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Creative fictions: Incentive work and humanitarian labour in South Sudan

Léonie S. Newhouse 

Department of Geography, Durham University, Durham, UK

Correspondence

Léonie S. Newhouse, Department of Geography, Durham University, Lower Montjoy, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK.

Email: leonie.s.newhouse@durham.ac.uk

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Abstract

The career of the incentive has been meteoric and global, cropping up in peace-building, state-building, global health, and humanitarian contexts across the world. In this paper, I consider incentive work from the vantage point of independence-era South Sudan. In doing so, I build conversations between geography and spatially sensitive anthropology about the power of social forms to shape action, through an attention to the porous and polyvalent logics of legitimation entailed in ‘creative fictions’. Attention to the modes of legitimation help to understand not only what social forms do, but also how they emerge, travel, and are appropriated and repurposed for use by new sets of actors. In tracing the transit of incentive work from development practice into humanitarian programming, I understand incentive work as a creative fiction—an intangible social form that animates and channels action to generative ends. While incentive work emerged as a tidy solution to constraints within the humanitarian sector on who might be paid for what kind work, the social form of incentive work proliferated. Set free from those constraints, incentive work offered up channels of accumulation to new actors—including mid-level state functionaries—by mobilizing and legitimating claims on un- and under-compensated labour through a call to *voluntas*, the morally inflected volitional ethos of volunteerism.

KEYWORDS

humanitarianism, South Sudan, volunteers, work

1 | INTRODUCTION

The career of the incentive has been meteoric and global, cropping up in peace-building, state-building, global health, and humanitarian contexts across the world (Almasri, 2020; Carruth & Freeman, 2021; Farah, 2020; Morris & Voon, 2014; Ward, 2022). Largely unremarked by scholars, traces of the increasing reliance on incentive-based volunteer programmes in the delivery of international aid work haunt the pages of academic journals in studies related to public

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health, development, and humanitarian interventions. This is because incentive workers do much of the work of front-line service delivery in these contexts. Practitioners and policy makers debate over best practices (Morris & Voon, 2014), and scholars consider how such work is exploitative (Carruth & Freeman, 2021), gendered (Jenkins, 2009), racialised (Farah, 2020), or invisibilised (Ward, 2022). However, I am interested in accounting for how incentive work quietly became ubiquitous, and how it has been adopted not just by humanitarian organisations but also by a broader array of social actors, including local government in independence-era South Sudan.

While conducting my research in the years leading to independence in South Sudan, incentive work was a commonly referenced category of work or job. Its precise meaning covered a variety of labour relations that might be contractual or non-contractual; might be remunerated in cash or in kind; and might index relatively stable arrangements lasting months or years, or more contingent mobilisations of work measured in hours or days. Some workers earned incentives on top of government salaries, while for others incentives were the only form of remuneration for their work. Despite this diversity of practice, people understood themselves to be incentive workers, and to hold incentive jobs. Incentive work, then, was a polysemous emic category that described a variety of somewhat distinct practices that cohered around an ambiguity over the appropriateness of payment for work. For example, it was a common answer to questions I posed about employment in 2011 (Newhouse, 2012a), as it was a year previously in a livelihoods survey I undertook in a rural setting (Newhouse, 2012b). It was also included as a common qualifier on adverts posted to local job boards. It was the ubiquity of this taken-for-granted category, and indeed the frustrations that it engendered among workers and job-seekers, that caught my interest: Why, I wondered, was so much work organised in this way?

To answer this question, I look to what geographers interested in cultural approaches to the economy might learn from the work of spatially sensitive economic and political anthropologists. In particular, I build on recent work exploring the enduring power of liberal ideal-types or forms in shaping social relations in a-liberal places (Appel, 2019; Bear et al., 2015; Lombard, 2016). This body of work demonstrates the productivity of opening up these taken for granted forms—such as sovereignty, the state, rebels, the contract, the rule of law, standard procedures, or depersonalisation—to question, demonstrating the performative power of ideal-types in shaping the field of social, political, and economic relations. At the same time, this work offers a pathway to trace out their role in the appropriation, transformation, and distribution of value and values (Appel, 2019; Bear et al., 2015; Lombard, 2016). While my paper works through these questions empirically, I am as much interested in understanding the proliferative logics of such ‘forms’: how and why certain forms are so successful in transiting institutions, professional domains, geographies, and scales.

The notion of incentive work is precisely this—a powerful ideal-type that reordered the landscape of work and employment in independence-era South Sudan. To understand the power of the incentive as both a practice and a form, I trace the career of this idea in development and humanitarian communities of practice more generally, while also considering what this reordering offered to those in South Sudan seeking to employ people on an incentive basis. I argue that organising work under the rubric of the incentive was useful, even generative, for a variety of actors both inside and outside the development and humanitarian aid sectors. Consequently, incentive work was a remarkably successful conversion device that mediated diverse social and economic projects.

Conversion devices are social forms that allow certain kinds of value capture—capture that might not be legitimate, or even possible, without them (Bear et al., 2015). Because they mediate differing logics of valuation, such conversion devices are often also mechanisms for the accumulation and distribution of (economic) value and (moral or political) values. Yet, if social forms are able to order all manner of relations, and conversion devices to apportion value/s, the question remains of how these orders and distributions come to be viewed as legitimate, or at the very least how they come to be accepted as normalised practice. This is where I extend the conversations about the power of such social forms through an attention to the porous and polyvalent logics of legitimation—what I call creative fictions. For me, attention to the modes of legitimation helps to understand not only what social forms do but also how they emerge, travel, and are appropriated and repurposed for use by new sets of actors.

In this paper, I argue that the usefulness of incentive work as a conversion device hinged on the creative fiction that such work was not in fact work but instead voluntary participation. The creative fiction of incentive work offered up channels of accumulation by mobilising and legitimating claims on un- and under-compensated labour through a call to *voluntas*, the morally inflected volitional ethos of volunteerism. As I will show, humanitarian and state-building programmes introduced a productive ambiguity in the relations between work, employment, and volunteering, in part by paying incentives rather than wages or salaries. This had as much to do with administrative and budgetary constraints as it did with a desire for more democratic or participatory forms of community engagement. Incentive work originated as a solution to a set of constraints around who could be legitimately paid for what kind of work. Yet, I argue, the life of this

social form has extended well beyond the humanitarian and state-building domain. Set free from the confines of these communities of practice, the potential of incentive work was recognised by a much wider range of actors, who, I will show, have put this device to use for their own purposes.

While the proliferation of incentive work is much more extensive and stretches back decades (see Jenkins, 2009), in this paper I hone in on South Sudan during the period running up to and just after its independence (2009–2011). I explore how the widespread adoption of incentive work helped humanitarians, state functionaries, and a variety of critical frontline workers to collaborate in the delivery of basic services, at a time when significant international funding was flowing into the country. I consider the programmatic borrowing and professional common sense through which incentive work came into regular use in the humanitarian sector. I further show how this technique for mobilising and remunerating labour responded flexibly to the political and economic constraints of South Sudan's transition to independence.

I draw from long-term ethnographic engagement across three research projects exploring South Sudan's emerging political economy between 2009 and 2011. During this time, I spent 15 months in South Sudan researching land and resource rights (Newhouse, 2017), changing livelihoods practices (Newhouse, 2012b), and youth job-seeking (Newhouse, 2012a). I supplement data from participant observation with structured interviews with subsistence farmers, shopkeepers, job seekers, incentive workers, civil servants, humanitarian and development actors and politicians (over 280 in total), a livelihood survey (79), focus group discussion (8), market canvassing exercises, and documentation of local job-board postings, newspaper recruitment listings, and tendering adverts. These have been edited for clarity. Additionally, I interpret my data in light of more than two decades spent analysing grey literature produced by organisations involved in humanitarian relief, state-building, and post-conflict transition, first as a practitioner and later as an academic.

2 | VOLUNTEERING GEOGRAPHIES

Volunteering, like all forms of work, is embedded within the social, political, legal, and economic fabric of any particular context (Baillie Smith, Fadel, et al., 2022; Herrick & Brooks, 2020; Hustinx et al., 2022). Volunteering is a value-based activity associated with both implicit and explicit normative commitments (Hustinx et al., 2022). It is also laden with gradients of power and status along several axes, including who does and does not volunteer, what kinds of activities 'count' as volunteer work, and the hierarchies between staff and volunteers, between differently situated volunteers, and between volunteers and beneficiaries (Baillie Smith, Fadel, et al., 2022).

Recent research has explored the expansion of volunteering as government social provision has waned under neo-liberalism (Eliasoph, 2011; Jenkins, 2009; Prince & Brown, 2016). Around the world, volunteers perform more of the social provision roles previously undertaken by the state (Adams, 2012; Eliasoph, 2011; Prince & Brown, 2016). As the ranks of volunteers have expanded, they have increasingly become subject to practices of human resource management (Hustinx et al., 2022) or viewed as resources in organisational competition for donor funding (Adams, 2012). This has resulted in volunteering becoming more job like, with volunteers, organisations, and prospective employers seeing volunteering as a pathway into work (Baillie Smith, Mills, et al., 2022; Brown & Green, 2015; Bruun, 2016; Prince, 2015; Prince & Brown, 2016). Volunteering is viewed as a way to build experience and develop critical career skills (Herrick & Brooks, 2020) and as a way to build and maintain the social ties essential to break into more stable salaried positions (Bruun, 2016, p. 113; Colvin, 2016, p. 32). This body of literature highlights how practices of volunteering have much more generalised impacts on the world of work, which extend beyond the individualised benefit to any singular volunteer (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018; Prince & Brown, 2016, p. 18).

If volunteering is fundamentally related to work and employment, then the political economy of volunteering is entangled with issues of law and inequality. Baillie Smith, Fadel, et al. (2022) note that how volunteer work is described and how (and whether) it should be remunerated can depend on national labour regulations that shape how (and if) such forms of labouring are formally contracted. Recourse to using volunteers in core areas of project implementation and service delivery can be a way of circumventing local labour or immigration-related legislation—including minimum wage requirements or prohibition on work for certain categories of non-citizens (Baillie Smith, Fadel, et al., 2022; Morris & Voon, 2014; Ward, 2022). Research on volunteering in the global health, development, and humanitarian sectors in the Global South has documented that the immense programmatic work, expertise, and social competencies of volunteers is not always recognised or valued, particularly when people volunteer in their own communities (Baillie Smith et al., 2021; Farah, 2020; Ward, 2022). However, the social reading of volunteers as dispensable, or undertaking non-essential duties, often changes for the contributions of volunteers who benefit from the privileges of whiteness, access to education, and/or transnational mobility, whose skills, commitment, and

efficacy are more likely to be celebrated (Herrick & Brooks, 2020). In national contexts where paid stable employment is vanishingly scarce, widespread reliance on volunteering raises the spectre of structural coercion. People interested in accessing paid work have little choice but to volunteer their labour for extended periods of time in order to gain experience that is socially legible in their chosen field (Bruun, 2016; Fisher, 2013; Newhouse, 2015, p. 2298; Nyirenda et al., 2020). Literature in this vein then alerts us to the ways in which national legal contexts shape how volunteer work is organised, regulated, and valued, and how they can reproduce disadvantage and perpetuate economic exclusion.

However, volunteering is never solely an economic endeavour or an instrumental strategy for career advancement. Volunteering is both embodied (Redfield, 2012) and affecting (Eliasoph, 2011; Griffiths, 2015; Maestri & Monforte, 2020). It is deeply imbued with what Colvin (2016, p. 34) describes as a powerful 'altruistic imperative' or 'moral magnetism' that often implicitly draws on religious or nationalist notions of duty, sacrifice, and service. This places volunteering as a practice of self-fashioning that emerges from an individual's moral, religious, or political commitments (Mittermaier, 2014; Wang, 2022). Since being a volunteer is defined by (potentially divergent) forms of moral reasoning, differing perspectives over practising volunteering can reveal fundamental assumptions and disagreements about society (Wig, 2016). Disputes over volunteering are often moral conflicts, and thus they may be deeply felt and hotly contested. The moral character of volunteering also tends to focus attention to the interior mental state of volunteers—their perspectives, motivations, or moral development—while eliding the ways in which volunteering is made sense of socially.

A key take-away from this literature is that it is crucial to attend to how ideas about volunteers and forms of organising volunteering practice circulate and come to ground (Baillie Smith et al., 2021). Hegemonic forms and norms of volunteering exert pressure on broader social relations, including paid employment and more organic forms of mutual aid, care, religious charity, or unmediated voluntary service (Herrick & Brooks, 2020).¹ Thus, volunteering geographies scholarship alerts us to the complex interrelation of the normative/affective dimension of such work for individuals, and the geographically specific social-scale ways of organising and valuing volunteering practices. Attending to how particular forms, norms, or practices of volunteering come to be socially recognised and institutionalised, can, in turn, bring to light the tensions between the moral and political values, and economic value that condense in volunteering.

To make sense of what is at stake in the mediation between economic value and normative values that underpins institutional practices of volunteering—and incentive work—I build a conceptual vocabulary in conversation with work that seeks to understand the appropriation and transformation of various kinds of value by social forms (Bear et al., 2015). Ethnographically nuanced work on so-called weak states has shown what happens in the unstable contact zones where proliferative instantiations of liberalism come up against a liberal modes of organising political and economic authority—such as extractive industries (Appel, 2019) and international peace keeping (Lombard, 2016). This work recognises the performative power of liberal ideal types—such as the state, the contract, or the rule of law—to (re)organise social and economic relations, even when conditions on the ground do not conform to the underlying assumptions on which these ideal-types are built. These creative fictions are intangible social forms that animate and channel action: imaginaries that allow different kinds of actors to get into and sustain relation. Creative fictions are useful precisely when differently situated actors perceive significant barriers to collaboration and seek to find pragmatic workarounds that permit collective projects to move forward. In doing so, they are also often occasions for the conversion of social and moral values into opportunities for the appropriation or distribution of economic value. Creative fictions, such as what came to be understood as incentive work in South Sudan, are often generative because they are containers that hold together loose sets of practices, ethos, and values in ways that make them easier to move around, jump scale, or shift context while retaining some degree of coherence. Indeed, a lack of agreed and clear defining features, characteristics, or meaning are part of why creative fictions are effective: they offer opportunities for collaboration in the absence of agreement.

Reading incentive work through these two bodies of literature highlights the global circulation of norms, practices, and institutional arrangements of volunteering, the vital role of local contextual factors in shaping how these manifest, and how the social forms and justificatory logics entailed within them become opportunities for generative collaboration. In the following sections, I bring these insights to the project of understanding (a) how relying on the un- and undercompensated labour of incentive workers came to be normalised in the provision of internationally organised humanitarian and state-building activities in South Sudan and (b) how the creative fiction of incentive work circulated and was taken up by a wider range of actors as a way to facilitate mobilising labour when funds were short, or were appropriated for other uses.

3 | INCENTIVISING THE CIVIL SERVICE, BUILDING THE STATE

I don't remember the first time I heard someone talk about their incentive job in South Sudan. The practice was so common, it wasn't particularly worthy of mention. But as I tried to come to grips with the economy of the small town where I was based, I soon noticed that incentives and incentive workers were everywhere, doing all sorts of things. Incentive workers distributed mosquito nets for an international public health NGO, delivered babies, vaccinated animals, and drove out to remote areas to support guinea worm eradication. They were public health survey enumerators, taught primary school, and led workshops about elections. They surveyed land, tracing out the imagined contours of future towns. Even the unglamorous work of cleaning, cooking, and night guarding was organised in this way, with workers more likely to be given a small token payment referred to as an 'incentive' than they were to receive a regular wage or a salary. Incentive work was not reserved for those considered 'less skilled'. Mid-level civil servants and medical professionals earned incentives as top-ups on salaries for their work supporting various development, state- and capacity-building projects. For this group, incentives paid by a variety of international institutions and organisations helped smooth out income when salaries were delayed or occasionally misdirected. While these may seem like a wide array of practices, all payments and the work associated with them were routinely referred to by South Sudanese people as incentives and incentive work.

This snapshot of South Sudan on the eve of independence reveals that the country was full of people working on an incentive basis in a variety of public service roles—from health and education to civil society promotion and agricultural extension. In South Sudan's transitional period, there was considerable international financial and technical support for the newly established semi-autonomous government to build out a system of basic service provision, after decades of conflict and deliberate disinvestment (Collins, 2008; Johnson, 2011). Oil revenue sharing arrangements meant that Southern political authorities had, for the first time, financial and budgetary autonomy. But there were challenges in building a civil service nearly from scratch (Badiy, 2010; Kindersley, 2019; Leonardi, 2013; Rolandsen, 2005) and significant state resources went into military rather than civil investment (Pinaud, 2014). Funded by international donors committed to political transition in Sudan and South Sudan, various humanitarian and state-building programmes were created to support basic service delivery and training for those who would staff these new roles. Meanwhile, the major players in the state- and peace-building effort—such as various arms of the UN, USAID, and the European Commission—were cautious about overstepping, keen that the new government retain the financial and administrative responsibility of managing the civil service.² This resulted in what one UNDP staff member called the 'roads, schools and boreholes mantra', a focus among donor-funded projects on building basic infrastructure rather than directly funding service delivery.³ Using incentive payments to augment salaries, support training, and encourage those with skills to work in remote areas offered a tidy solution to the concerns from various quarters around impinging on state sovereignty. In these schemes, civil servants received incentives funded by international organisations not for their basic work duties but instead for participating in ongoing training exercises, public health or peacebuilding initiatives, or rights awareness campaigns, or for their willingness to work in remote 'hardship' locations. Incentive payments, then, constituted a way to sidestep the unseemliness of direct subsidies of the civil service by the humanitarian and state-building sectors, while the government of South Sudan spent freely on its military.

That said, there was considerable variation between agencies and donors and across time about where to draw the line on monetary transfers to government workers. Some UN staff felt categorically the UN should not pay civil servants, believing that results would be better when people chose to participate in programmes rather than being induced by benefits like incentive payments.⁴ But there was no overarching prohibition on the practice. Incentives may have been hotly contested in head offices in Juba, but moving closer to frontline service delivery in South Sudan's rural towns and villages, I found that programme and project leads were much more pragmatic about their use. The head of mission of one NGO providing humanitarian and development assistance in South Sudan explained how a change in donor policy caused significant problems, affecting their ability to operate their health-sector programmes:

We have been facing a lot of problems in some of our other clinics, because USAID has stipulated that we are not allowed to pay government employees at all. But the people staffing our clinics haven't received their salaries in months, and we can't even give them any incentives. It causes a lot of tension. It has affected the quality of their work. They are demanding incentives to continue working.

(Interview, 10/01/2010)

These kinds of dilemmas often meant project leads exercised what discretion they held or found other workarounds to arrange for payments when the practice was frowned on by those higher up. Programme leads recognised that government

salaries were chronically delayed or diverted, often never reaching employees. Within the humanitarian and peace-building sectors, disgruntled civil servants were viewed as potential threats to sustaining peace. They were also viewed as a key pathway for delivering a peace dividend to the population. Paying incentives for voluntary participation in workshops, meetings, or trainings became a routine way to shore up the goodwill of workers and ensure the ongoing work of basic civil service delivery took place. For implementing agencies, there was a secondary benefit: tapping into budgetary pots shifted costs associated with staffing projects into other categories of spending such as consumables or even direct benefits to target populations. The incentive payment, then, was a pragmatic instrumental reframing of monetary transfers to people who, owing to their position or existing role, could not be put on salary. It was a creative way to sidestep donor rules limiting payments to civil servants. Even as incentives disavowed the employer–employee relation, they ensured channels for collaboration remained open between humanitarian or state-building actors and the people who did much of the work. In the eyes of INGO management, incentives were viewed as supplementary token payments that were offered only for voluntary work outside of a worker's core responsibilities.⁵ However, in conversations with health workers, teachers, and other civil servants it was clear that they viewed the additional incentives paid by humanitarian organisations as a key part of their remuneration package, particularly given the unreliability of government salary payments. Regardless of these differing views on incentives, there was no need for a mutually agreed definition of what an incentive was or what it remunerated for it to proliferate. While such 'creative fictions' may have begun their life as stop-gap measures to make licit or acceptable practices otherwise prohibited (on making licit, see Appel, 2019), they had a channelling effect. That is, as incentive work became institutionalised, it became not just a workaround, but the way things work.⁶ What was at first seen as a sidestep to the regulatory order became, in a relatively short period of time, the default option for organising programme delivery work by international organisations in South Sudan.

What was it about incentive work that allowed it to escape its initial context and be adopted by others? I argue that it was the useful ambiguity within the creative fiction that underpinned incentive work—that it was voluntary participation. While these workarounds may have been developed by street-level implementers as a creative response to obstacles to service or programme delivery, they reflected broader conceptual trends within the development and humanitarian communities of professional practice. Drawing on a critical reading of grey literature, I turn now to explore how these trends provided a ready-made conceptual bridge, as well as concrete bureaucratic forms, that eased the acceptability of reframing workers as volunteers, and volunteers as programme beneficiaries.

4 | THE BENEFIT OF WORK

Unpacking the creative fiction of 'incentive work' necessitates tracing antecedent discursive reframings of work in circles that provided both the conceptual groundwork and the programmatic architecture for the practice. The uptake of the incentive within humanitarian programming to elicit and compensate labour echoes two trends in development practice. The first saw unconditional cash transfers and guaranteed rural work schemes as social protection solutions, while the second saw beneficiary participation as a way to address the sector's accountability problem, where programme staff were more accountable to donors than they were to beneficiaries. I explore each of these trends in turn below, before considering how they made their way into the humanitarian and state-building playbook as 'incentive work'.

A variety of cash-based programmes have come into fashion over the last few decades in donor-driven and state-led development (Ballard, 2013). Among these are guaranteed work schemes that draw inspiration from the American New Deal, India's National Rural Employment Guarantee and Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme. The latter two offer a certain number of days of work on public projects per month or year to impoverished households (Carruth & Freeman, 2021; Hickey, 2012).⁷ Such make-work programmes often involve physically intensive labour building or repairing public infrastructure or rehabilitating ecosystems through conservation efforts (Moore & Jadhav, 2006). Guaranteed work programmes are typically justified in two ways. First, that offering a wage to those otherwise out of work acts as a social safety-net for the very poor. Second, that mobilising this labour will have broader social benefits—including the creation or maintenance of public goods and infrastructure, and the 'skilling of workers'.⁸ However, evidence is mixed as to whether such programmes generate any tangible improvements in public infrastructure or improve the skills of the un- and underemployed (Carruth & Freeman, 2021; Hickey, 2012). Indeed when evaluating programme success, guaranteed work programmes are often compared to cash-transfer programmes rather than public infrastructure projects or other forms of civic investment (Beierl & Grimm, 2018; Ravallion, 2019). As this makes clear, development practitioners view guaranteed work as one of several ways to distribute 'benefits'—in this case the benefit of an income—to those in need, rather than the provision of public infrastructure. The labour mobilised by guaranteed work programmes and its

accomplishments is often incidental to how development actors assess the efficacy of these programmes. In other words, there is no expectation that this kind of work is actually productive because the main purpose is to buoy vulnerable households through shocks or offer longer-term income insurance. Thus, when work is viewed primarily through a lens of social protection, it is transformed into a form of assistance—into a benefit (see also Carruth & Freeman, 2021; Ward, 2022). Instead of employing people, programmes organise laborious activities that act as occasions for the distribution of a benefit regardless of the quality of their outputs or their generation of value.

When development actors adopt the view that work is an occasion for the distribution of a benefit (rather than as an activity organised around the productive use of the skills, talents, and energy of those working) then a set of concerns deriving from mainstream development economics are brought to bear on programme design and evaluation. Attention to the language used in policy evaluation documents is instructive. A 2018 GIZ report on such schemes, for example, worries that the promise of a guaranteed wage might pull people into make-work schemes and away from waged-work or investing labour in subsistence, petty production, or trade (Beierl & Grimm, 2018). To avoid this moral hazard, the report argues, programme wages should be suitably low so as not to draw people out of more productive work (Beierl & Grimm, 2018).⁹ These assumptions and concerns determine how such programmes set their wage rate—between the minimum transfer that will offer a social protection benefit and some maximum transfer value that is not so large as to change the prevailing wage rate for unskilled physical labour. In other words, the programmes operate as devices to mobilise labour at a discount. In addition, the discursive recoding of work not as labour but as a benefit allows for different sets of institutional concerns and commitments to rise (or fall) in prominence. It allows organisations, for example, to let go of legal protections attached to the treatment of employees—such as equal pay for equal work—and concentrate on those attached to ensuring fair and equitable distribution across a population of assistance to beneficiaries.

The second development trend that played a role in the proliferation of incentive work is the move towards participatory programming. Facing pressure related to the lack of accountability between development actors and the populations they purport to serve, participation came to be viewed by many in the sector as a way to introduce mechanisms for ‘target’ populations to shape programming or offer feedback on interventions in their communities (Hickey, 2004). Like guaranteed work programmes, participatory models of development and humanitarian assistance chime well with neo-classical moral concerns that aid generates dependency and so disincentivises the creation of organic investments that might lead to development. While posed as a democratising move, participatory development has led to another form of discursive reframing of the time, labour, and skills beneficiaries are asked to invest in development and humanitarian projects in their areas—now understood as participation, rather than work. Despite significant critique (Hickey, 2004; Kothari, 2005), programme planners and implementers continue to view participatory programming as a means to flatten aid hierarchies by involving beneficiaries in day-to-day delivery. Participation, however, does not typically extend beyond implementation, leaving participants’ power to shape projects that affect them rather limited. In severely resource-constrained environments where need outpaces capacity to deliver services, participatory development models often entail requiring groups of beneficiaries to commit to giving labour away freely in order to attract desperately needed development investments (Truelove & Ruszczyk, 2022). Thus, it is important to recognise that beneficiary volunteers may feel compelled to accept the demands of NGOs promising social investment and have little control over the conditions of their labour.¹⁰

Together the turn to participation as a mechanism of beneficiary ‘voice’ and the uptake of guaranteed work programmes reframed how work was both viewed and valued within the overlapping communities of practice of development, state-building, and humanitarian aid professionals. Viewing practical work as participation and work as a benefit has allowed a shift in the conceptual underpinnings of project design. In this way, the near erasure of the already collapsed distinction between the worker (who earns a wage or a salary for their labour) and the beneficiary (who might receive some kind of material benefit for their participation) in combination with a focus on work as social protection offered a ready vocabulary and justificatory logic that may have eased adoption and acceptability of reframing workers as volunteers within the humanitarian and state-building sectors.

How does this relate to the ubiquity of incentive work in independence-era South Sudan? The allied professional fields of development, humanitarianism, and state-building share a set of common features that contribute to sharing of norms and practices (Autesserre, 2014). These include a reliance on international donor funding; planning models organised around discrete time-limited programmes or projects; non-state institutional forms that are deeply bureaucratic; and auditing structures that tend to prioritise upward legitimation over downward accountability (Herrick & Brooks, 2020; Hilhorst et al., 2021). Over the last four decades, these sectors have also professionalised and in the process have become more technocratic and more deeply embedded in market-based logics (Adams, 2012; Duffield, 2001; Kothari, 2005). As others have noted, there is a significant cross-fertilisation between

the humanitarian and development industries, which includes shared concepts, ways of working, fields of operation, staffing pools, and, in many cases, living quarters (Autesserre, 2014; Duffield, 2012). Moving from project to project, staff circulate between regions and contexts, as well as across domains of competency. As they circulate, so do the concepts, theories of action, policy options, and—importantly for my argument—ways of thinking about, planning, accounting for, and structuring programmes and interventions. In this way, head office staff in Juba often used ‘cash-for-work’ as a shorthand for many programmes and projects that relied on mobilising large cadres of South Sudanese nationals at the local level. The conceptual frame of the cash-for-work programme that saw work as a benefit, in turn, informed how work was contractually structured—where organisations favoured short-term contracts that they could cycle through an applicant population, distributing jobs like benefits. In at least one case, this included a limit on holding consecutive work contracts and a required cooling-off period before workers could reapply for positions (Newhouse, 2012a, 2012b).

5 | LABOUR AT A DISCOUNT

Despite the circulation of ideas, concepts, and even personnel from the development field into humanitarian and state-building practice, the shift to incentive work also entailed a significant departure from the assumptions embedded in guaranteed income type programming—where the skills and competencies of the labourer are irrelevant because the work undertaken was merely an occasion for the distribution of a wage-benefit. In contrast, in South Sudan, incentive workers were specifically sought out for their skills and experience through formal recruitment and vetting processes, and their work was vital to the successful delivery of organisations’ objectives. The widespread use of incentives in South Sudan may have started as creative fiction or ad hoc improvisations. But once these practices were embraced at an institutional level, they became routinised. They gained their own momentum and normative force, becoming new common-sense ways of organising relations: If you were South Sudanese and you were working in your own community, you would most likely be paid an incentive rather than a wage for work, often regardless of your level of training, years of experience, skill set, or the complexity of your role.¹¹ This had the effect of transforming work into participation and any payments into a benefit. To see how this operated in practice, I introduce two South Sudanese semi-professionals working on an incentive basis: Sofia, a traditional birth attendant and midwife and Paul, a primary school teacher.

5.1 | At the clinic with Sofia

I first met Sofia in February 2010, when I travelled a half day’s walk ‘up-mountain’ to a remote village in the heart of the productive plateau along South Sudan’s southern border. At that time, the majority of the area was unserved by roads or telecommunications networks. I arrived in soaking rain and made my way to the clinic, which had a room where visitors could stay the night. As the rain drummed heavily on the corrugated zinc roof, I took a seat alongside the 20 or so patients who were waiting to be seen. Though technically government run, the clinic was supported by an NGO in the town where I lived and where the county government headquarters were located. When I asked about the room, a woman came out from the back room and greeted me, first in the local language, and then switching to fluent English, put me on the spot by asking me for updates on the NGO-funded programme that supported the clinic:

Sofia: Did you bring the vaccines?

Léonie: Vaccines?

Sofia: What about the medicines? Anti-malarials?

Léonie: No. I...

Sofia: No!?! When will they be sending someone? Didn’t Hector tell you?

Léonie: Uh... I... I’m sorry, they don’t share that information with me.

Sofia: Great. We only have a few vaccines left, and nearly all of the medicines are already gone. We will have to close if they do not come soon. They didn’t give you any message for us?

Léonie: No, I really don’t know. But I will be going back tomorrow or the day after, I will make sure to tell them. If you want to send a letter, I can give it to Hector, at least to let him know...

At this, Sofia's face breaks into a broad smile. Bemused, she responds:

Sofia: We have advised them several times already. You know, we have not been paid for some months now. And still, we are working. The other clinic closed a few weeks ago. They got tired of working when they are not paid. Now women are coming with their infants all the way from there, just for the vaccines. We have very few doses left. Still, though we don't get paid, we will continue until the medicines get finished. What else can we do?

A spry woman in her early 50s, Sofia's fluency in English marked her out as one of a handful of women of her generation to complete formal education beyond primary school. For her work as a traditional birth assistant in the remote mountain clinic, Sofia was entitled to a small salary from the state government and was also paid an incentive by the NGO that supported the clinic's vaccination programme. Sofia was dedicated to her work, but she was also fed up. She was dismayed by the lack of supplies to do her job properly and disillusioned by chronically delayed salary payments and meagre incentives that meant she struggled to pay school fees for her youngest child.

A few weeks later, I ran into Sofia again, this time down in town. Calling out from across a stream bed, Sofia invited me for a drink. Surprised to see her, I responded:

Léonie: Ah! Sofia, it's you. You have come here. What are you doing in town?

Sofia: Why should I stay up there when there are no medicines? What can we do? Only send people to the hospital here in town. We cannot help people, so why should I stay there? Better I come here and cultivate.

During this period in South Sudan, the state government lacked the capacity or (many argued) the political will to ensure timely delivery of employee salaries and the supplies needed to operate the county health infrastructure,¹² which included a handful of primary health care centres (PHCs) and the single hospital located in the county. Stepping in to fill the gap, three different NGOs provided supplies, training, employee vetting, and in some cases additional monetary incentives to reward health workers for taking up hardship postings. Still, the strain was apparent. At the hospital in town, medics and nursing staff were considering striking until they received six months of delayed wages. Most of the PHCs had closed their doors, employees unwilling to work without pay or adequate supplies. Sofia and incentive workers like her did their best in the circumstances to keep the health system running.

Several months passed, with Sofia splitting her time between the village clinic and her fields in town. When I ran into her again at harvest time, she told me she was waiting to hear back about whether she would continue with her job. The responsibility for all of the county's health provision had been officially transferred from the NGO to the government. Having been originally hired by the NGO, Sofia and all other affected health workers were required to reapply for their jobs, this time through the government. Though Sofia had worked as a traditional birth assistant for over 10 years, she had had only basic formal training and was worried that the job might go to a younger woman from a different area who had received midwifery training as a refugee in Uganda. While waiting for the final interview shortlist to be posted, Sofia had decided to settle in town with her youngest son, where he could finish primary school and she could tend to her gardens. In the meantime, she had invested her small savings into setting up a roadside kiosk where her son could sell salt, biscuits, soap, and other small items after school to supplement their income in case the job did not come through. Sofia's decisions to invest savings and labour both in agriculture and this new kiosk showed that, while she valued the opportunity to work even on an incentive basis, she also recognised that relying exclusively on income from the government or NGOs might leave her without the ability to adequately support herself and her youngest child.

The decision to stay in town, prioritising subsistence and alternative income generation, nearly cost Sofia her salaried midwife position. During the vetting process, I spoke with the county health official, who, along with the head of the NGO's community health programme, was responsible for hiring decisions. When I asked about Sofia's chances, he responded that though she had considerable experience and was respected among her patients, he wasn't convinced she was fully committed to her work. He thought that she spent too much time away from the clinic attending to her gardens and other projects. In listing points against her in the vetting process, he pointed to her presence in town (and thus away from the clinic) during the hiring process as one example of her lack of dedication to supporting women's health. When I reminded him that she was not currently under contract, he suggested that meeting critical community needs should be sufficient reward. Ten weeks passed between the time when Sofia went for interview and when she was informed that she would be rehired. Even then, she was not able to immediately return to work at the clinic. Her new contract carried the condition that she attend a midwifery training course in the state capital. Though the course would be paid for by the organisation, she would not receive her salary or any further income support during the retraining process. This meant

that the clinic was without a birth attendant for a total of six months, and that Sofia was without a salary for the duration of that time.

5.2 | *Voluntas*: duty, service, and obligation

Reflecting on Sofia's situation highlights the hard edge of the imperative to altruistic service connected to volunteerism (Colvin, 2016; Hustinx et al., 2022). What surfaces is an expectation of unending self-sacrifice in the face of duty.¹³ This is noteworthy because it shows how the strategic instrumentalism of using incentives as a mechanism of working around regulation gives way, how creative fictions take on a life of their own. If initially the decision to use incentives to reward voluntary participation was aimed at circumventing donor-driven prohibitions on subsidising the civil service, in recounting Sofia's experience, we see the meaning attached to incentive work shifting as the practice moves off the pages of a planning document and into the world. The productive ambiguity of incentive work, then, was that it was seen as a set of contracted duties and responsibilities undertaken for a material reward and at the same time a freely given contribution of time, skills, and energy in service to the public. Frontline government and NGO programme administrators conceived of incentive work as both the provisions of the contractual duties of employment and volunteering at once.

As with many instruments aimed at circumventing legal or budgetary constraints, we see clearly in the case of Sofia how the instrumentalist aspect in the incentive gives way and *voluntas* becomes a defining logic that shapes how work is understood. To volunteer involves, as Kirsch (2016, p. 208) argues, an 'over-fulfilment of what would normally be expected' of an individual. Framed in this way, the use of an incentive rather than the payment of a wage enjoins workers to view work not as labour but as an act of voluntary good will, for which no personal benefit should be expected. But as the logic of *voluntas* became ingrained within the social reading of incentive work, this 'should' was used by institutions and those acting on their behalf as moral grounds to demand and discipline, as a way to expand what might be expected of workers and to sidestep discussions of fair pay or conditions of work. Recall that when I first met Sofia she had been working at the clinic on a voluntary basis for months already, her salary chronically delayed with no reasonable prospect that she would ever see the entirety of her wages (she didn't). Her decision to leave the clinic hinged not on a lack of moral commitment but instead on her inability to provide any real service or succour to patients because the clinic lacked the necessary supplies and medicines to do so. Yet, when the time came to consider her for reappointment, those in the position to make the hire explicitly weighed their assessment of her commitment to supporting rural women's health against her pragmatic decision to secure her family's survival through agriculture and micro-enterprise. What then started out as an instrumental workaround transformed into a morally inflected claim on both labour and sentiment.

Primary teacher Paul also worked on an incentive basis, teaching at a recently opened second primary school. Built with donor funds to support the children of returning refugees, the new school was meant to replace the existing primary school, which had been badly damaged in the war. When Paul had started at the school the previous year, he was told by county education officials that after a period of working on an incentive basis he and his fellow 'volunteer' teachers would be given proper contracts and added to the official civil service payroll. Unlike in the clinic, these incentives were from the government rather than one of the internationally funded NGOs. They were also non-monetary, of lesser value, and more sporadic. Paul's incentives consisted of an occasional 25 kg bag of grain and smaller in-kind contributions requested from students' parents, like a piece or two of firewood, or some local vegetables. That prospect had seemed manageable when, he believed, it would lead directly to an official appointment as a teacher. But as time wore on and the new teaching year approached, there didn't seem to be any progress in getting onto the official payroll. So Paul made an expensive and arduous journey to the state capital to press his case. I happened to meet him there, at an office block housing several state ministries. As I left the office of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, I found Paul standing in the corridor. In his hands he held a bundle of documents, protected from the dust by plastic envelopes. He had hoped that by coming in person and bringing his credentials to the state Ministry for Education, he would finally get added to the rolls. But the minister had refused to meet him and one of the other people working in the office let slip that the school he worked for was not even included on the list of officially operating schools in the state's budget. It was, in effect, a ghost school. This was why teachers at the other primary school were paid salaries while he and his colleagues made do with incentives of maize. He was told that if he wanted a teaching job, he would have to wait for the next round of recruitment to apply just like any other applicant.

Again, we see how the incentive job drew from a set of meanings connected to volunteering—in this case the notions of patriotic service as well as professional development. County-level officials spoke glowingly in public forums of the volunteer teachers' contribution to South Sudan's brighter future. At the same time, they framed incentive work as an opportunity to gain experience and promised their voluntary work would lead to proper, salaried civil servant contracts

in the future. Paul and his fellow incentive teachers excelled in their work. However, the skill and efficacy they demonstrated in their teaching roles were irrelevant to their prospect of moving into salaried roles. Decisions over staffing were not part of the county government's authority—this sort of decision was made at the state level. Knowing budget resources for two schools would not be forthcoming, county education officials chose to run the school on an incentive basis, redirecting small amounts of country resources towards providing benefits to the volunteer teachers. This and the promise of future employment were sufficient to enlist Paul and his colleagues into doubling primary school capacity in the county's largest town, at minimal cost to the county government itself.

6 | CONCLUSION

Like Paul and Sofia, many South Sudanese incentive workers were indeed animated by a desire to contribute to their country (see Faria, 2014; Grabska & Fanjoy, 2015; Newhouse, 2012a). Many incentive workers genuinely wanted to work in service to the public. However, this does not mean that they were blind to how their desire to contribute was instrumentalised to push back against efforts to shape working conditions. Sentiments of patriotism and service that many South Sudanese people felt in the run-up to independence did not fill the soup pot or buy school uniforms, forcing people to make difficult decisions around how to manage competing demands on their time and energies. Yet, the reframing of work around *voluntas* that incentive work engendered also allowed organisations, like the county health and education departments, to use moral judgements about values and sentiments to enjoin people to work for no or little pay. Playing on patriotic duty is by no means new but the ubiquity of incentive working offered a ready-made format that low-level functionaries could draw on in renegotiating the terms and organisation of frontline work, particularly in the health and educational domains. At the same time, the appeal to voluntary service and sacrifice for a greater social good acted as a means to de-fang legitimate demands related to working conditions.

In this paper, I have shown how humanitarian and state-building organisations used incentive work as a flexible way to mobilise labour in support of their projects, with the aim of also tracing how incentive work moved into general use as low- and mid-level state functionaries embraced the practice. These actors were able to do so because of the conceptual fluidity that surrounds incentive payments as a form of humanitarian support or benefit, rather than as payment for work. I have argued that incentive work was an instrumental reframing of the relations between humanitarian and state-building actors and the people who do much of the work that constitutes building a state or sustaining a population. This reframing built on ideas from the development social protection toolkit, where access to work and the wage that comes with it are viewed as benefits. Ultimately, I push for reading the incentive as a useful 'creative fiction', one that allows people and institutions to collaborate, albeit on differing footings.

Reframing work as a benefit accomplished several moves at once. First, it allowed the organisations relying on this mode of organising work to sidestep regulations by states or conditionalities from donors that shape who can be paid, where, and for what. In this case, donor soft policy and government sensitivities meant that organisations working on post-conflict recovery and state-building in South Sudan should not pay the wages of civil servants, even if these functionaries were not being regularly paid by the state. Put differently, the figure of the 'volunteer' offered organisations and workers a useful fiction that allowed them to cooperate. Second, by connecting this administrative sidestep to participation and volunteerism, incentive work built on and enlisted the normative sentiments and moral magnetism associated with voluntary work. This reframing allowed moral judgements about values and sentiments to be used to actively de-fang any legitimate demands over working conditions, such as fair pay. As incentive work became normalised, it moved out of the arena of its inception—the constraints on humanitarian and state-building operations posed by sovereignty—into wider practice, where its moral appeal (and moral disciplining) became politically useful and economically expedient.

Finally, I show the productivity for geographers in engaging with anthropological work exploring the economic, political, and affective effects of intangible social forms. The paper develops a conceptual vocabulary to understand how incentive work operated as a 'creative fiction'—a particular type of conversion device that mediates the tensions between values (in the political and moral sense) and value (in the economic sense). More generally, as loosely defined imaginaries, creative fictions allow different kinds of actors to collaborate, and offer vital connective pathways, particularly in the face of formidable legal, administrative, procedural, or political constraints. They do so by generatively holding polysemous practices together and withholding the requirement for actors to arrive at collectively agreed meanings. In proposing 'creative fictions', I point to the performative power of intangible social forms to condense and channel social action, even when the underlying assumptions on which such ideal types are built give way. While I work through these questions empirically in this paper, attention to 'creative fictions' highlights the importance of logics of legitimisation in

how, why, and when particular social forms, animating ideas, and programmatic architectures proliferate and get taken up in new professional and geographical contexts, complementing more materialist reading which sees these through the lens of the appropriation, transformation, and distribution of value/s.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

For both legal and ethical reasons, research data are not shared.

ORCID

Léonie S. Newhouse  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6624-943X>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This concern is echoed in numerous policy papers and reports related to the payment of volunteers in the development, global health, and humanitarian sectors, which worry that formalised volunteer programmes that incorporate payment may erode organic or culturally embedded means of mobilising unpaid labour, or the willingness of target(ed) populations to participate in a variety of programmes that depend on volunteers (Morris & Voon, 2014).
- ² To preserve confidentiality, interviewees are referred to by organisation type and general role and any names have been changed. Where quotations are used, these are drawn from audio-recorded interviews, or contemporaneous field note diaries where direct quotes have been noted down, e.g., Interview, 17/5/2010; fieldnotes 19/5/2010. See also Lombard (2016, p. 80) writing in the context of the Central African Republic on how international NGOs that regularly carry out the responsibilities of the state actively disavow their work as state like or state replacing.
- ³ Fieldnotes, 18/3/2010.
- ⁴ Based on formal interviews with implementing staff 4/12/2009, 10/1/2010; informal discussion with INGO and UN programme staff in Juba and Torit, fieldnotes 26/8/2011, 25/10/2011, 8/3/2015.
- ⁵ Fieldnotes 08/03/2015; retrospective interview 10/10/2022.
- ⁶ As my snapshot in the beginning of the section indicates.
- ⁷ These programmes themselves draw on longer histories of state-led labour compulsion—including feudal arrangements, colonial corvée systems and vagrancy laws (Carruth & Freeman, 2021; Leonardi, 2007; Young, 1994).
- ⁸ A commitment to nation-building underpins both lines of justification, as such programmes link protecting the nation's most vulnerable with building public infrastructure, and thus the nations—see Hickey (2012).
- ⁹ Terms such as opportunity costs, moral hazard, and market failure are hallmarks of neoclassical economic discourse. For a fuller discussion of these in the context of another development trend—micro-credit—see Young (2010).
- ¹⁰ I witnessed this dynamic on several occasions during my research from 2009 to 2010. On one occasion, community commitment via labour contributions was used as a factor in deciding where agricultural extension services would be located in the county. On another, a faith-based organisation hoped to use volunteers to rebuild by hand a road accessing the agriculturally productive highland areas.
- ¹¹ It is worth recognising that the shift towards incentive work also tapped into already circulating normative discourses about service, commitment, and sacrifice that played a vital role in the provision of military recruits, local services, and mobilising material support for soldiers during the SPLM/A national liberation war (Leonardi, 2007; Mampilly, 2017).
- ¹² Government payrolls were filled with ghost workers, and procurement contracts were more effective as vehicles for kickbacks than they were at delivering supplies (de Waal, 2014; Kuol & Logan, 2018; Twijnstra, 2015).
- ¹³ As mentioned previously, it is important to note that moral judgements about commitment and service that attached to incentive work also resonated well with local discourses of national sacrifice articulated by the SPLM/A during Sudan's second civil war.

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