semester 2016/17 in which design students worked together with school kids age 12-15 from The Love School Center in Nairobi's slum Kawangware. In the beginning, they built teams and had weekly meetings via Skype. The challenge for the students was to moderate the conversations with the goal to collect as much information as possible about the living conditions and challenges of the children. Some of the observations have been transformed into design concepts; in other cases the teams followed a specific craft-related idea. In the course of the semester, the students moved on to formulate tasks that accompany the design process in a simplified way. The goal of the project was the design of objects for a low volume production that were developed jointly with the children and would be sold to support the school. The collected money would not be a simple donation, but the active participation of the children would give them a feeling of ownership and raise their awareness of self-efficacy.

Subsequent to the semester project, a two-week co-creative workshop was organised at The Love School Center, which was financially supported by the German embassy. Here, the techniques and procedures that were introduced during the semester were deepened. After having observed some of the children being focused and passionate during the workshop, while otherwise in class rather un-attentive and weak, the headmaster of the school implemented an arts and crafts class into the curriculum, which is currently not mandatory in the national education program. Important insights of the project were the positive impact on the student's self-efficacy due to the double role as teachers and students, because they had to reflect their own learnings and transform them into child-oriented tasks. The children have made, according to their own statements and those of the staff, a remarkably big leap in self-efficacy due to the cultural exchange and practicing their craft skills. Through new competences their perspectives of potential future work and field of activity after finishing school expanded. This is especially positive because the youth living in slums often get involved with drugs and criminality due to lack of opportunities. The project was presented at various events, among them State Of Design, Re:publica and Salone Satellite; the designed objects vary from clay and porcelain to upcycled furniture, glass and plastic.

In the following semester I offered the design project Regenerate! – Fluid Community Food Systems in which the participants dealt with questions around community oriented, decentralized food production in the urban context with focus on Berlin and Nairobi. Our cooperation partner is the Wajukuu Art Project in the Nairobi slum Lunga Lunga. The subsequent workshop is still in planning and will be coordinated in accordance to the learnings and conclusions from The Love School Project.

## **Project Goals and Methodology**

This research is embedded in the organisation SUPERNOVA, which aims at fostering healthy, regenerative and sustainable communities through networked, global interventions (Wahl, 2016) while running itself as a TEAL organisation (Laloux, 2014). As an open, democratic platform it brings together an international, post-

capitalistic community of actors, activists and projects all aiming for sustainable solutions in the interest of public good. As an institution, SUPERNOVA initiates new practice-based formats and produces – based on the empirical, epistemic practice – transformative knowledge. The structure of the organisation is tied tightly to the research, which of course follows the meta-goals of the organisation. The development, test and iterations of different participative formats and methods serves the research of the question, whether they are capable of sustainably disseminating the designerly way of thinking and working, which consecutively segues into self-determined action. Therefore, long-term relationships will be built with the participating initiatives of the Global South (schools, youth groups, projects and communities in slums and favelas) and the Global North (pupils, design students, designers), who are connected locally and globally.

Based on the experience gained in the first workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, four areas for the attainment of self-reliance and independence have been identified:

1. Craft & Polytechnics
2. Food production & Permaculture
3. Entrepreneurship
4. Technology

To reach a larger sphere of impact, the workshops will be set up as a train-the-trainer concept in which several representatives of each participating initiative will take part, who thereby represent themselves the roles and generations within the initiative (role models, parents, teachers, students etc.). Together with the participating members of SUPERNOVA, local challenges and potentials will be identified and first concepts will be worked out. Subsequent workshops will focus on the realisation of the concepts and disseminate concrete hands-on knowledge integrating the local economy. In the next step this knowledge will be spread in the communities and initiatives, and ideally integrated in curricula or product catalogues. With this concept, all participants are both learning and teaching because knowledge is produced jointly. The social interaction of different generations and cultures avoids the rise of any supposed knowledge sovereignty and enforces the mutual awareness of the newly learned and deepened competences and the resulting potentials and opportunities. Together, it will be easier to adapt the impulses of the workshops for internal innovation processes.

To provide good collaboration during the local workshops, relationships are being built in advance via exchange through the SUPERNOVA platform. During this phase, teams and interest groups are built and research can be shared and exchanged beyond the local context within the network and other projects. A specific culture of communication and behavior will be mandatory for participation, which will be accessible through a mix of self-awareness and reading to learn the basics in mindfulness, courtesy and respect.

The primary goal for the local work is to develop and collect a fund of different, participative methods and formats in the four areas of interest (Polytechnics, Permaculture, Technology and Entrepreneurship) to answer the research question and to observe the individual success of increased self-determination. The concepts and designs coming out of the co-creative processes will be supervised and curated from a design perspective. According to Open Design and Creative Commons, the blueprints of the designs will be shared on the SUPERNOVA platform for others to use. Via an online shop, crafted objects will be offered, with the profit going completely to the maker. Like this, the impact of the local projects reaches beyond their points of origin.

This concept reaches further than comparable projects and offers. Design for the other 90 per cent (Cooper Hewitt, New York, 2007) for example is a mere exhibition concept that displays good solutions from the Social Design sector. In contrast to this, the emphasis of this concept and research project lies primarily on the individual experience of the creative process and the consequentially developed long-term skill of solving problems. The initial output of the workshops is an intended yet secondary consequence. Also, it is not about

creating another handbook like Design Toolkits (IDEO), whose efficacy is quite questionable due to the non-design target group, because design expertise is based on internalized, complex, practical experiences and cannot be learnt straight from a book.

Based on the methods of grounded theory, the participants are being interviewed before, during and after the workshops to examine their self-awareness and the efficacy and type of different formats in the sense of the research question. The workshops will be observed and documented for further empirical data and there will be supervisory meetings with participants and facilitators. The representatives of the different initiatives will report regularly after workshops about the realisation of the concept and are in contact with each other.

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## Endnotes

The Love School Project – [theloveschoolproject.cre8tives.org](http://theloveschoolproject.cre8tives.org)  
Regenerate! – [regenerate.cre8tives.org](http://regenerate.cre8tives.org)  
Blockchain for new systems – [rchain.coop](http://rchain.coop)

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