The Delusion of Knowledge Transfer

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Introduction

PERPETUATING DEPENDENCE: EXPERT ADVICE AS TOOL OF FOREIGN AID

Foreign aid has been subject to critique continuously for quite some time, not least by individuals who have been involved in formulating and executing policies and programmes. William Easterly, a former World Bank economist and now professor at New York University, published a book with the provocative title *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*. Therein, he condemns aid agencies for maintaining the ‘technocratic illusion’ that expertise will solve the problems of the developing world; in his view, the advice of technocrats has helped to oppress people rather than to free them from poverty (Easterly 2013). While certainly taking one of the strongest positions, Easterly has not been the first critic of expert advice as a tool of development aid. Doubts about the impact of expert support were broached early on. Already in 1968, an economist at Washington State University published an article ‘Why Overseas Technical Assistance is Ineffective’ (Loomis 1968). In 1989, Richard Jolly, at that time Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, stated that “the vast bulk of technical experts and expertise at present provided by the UN and donor system has outlived their usefulness” (Jolly 1989: 21). A few years later, Edward VK Jaycox, the World Bank’s former vice-president for Africa, described the use of expatriate advisors as “a systematic destructive force which is undermining the development of capacity in Africa” (Jaycox 1993).

The aid community has reacted to the persistent critique of one of its main devices by routinely commissioning studies on the impact of technical assistance under which expert advice is commonly subsumed. Though varying in terms

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1 See, for instance, Forss et al. (1988); Berg (1993); Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs Norway & Asplan Analyse (1994); Williams et al. (2003); World Bank (2005a); DFID (2006); ECDPM & ACE Europe (2006); Land (2007); JICA (2008); OECD (2008); World Bank Independent Evaluation Group (2008); Morgan (2010).
of focus, scope and methodology, many of these evaluations yielded similar findings; to give just a few examples:

Looking at the 900 man years of assistance we must conclude that the institutional framework that should lead to a transfer of knowledge was non-existent or crippled. (Forss et al. 1988: ii)

Technical cooperation has not produced the national capacity necessary for self-reliance. (Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs Norway & Asplan Analyse 1994: 9)

A significant proportion of current technical assistance is ineffective (...). (Greenhill 2006: 24)

It is only in a minority of the cases reviewed that a capacity development impact can be identified. (DFID 2006: xiv)

Almost without exception the reports share the same circular structure: the identification of obstacles which impeded ‘capacity-building’ is followed by recommendations on how to improve the practice of technical assistance in order to increase its ‘effectiveness’ in future.

We refrain from following this pattern considering the problems of aid to be merely flaws of implementation. Rather, we see them to be fundamental in nature, pertaining to the structural complexities of knowledge transfer to young democracies as such. They concern issues of legitimacy and sovereignty on the recipients’ side, interacting with vested interests and domestic political dependencies on the donors’ side. Despite all rhetoric of ‘partnership’, aid relations are subject to intrinsic constraints that thwart the claimed objective of foreign support, namely helping recipients to become self-reliant. Quite the contrary, the persistent interference by outside actors in our view undermines the development of young into strong democracies as it puts governments at risk of losing control over their own policy agendas.

Various scholars in political science, international relations and development studies have demonstrated that donors continue to exert significant influence on policy decisions in recipient states, even though aid ‘conditionality’ has formally been abandoned in the post-structural adjustment era.2 The new emphasis on national ‘leadership’ and ‘ownership’, many argue, makes things worse since it overplays the agency of beneficiaries, while masking

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2 See, for instance, Helleiner (2000); Gould & Ojanen (2003); Harrison (2004); Wangwe (2004); Dijkstra (2005); Holtom (2007); Pender (2007); Mkandawire (2010); Ear (2013).
the pervasive involvement of external funders. Focusing particularly on the World Bank’s role in Africa, Harrison (2004: 88) has shown how the innovation of mechanisms such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs)\(^3\) and Sector-wide Approaches (SWAps)\(^4\) has legitimated “intense and routine donor involvement” in recipient countries’ policy space. Dijkstra (2005: 462), analysing the formulation processes of PRSPs in Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua, found that these were “written because donors want them to be written”, that the elected parliaments were barely involved, and that donor-organised ‘dialogue’ with civil society served as a ‘cosmetic’ element rather than being a serious effort to enhance participation. Holtom (2007) and Pender (2007) came to a similar conclusion for the PRSP process in Tanzania. The latter inferred that the new ‘partnership’ with donors “involves more, not less, domination” (Pender 2007: 117). In one of the most recent and comprehensive publications on contemporary aid and power relations, the authors examined to what extent aid-receiving governments in Africa have been able to retain control over their policy agendas, and why some have been more successful than others (Whitfield 2009b).\(^5\) The economic, political, ideological and institutional conditions of states were deemed decisive in this regard since they heavily influenced governments’ strategies for dealing with donors. While Whitfield and other authors investigated aid as a matter of negotiation, we look at it primarily as a problem of (imposed) expert advice which, as will be argued, invariably carries vested interests and perpetuates existing dependencies in donor-recipient relations.

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\(^3\) In 1999, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank made the formulation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers a requirement for multilateral debt relief under the Highly-Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative and for access to concessional lending. In many aid-receiving countries, PRSPs have replaced earlier national development plans and have become governments’ overriding policy frameworks.

\(^4\) In international aid circles, the concept of SWAps came up in the late 1990s when the traditional project approach was increasingly criticised for being donor driven and leading to duplication and fragmentation. This should be avoided by adopting a SWAp under which the recipient government takes the lead and owns a sector-wide programme which external partners jointly support. The Inter-Agency Group on Sector-wide Approaches and Development Cooperation, which elaborated the concept, defined a SWAp in the following way: “All significant funding for the sector supports a single sector policy and expenditure programme, under government leadership, adopting common approaches across the sector, and progressing towards relying on government procedures to disburse and account for all funds” (Foster et al. 2000: 1).

\(^5\) The research referred to above was carried out under the auspices of the Negotiating Aid project (2005–2007) based at the Global Economic Governance Programme, University of Oxford. The country studies included Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania and Zambia. Full findings have been published in Whitfield (2009b); central results are summarised in Whitfield and Fraser (2010).
Aim and structure of the book

This book sets out to reveal the complexities of expert advice in the aid context and to assess its impact on policy-making in young democracies. To do so we carried out empirical research in South Africa and Tanzania, two African countries which over the past decades have received lavish donor support for system reforms in almost all fields of governance. The focus of this study is on the areas of education, health and environment on the grounds that (a) they are high on the development agendas of both countries; (b) they have been priority areas of external engagement; and (c) they rely on different types of expertise and ‘evidence’ for policy legitimation. By comparing different sectors in two different countries, both of which are comparatively young democracies but have very different economic strengths, we expected to find out (1) what are the complexities of knowledge transfer through foreign experts in general; and (2) what role structural conditions such as the political and administrative systems and economic wealth have in helping the recipients of outside aid in retaining control over their policy agendas.

The book is structured as follows: Chapter 1 presents the theoretical framework. Unlike other studies we consolidate considerations from the theory of democracy and from the sociology of science, providing us with a unique perspective on the problems implied in knowledge transfer from Western to Southern countries. In Chapter 2 we give the reader an introduction to South Africa and Tanzania as sites of investigation; in Chapter 3 we briefly describe our research methodology and in Chapter 4 the actors and their interests in the aid business.

Chapter 5 dwells on the obstructive preconditions of expert advice in development assistance: the linkage between aid and politics, it will be argued, makes advice volatile, conditional and supply-oriented insofar as it becomes driven by shifting fads, legitimation and accountability pressures. Moreover, the chapter will show that structural flaws pertaining to the employment of external experts by donor agencies hamper knowledge transfer and ‘mutual’ learning. Beyond that, unequal relationships between actors in aid are reinforced through knowledge hierarchies that de-value experts in recipient countries, and increase the discursive power of agents working for international organisations.

The various constraints outlined in Chapter 5 explain why expert advice in the context of aid largely fails to achieve its main objective, namely to increase the capacity of recipients to an extent which would make them independent

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6 For a more detailed justification of South Africa and Tanzania as sites of empirical investigation, see Chapter 3.
from outside assistance. As a result, governments run the risk of ending up in a perpetual cycle of being advised by external experts who potentially (and illegitimately) gain significant influence in the policy space. Under which conditions recipients are able to defend their decision-making autonomy in such a setting will be analysed in Chapters 6 and 7.

Assessing South Africa’s and Tanzania’s relative strengths with respect to determining their own political agendas, we regard three factors decisive for dealing with external advice: financial resources, administrative capacity and the local knowledge base (i.e. scientific community). As outlined in Chapter 6, there are significant variations not only between the two countries, but also across the different sectors. Six case studies examine to what extent South Africa and Tanzania as recipients of aid have been able to retain their agenda-setting control in the respective areas (Chapter 7). Starting with a brief outline of sectoral challenges, governance structures and donor presence, each case study provides detailed reconstructions of past and present policy processes, with a particular focus on how external experts were involved therein and to what degree they were able to shape decisions. Chapter 7 concludes with a synthesis of findings drawn from the comparative view on the empirical accounts.

Chapter 8 summarises the main results. Instead of concluding with suggestions as to how to make expert advice in development assistance more ‘effective’, we offer some thoughts on what kind of support might better help young democracies to grow their own knowledge bases and, thus, to become truly independent from external expertise.

**Normative assumptions and issues of terminology**

Doing research and writing about aid means to enter a highly politicised terrain covered with ideological booby traps concerning terminology. Authors are easily pigeonholed not only on the basis of arguments, but also because of the wording they use. This is why a few remarks concerning the terminology and the scholarly perspective adopted in this book are in place. Our argumentation implies some normative assumptions drawn from political science. In line with Bickerton et al. (2007), we take it to be a core aspect of sovereignty that

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7 Easterly (2013: 12–13) pointed out the hazard of ‘code words’ for the perception of development writers by stating: “Mention *markets* and you are presumed to favor a world with zero government. Mention *liberty* too often and you are presumed to be in favor of some extreme right-wing ideology (...). If you mention *colonialism*, *racism*, or *imperialism* too often (...), you risk being seen as a leftist ideologue.”
states govern themselves and define their own policies.\(^8\) A loss of control over the agenda amounts to a loss of democratic legitimacy.\(^9\) Therefore, we see the interference of external actors in the policy space of young democracies as highly problematic, irrespective of the intentions they may have.

As to issues of terminology: we are aware that speaking about ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ experts, or referring to ‘donors’ and ‘recipients’ implies a generalisation which in a way oversimplifies reality and disregards contextual differences. Post-structuralist scholars would further criticise, commenting that by using such notions we reproduce the hierarchical classifications and unequal power relations which are objects of our study, and would not be satisfied with the defence that this is far from our intention.\(^{10}\) In fact, we agree with Ziai (2011: 2) that “it makes a fundamental difference whether we describe reality in one way or another”. Being conscious about the significance of language, it is also true that language alone does not change political realities. If we deliberately draw on a rather conventional vocabulary in writing about aid, this is because the ‘reality’ we encountered was and still is characterised by asymmetries and boundaries. Replacing the conceptual pair of ‘donors’ and ‘recipients’ with alternative terms (as done, for instance, by Eriksson Baaz (2005) who substituted the latter with ‘partners’) would mask persisting dependencies instead of helping to reveal them. We also noted that although much wording in the written discourse on aid has changed, the actors affected on either side still resort to the ‘old’ terminology when giving account of their experiences. This is why we refrain from using alternative constructs which are seemingly more impartial but often remain vague and confusing. We hope to provide the reader with clear language, giving priority to precision over premature political correctness.

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\(^8\) In our view, Brown’s distinction between the sovereignty of a country and the control over its political agenda is splitting hairs. He argues that the loss of the latter, although not uncommon, does not entail loss of the former (Brown 2013). We disagree by regarding self-determination a fundamental device of sovereign states.

\(^9\) Speaking about public control over the agenda as a fundamental requisite of democracy, Robert Dahl in an interview for the Annual Review of Political Science rhetorically asked: “If somebody else is controlling the agenda, what’s it all about?” (Dahl & Levi 2009: 5).

\(^{10}\) For reflections on the relevance of discourse for the construction of reality, see Ziai (2011).