Chapter 1

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER TO YOUNG DEMOCRACIES: ISSUES OF LEGITIMACY, SOVEREIGNTY AND EFFICACY

The role of knowledge in democracy

Since the fathers of the American Constitution it has generally been accepted that knowledge, or rather education in general, is a safeguard for democracy. Education, and thus the acquisition of systematic knowledge, prevents (or is supposed to prevent) citizens from populist or ideological temptations and protects the political process from the irrationalities that come with them. The assumption underlying this model is that the citizens reach decisions and consensus through enlightened deliberation and, in the process, accommodate their respective interests with the factual possibilities (technical and material resources) to realise them. The counter model is the liberal pluralistic one. In this model decisions are reached among citizens whose interests are assumed to be fixed and which can only be accommodated by the search for compromise. These two different notions of democracy, if taken as the endpoints of a continuous spectrum, are to be found in a multitude of combinations.

One dimension of the role of knowledge in democratic regimes concerns the degree of participation of the citizenry in decision-making. Here the spectrum reaches from the ‘mere’ choice of leadership, which is the rationale of ‘representative’ parliamentary systems, to ‘direct’ participation. The federalists distrusted the wisdom of the electorate so much that they introduced an additional tier, the electoral college, that chooses the president and may, in the extreme case, contradict the popular vote. The Swiss democracy allows its citizens to decide ‘directly’ certain purportedly fundamental issues. At least in
the European democracies one may recently observe a somewhat strengthened movement towards more direct participation in reaction to an alienation of the citizenry from the ‘professionalised’ political class (Crouch 2005). But this movement is met with the well-known and justified warnings of populist decisions implied in direct participation which can only be avoided by having a layer of ‘representatives’. Central to these variants – although often implicit – is the role of knowledge, whether in terms of the general level of education and/or as the use of specialised technical advice by policy-makers. Given the quest for rational, informed decision-making, the latter has become a central tool of democratic rulers. The governance, administration and regulation of modern societies have become extremely complex; this has led to the discourse that policy-makers depend on academically trained specialists who provide expertise for the formulation and execution of policies.

What is generally overlooked in such diagnoses is that this increased reliance on specialised (scientific) knowledge on the part of governments, at least insofar as they are democratic regimes, amounts to a shift toward technocracy. The more intense the alleged dependency of governments on scientific knowledge, the more pronounced the conflict between politicians and experts becomes. This conflict reaches deep into the fabric of democratic societies because it emanates from contradicting types of legitimacy: politicians are legitimated by popular vote and are supposed to represent the interests and preferences of their respective voters. Scientific experts are legitimated by their specialised knowledge, which is supposed to provide answers to factual problems. In other words, the logics of politics and science do not coincide; they may diverge and even be contradictory.

All modern states have developed institutional arrangements to regulate the use of knowledge in the political process. These arrangements address, in various ways, the problem of the underlying conflict between governments’ dependency on knowledge, that is, its instrumental function, on the one hand, and the potential loss of control over decision-making to technocratic experts, on the other:

Both variability and convergence can be seen as an expression of the potential threat that any advice poses to the legitimacy of governments and, likewise, that politicisation poses to the authority of scientists, i.e. the reciprocal interest to control the advisory process and outcome (...). All advisory bodies and their procedural rules are situated somewhere on a continuum whose endpoints are dominated by one or the other: dependence of the advisers and their politicisation on one hand, and independence or autonomy of the advisers and the technocratic shaping of politics on the other. (Lentsch & Weingart 2011: 10)
The contradiction between expert knowledge and the political formation of opinion and decision-making has particular significance for young democracies whose local science base is comparatively weak and in which, as a consequence, science-based policy advice is predominantly provided by foreign experts in the context of development aid.  

The role of knowledge in development aid

Expert advice in the form of ‘technical assistance’ has been an instrument of foreign aid since its inception in the late 1940s/early 1950s when the attached system of international organisations came into being. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United Nations was established with the aim “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom”, and, therefore, “to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples” (United Nations 1945). The then President of the United States, Harry Truman, in his 1949 inaugural address emphasised the need to participate in that machinery and provide assistance to countries in need as follows:

[We] must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery (…). For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve the suffering of these people.

The United States is pre-eminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques (...). I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life. And, in cooperation with other nations, we should foster capital investment in areas needing development.

We invite other countries to pool their technological resources in this undertaking. Their contributions will be warmly welcomed. This should be a cooperative

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11 We use the term ‘young democracies’ for countries that experience a process of democratic transformation, irrespective of the year in which they have formally adopted ‘democracy’ as a form of government. This allows us to also include countries such as Tanzania, which turned from an authoritarian, socialist ‘one-party democracy’ into a multi-party democracy in 1995 and, since then, has undergone significant reform processes in all fields of governance.
enterprise in which all nations work together through the United Nations and its specialized agencies whenever practicable. (Truman 1949)

The fourth point of Truman’s speech is cited in some length here since it points to essential elements of the discourse that was to shape the first decades of aid: on the one hand, a division of the world into ‘developed’ (i.e. prosperous, scientifically and technologically leading) and ‘underdeveloped’ (i.e. deficient, unprogressive) nations facing conditions of misery, whereby the latter were depicted as unable to end the suffering of their people without the ‘knowledge and skills’ of the former; on the other hand, the problem-solution, namely the transfer of capital, science and technology. On the grounds of this narrative, so-called ‘technical assistance’ became a major means of aid, complementing large investment and infrastructure projects designed and carried out by Western experts sent to the South to provide a ‘tech-fix’ to the ‘problems’ of supposedly impotent, needy societies.

Although criticism of the technological and epistemic determinism underlying this practice was raised early on even by influential voices from within the system, the idea that donors would provide appropriate concepts and tools to trigger economic growth and development in recipient countries was upheld over decades (Cherlet 2014). During the 1980s, international financial institutions started to impose neoliberal policy reforms on borrowing states; the Washington Consensus of 1989 formally consolidated the hierarchical model of ‘donorship’ (Faul 2016: 188) enacted in the era of structural adjustment.

The 1990s paved the way for a discursive turn. In light of the detrimental effects of structural adjustment programmes on social and economic conditions in ‘beneficiary’ countries, the critique of the “top-down, authoritarian enterprise” (Ziai 2014: 9) of aid articulated in both development and academic circles could no longer be disregarded. The idea that the North could solve the problems of the South by exporting its expertise and technology seemed increasingly obsolete. The ‘knowledge for development’ agenda emerging in parallel to the upcoming partnership paradigm emphasised the need “to assess and adapt relevant policy and technical knowledge to local situations” (World Bank 1999c: 7), and to incorporate local knowledge into transformational processes. The new narrative highlighted “that local conditions matter for the success of programs, that people on the ground have the most knowledge of local conditions, and that the challenge of knowledge for development is to combine local knowledge with the wealth of experience from around the world” (World Bank 1999c: 14).

The framing of aid relations and the role of knowledge therein has changed significantly over the past decades. The dichotomic rhetoric of the 20th century (developed versus underdeveloped, donors versus recipients) has
been replaced by a rhetoric of equality which pertains to decisional power and expertise alike. Hence, seminal documents such as the Busan Partnership Agreement endorsed in 2011 no longer speak of ‘technical assistance’ and knowledge transfer, but knowledge ‘exchange’ and ‘mutual learning’ (Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness 2011). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by world leaders in 2015 outlines a vision of ‘partners’ who aim to ‘share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources’ in a ‘spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people’ (United Nations 2015).

The discursive shifts, however, have not (yet) substantially changed international cooperation – neither in terms of power relations nor with regard to the use of expertise. As Ziai (2014: 12) points out, aid agencies remain based on the assumption of “knowledge on social change which is universal in character and therefore applicable all over the world”. Consequently, ‘international’ experts continue to play a key part in the aid business, as administrators, policy advisors or ‘technical assistants’. While it is somehow assumed that they impart their knowledge and skills to local actors by their mere presence (see also Chapter 5), the reality of knowledge transfer, exchange, absorption and adaption is much more complicated than the World Bank’s optimistic (or cynical?) declaration that “knowledge is like light” and “can easily travel the world” suggests (World Bank 1999c: 1). In this book, we examine expert advice as an instrument of foreign aid. By doing so, the arrangements of advisory processes at the science–politics interface best serve as the model because only they reveal the complexities of the transfer of knowledge. Before we dwell on these complexities, we briefly discuss what kind of knowledge is at stake in the discourse on ‘development’.

**Differentiating ‘knowledges’**

When in 1999 the World Bank issued its World Development Report and likewise UNESCO its ‘Declaration on science and the use of scientific knowledge’, both organisations addressed the inequality of knowledge between nations (UNESCO 1999; World Bank 1999c). The reference was primarily to scientific knowledge, even though the World Bank distinguished between scientific and technical knowledge, on the one hand, and knowledge about attributes, for example, the quality of goods, on the other. The assumption underlying these declarations is that scientific knowledge is a, if not the, crucial factor responsible for development identified with economic well-being (Weingart 2006: 164). This assumption, whether true or not, is in line with the rhetoric of
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the ‘knowledge society’ that has informed the science and innovation policies of Western countries, but has also been adopted by, for example, South Africa. One is tempted to conclude from the respective declarations that since the end of the last millennium the policies and programmes of donor countries toward ‘developing’ countries in general, and Africa in particular, would focus on (a) strengthening scientific knowledge production in these countries in order to attack the development problem at its roots instead of tampering with symptoms and (b) strengthening local knowledges and promoting constructive co-production of knowledge. Yet, the dominant approach used by aid agencies has been and continues to be to send advisors and consultants supposed to transfer and share their ‘expert knowledge’ with counterparts in recipient governments.

Just as the framing of aid relations has changed over the last decades so has the understanding of knowledge as part of it. The ‘knowledge for development’ agenda brought the differentiation between Western scientific and local knowledge to the fore. This distinction among many other possible ones is most pertinent to the issues of ‘development’ and ‘knowledge transfer’.

The very term ‘knowledge’ is so vague as to allow many interpretations and associations of meanings and interests. If, as is here the case, the focus is on the relation between the North and the South, on development and aid, knowledge refers to Western scientific and technical knowledge, part of which – as alluded to in the World Bank statement – is economic and management knowledge. Given the global predominance of this type of knowledge, it is also associated with the supremacy of the West over the developing countries. At the same time, it is seen to be superior to the ‘local’ knowledge that is to be found in the ‘developing countries’, not least because by definition science is global and purportedly not specific to and dependent on particular cultural contexts (Agrawal 1995). But ‘local knowledge’ is an equally vague concept that has become associated with romantic idealisations and misguided expectations, although it has also given rise to concrete policies. This crude picture has been replaced and refined in the course of the shift to the rhetoric of ‘equality’. In particular, common assumptions about certain properties of scientific knowledge have been called into question, such as its epistemic superiority (power of prediction, certitude), its independence of (cultural) contexts and universal validity and, thus, its applicability. Parallel to this, ‘local’ knowledge has been invested with expectations regarding ‘development’ that most likely overstretch its actual potential (Agrawal 1995). Rather than following the various arguments invariably coloured by political and ideological convictions

12 Antweiler (1998: Table 1) gives a list of terms and connotations for ‘local knowledge’, pointing to it being both instrumentalised and romanticised.
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reflecting allegiances to the respective development paradigm, the discussion here has to be limited to answer just a few questions:

- What kind of knowledge is at stake in aid relations?
- What kind of knowledge (scientific/global and/or local) is available; what is lacking in the countries concerned?
- What kind of knowledge can be/is being provided from ‘outside’ and under which circumstances?

Not all fields of knowledge, let alone scientific knowledge, are relevant in ‘development’. Hornidge (2012: 25), in a review, lists five related discourses that pertain to knowledge: (a) the construction of ‘information’ and ‘knowledge societies’; (b) the development agenda of international donor organisations, summarised under ‘knowledge for development’; (c) bridging of ‘the global digital divide’ summarised under ‘ICTs for development’; (d) current trends of ‘innovations’ and ‘innovation systems’; and (e) the adaptive capacities of ‘knowledge’ for the living with change processes, ranging from climatic and environmental changes to socio-economic and political transformation processes. The delineation of these discourses is fuzzy and does not lead one to concrete fields of knowledge. In fact, they also reflect fads in development, such as the shift from engineering knowledge to soft social science issues such as ‘good governance’ as a precondition of development. The more concrete reference of the World Bank to ‘knowledge about technology’ and ‘knowledge about attributes’ (i.e. quality of goods and services), points to types of knowledge which clearly reside in Western knowledge systems. The same can be said about the “narrowing down of the former ‘knowledge for development’ to ‘ICTs for development’, a process possibly also nurturing the interests of the ICT industries of mainly developed countries, and thus supporting an ‘expert knowledge’-focused approach in development cooperation” (Hornidge 2012: 33). The discourse on innovation and national innovation systems (NIS) represents another example of broadening the scope of the development agenda to institutional and social issues. The notion of NIS was taken up, for example, by South Africa which has formulated a national innovation systems policy, thereby following an international fad. However, the very term is controversial in academic discussions not least because it is trendy rather than providing political orientation. This is documented by the OECD’s assessment that the “relatively strong” system under the apartheid regime has been re-shaped into “another strong” system since 1994, implying that SA had an NIS without it being called as such, thus documenting the vacuousness of the term itself (OECD 2007:10). Finally, the issue of processes of change, for example climate change mitigation and adaptation, points to the most concrete conflict
between types of knowledge, since the climate models are developed by a high-tech instrument-intensive Western science, while in the ‘developing’ countries people rely mostly on local observations and long-term experience.

Much if not most of the knowledge negotiated in these discourses, assuming that they represent the foci of ‘development strategies’ over the last two or three decades, is organisational, management and economics oriented, and it is mostly Western based. The ‘knowledge deficits’ on the part of the recipient countries accrue in part from the ‘development agendas’ of the donor countries and from the international development paradigms. Knowledge on governance, finance and management, as well as quality management as it is either implied in or explicit in the World Bank’s and other donor countries’ development agendas, is very much a domain of Western business schools and political science departments at universities. It is also the kind of knowledge that is typically communicated by ‘experts’ from the West. The asymmetry with respect to knowledge is, in part, also determined by the knowledge base that exists in both donor and recipient countries. Some donor countries have selected aid programmes for which they have particular expertise, such as the Scandinavian countries’ programme on forestry in Tanzania. For these they can draw on their own scientific resources. But their ‘experts’ meet with local people who have in-depth knowledge about and experience with their natural environment. In the case of South Africa, its science base with respect to biodiversity and the protection of the specific flora of that country is so strong that administrators can take the attitude of equal partnership or even conditional acceptance of outside expert advice, as they are able to rely on renowned academics at the country’s own universities.

In the examples given it is not clear which part of ‘local knowledge’ is also part of Western scientific knowledge, and which is ‘local’ in the sense of it being locally restricted and context-bound. The assumption that Western scientific knowledge and ‘local knowledge’ necessarily clash because they are epistemically incompatible is simplistic and mostly unjustified. There are many ways in which Western scientific and local knowledges can and factually do interact, ranging from dominance all the way to innovative adaptation and mixing (cf. Antweiler 1998: 482, Table 6). The problem of any transfer of knowledge resides in the degree to which the ‘external’ knowledge is abstract with respect to the ‘local’ issue to be solved and the knowledge held by ‘local’ recipients of ‘external’ advice. Simple standardised technical solutions to problems such as installing water pumps are much more easily transferred to a community with little technical knowledge than complex designs of, for example, an effective and just taxation system. The underlying economic and social knowledge for the latter is abstract, fraught with uncertainties and requires substantial input of ‘local’ knowledge about the socio-economic situation of the population, political
loyalties among the citizenry, and pertinent provisions of the legal system etc., to be applicable and useful. In view of this, the very term ‘knowledge transfer’ suggests the superiority of the ‘external’ Western type of knowledge and disdain for the ‘local’ knowledges in question; this has consequently drawn a lot of criticism, resulting in the development discourse becoming more sensitive and egalitarian. The ‘transfer’ of supposedly universal and value-free knowledge is a highly complex matter in its own right. The knowledge in question, such as about financial and project management, regulation of markets, rules of ‘good governance’ and the like is far from certain. It is subject to fads such as ‘new public management’ and it comes with cultural contextualities. Even seemingly ‘objective knowledge’, for example the evidence of the HIV/AIDS link, has been contested for political reasons. The attitude on the part of the donor organisations and of the experts they commission can make all the difference, and often enough corroborates the criticism, for example, if highly paid foreign experts are commissioned to advise local governments on a short-term basis with little or no time nor concern for the applicability of their knowledge to the local context. This is exacerbated by the fact that these experts appear to develop their own professional identity and pursue their own interests as an ‘epistemic community’, most notably the diffusion of concepts deemed valid by themselves and the agencies on behalf of which they operate (cf. below).

Thus, the paradigmatic shift towards an egalitarian approach in development, to equal partnership and to a recognition of local knowledge all point to a more sophisticated understanding of the communication of knowledge which would create conditions that allow for a process of co-creation of knowledge that is both scientifically sound and up to date, as well as adequately adapted to local circumstances. To what extent that ideal is realised is the object of this study.

**Risks of aid-related expert advice for young democracies**

The major threat to young democracies is that they lose control over setting their own political agenda. Obviously, the ability of a citizenry to elect their representatives into political office where they can design policies that reflect the electorate’s wishes and interests and reach compromises with their opponents is the core element of any democratic system. It is the principle of self-determination. This principle is undermined if decision-making primarily follows the objectives of external agents instead of being responsive to those of the country’s population. Young democracies are particularly vulnerable to this threat posed by donors in the form of aid programmes and expert advice because of their internal instability: their governments’ legitimacy with their electorates is often tenuous, their institutions are still fragile, and their scientific
communities (i.e. their knowledge bases) are usually comparatively small, isolated and underfunded, which makes the respective countries dependent on knowledge from outside. There is an obvious asymmetry between donor and recipient countries insofar as the latter do not match the Western democracies, be it in terms of institutional stability, sophistication of administrative infrastructure and staff, juridical and governance systems, higher education and research systems in terms of volume, level of education, research output and absorptive capacity. This is regardless of the vast differences between countries within Africa (see Chapter 6).

The consequence of such asymmetry is that governments of countries that are recipients or addressees of aid programmes respectively come under influence from outside to varying degrees. This may impede their ability to determine their own political agendas and thereby run the risk of losing legitimacy with their own citizenry. This risk has become an object of a broad debate especially between observers of international aid policy and analysts from the aid community itself.

Therefore, it is worth taking a closer look first at the nature of legitimacy as being threatened, then at those conditions that appear to be crucial for recipient control over political agenda-setting: financial strength, the quality of public administration, especially with respect to its ability to critically absorb knowledge provided by external experts (absorptive capacity), and the strength of the ‘local’ knowledge base.

**Legitimacy**

The acceptance of a political system by its citizenry and, thus, its legitimacy, depends on both the institutional arrangements on the input side and the actual effectiveness of governmental institutions, most obvious in the provision of socio-economic benefits, but also in the rule of law, on the output side. The concept of ‘legitimacy’ in theories of democracy has several meanings. A common distinction is that between ‘input legitimacy’ and ‘output legitimacy’ (Scharpf 2005). This suggests that legitimacy is constituted not only by the institutions which allow for the participation of the electorate, such as political parties, interest groups, NGOs and the media in framing political decisions, but also the institutions that guarantee the quality of the decisions and their implementation. The combination of ‘input’ and ‘output’ legitimacy is particularly pertinent for this study as it points to the various factors shaping the relationship between recipient and donor governments, and allows an assessment of the impact of knowledge transfer ‘from outside’.
In young democracies, the most immediate threat to legitimacy from external experts, it can be hypothesised, will most likely come from a displacement of accountability of governments. This amounts to the open or implicit denial of ‘voice’ (i.e. participation) in shaping and making decisions, in particular about the political agenda. This is underscored by the exemplary and frequently quoted statement from President Paul Kagame of Rwanda:

*To realize our development vision, we in Africa must substitute external conditionality – that is, what the donors tell us to do – with internal policy clarity – that is, knowing ourselves what we need to do and articulating this clearly and consistently to our people and our development partners (...). This requires that, among other things, we need to learn to ‘say no’ to donors whenever their priorities do not align with domestic objectives and agenda.* (Kagame 2007: 5)

In order to capture the potential threat to the legitimacy of recipient governments posed by donor engagement it has been suggested to look at the “aid negotiation process as including the full policy cycle: agenda-setting, policy formulation, implementation, evaluation, and revision” with special emphasis “on the agenda-setting and policy formulation stages because these stages involve the strongest forms of recipient government control over its national development strategy and policies” (Whitfield & Fraser 2009: 39–40). By assuming this analytical perspective, both partners in the negotiation process come into view and are taken seriously as having their own interests and strategies in this process. More than that, it points to the particular conditions under which each party enters the process, such as governments’ dependence on aid.

When looking at young democracies and their particular sensitivity to knowledge transfer from outside the crucial point is that both donors and recipients are subject to legitimacy issues. Donors depend on public opinion ‘back home’, on the criteria and conditions of giving aid that are formulated by their parliaments, on the paradigms of the aid policy that may change with each new government. Likewise the recipient governments depend on the public consent of their respective citizenry to the various aid projects which add up to their aid policy. This dual orientation to each one’s source of legitimacy makes the negotiation between the two parties very sensitive. Mkandawire also points to this dual accountability when he writes:

*The more accountable a donor is to its own voters, the more onerous and invasive will be its intervention in the receiving economy and the more likely it is to undermine the recipient democratic government’s accountability to its own voters.* (Mkandawire 2010: 1168)
In particular, it makes aid programmes that in many, if not most cases require time to show the desired effects, subject to frequent and sudden changes, thus putting an additional burden on governments’ credibility with the public.

**Financial strength**

A fundamental condition of political sovereignty, it would appear, is financial independence. As Pender (2007: 112) writes, it is

> the idea of material capacity to act which blurs the lines between sovereignty and economics. Power always depends on material strength, and sovereignty has always implied some degree of autonomy from, and control over, economic processes.

Governments that have enough financial means to run their own affairs do not depend on financial aid from outside and consequently do not have to accept advice that potentially interferes with their own agenda-setting. This is so self-evident that it hardly needs to be discussed. The reverse argument is that governments in need of foreign funding have a weaker position in negotiating with donors over political objectives and priorities. In the extreme case the price they pay for securing aid is a loss of policy-making autonomy which threatens their legitimacy if decision-making becomes more responsive to external demands than to public preferences.

Yet, there are some considerations that suggest a more differentiated view on the effect of finances. Findings from recent studies indicate that there is no direct correlation between aid dependency, as measured in terms of foreign funding as a share of national budgets or gross national income, and the extent of external influence. Whitfield (2009a), for instance, has shown that countries such as Ethiopia and Rwanda show high degrees of control over their policy agendas in spite of being highly dependent on aid, as they are able to derive negotiating capital from favourable political and ideological conditions, amongst others.\(^\text{13}\) This challenges the assumption that countries which suffer from lack of funds must accept donor interference. It also indicates that ‘lack of funds’ is a relative figure that has to be seen in reference to the economic

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\(^\text{13}\) According to Whitfield (2009a: 333–341), the favourable political and ideological conditions in Ethiopia and Rwanda include their geostrategic importance for the West, the existence of clear development visions and a strong confidence of the governments in their authority relative to donors which they derive from their respective country histories. Ethiopia, for instance, had never been colonised as most other sub-Saharan states, and thus shows a strong sense of its own equality with donor countries; Rwanda is able to use the legacy of the genocide to de-legitimise external interference in domestic affairs.
power of the recipient country, but also to its political ambitions and objective needs. The onslaught of the HIV/Aids epidemic, for example, has imposed financial burdens on various African countries that were unanticipated and have threatened their economic well-being to different degrees. It is more instructive therefore to look at the ratio outside funds constitute as a percentage of budgets available for certain policy fields. Then financial dependency becomes more concrete: political agenda-setting usually applies to sectors represented by line ministries. It is on that level that the range of political options is narrowed by advice from outside. Here interference with policy agendas is most direct and damaging to a government’s authority and legitimacy.

**Administrative capacity**

Modern democracies rely heavily on efficient administration for both the preparation and implementation of political decisions taken by their legislatures. The administration of health care or education systems and the regulation of the labour market, to take just these examples, depend on systematic and reliable knowledge. The quality of bureaucracies has a strong influence on the quality of governments, their policies and their decision-making. With a constantly growing share of public administration being knowledge-based, bureaucracies have to have well-educated professional staffs which also connect them with their respective academic communities and allow them to gain some independence from the various lobby groups around them trying to gain influence over their actions. Control of the political agenda is thus an issue if bureaucracies are being confronted with expert advice they are not able to absorb properly, for lack of capable personnel or because – in the worst case – they are inefficient and corrupt. Then they are less likely to be competent parties in negotiations with donors than if they have a high level of professionalisation and well-trained staff. The perception that ‘their’ administrations are fit to deal with donors in a way that safeguards the local interests and guarantees performance that benefits their society will also gain a higher degree of trust from their constituency. Thus, the quality of bureaucracies in terms of their knowledge-related absorptive capacity is a crucial factor determining their ‘strength’ or ‘weakness’, respectively, and an important element of a government’s output legitimacy. The significance of absorptive capacity, thus, lies in its function to enable governments of developing countries to retain the control over their own political agendas, and as this control is closely related to legitimacy in (new) democracies it is a very important political resource.
The precondition for strengthening the absorptive capacity and, thus, for gaining independence from and control over foreign experts lies obviously in an education system that provides the respective governments with well-educated manpower. Although most African states now have elaborate education programmes and policies in place, their actual implementation ‘on the ground’ is a recurrent topic of complaint. Many lack the means and the competence to set up functioning education systems, although the quality varies greatly among them. Perhaps with the exception of South Africa, the education systems of many African states are not well developed and consequently the ‘absorptive capacity’ of these countries is comparatively low. As a result they are severely constrained in receiving the donors’ experts with their own critical assessment of the information they are being given, and in doing their part of translating the expertise into their respective political, cultural and social contexts.

Local knowledge base

To a considerable extent the absorptive capacity of a country is also determined by the relative strength of its own science system. Although scientific knowledge is supposedly international and the scientific community is a global network of communication, the differences between countries, the North and the South in particular, are considerable. Compared to the leading ‘scientific nations’ such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and since recently China, many African countries do not have the means to support a science system that can sustain internationally competitive research. Strictly speaking it is not necessary for a country to compete at the frontiers of research – and practically none can afford to do this in every field. But in order to tap that knowledge which is freely available and to adapt it to local conditions, a country needs a scientific community (and the requisite institutions) that is able to ‘absorb’ this knowledge. It is only then that knowledge can be converted to ‘expertise’ (i.e. knowledge) that is to be applied to solve practical problems. Only then will a roster of local experts be created, recruited from the national scientific community.

The difference between ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ expertise is an issue because the international community of experts has its own identity, its own culture, its own ideology and its own interests. The configurations of this community have been assigned different concepts over the last decades, from ‘strategic groups’ (Evers et al. 1988) to ‘(globalised) epistemic communities’ (Haas 1992; Evers

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14 See, for instance, Kisting (2012); Ayo (2013); Ndlovu (2013).
et al. 2009). These conceptualisations reflect to an extent the theoretical (and ideological) positions of their authors. But they also mirror the experience and the evidence gathered in numerous studies about the activities of foreign experts, their impact and their failures. The main point is that these groups or networks or communities of experts, even if they come from different disciplines and act on behalf of different governments or donor agencies, share a common set of qualities that Haas has characterised as being

(1) a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, which provide a value-based rationale for the social action of community members; (2) shared causal beliefs, which are derived from their analysis of practices leading or contributing to a central set of problems in their domain and which then serve as the basis for elucidating the multiple linkages between possible policy actions and desired outcomes; (3) shared notions of validity – that is, intersubjective, internally defined criteria for weighing and validating knowledge in the domain of their expertise; and (4) a common policy enterprise – that is, a set of common practices associated with a set of problems to which their professional competence is directed, presumably out of the conviction that human welfare will be enhanced as a consequence. (Haas 1992: 3)

As vague as the delineation of these ‘communities’ is, the analytical significance of the concept is the thesis that they represent certain views which they successfully transfer into politics. The mechanism of influence, as Haas sees it, is such that members of these communities may identify interests for decision-makers or illuminate dimensions of an issue

from which the decision makers may then deduce their interests. The decision makers in one state may, in turn, influence the interests and behaviour of other states, thereby increasing the likelihood of convergent state behaviour and international policy coordination, informed by the causal beliefs and policy preferences of the epistemic community. (Haas 1992: 4)

In other words, although on the surface one is made to believe that knowledge, scientific knowledge in particular, is universal and therefore neutral towards parochial interests and cultural contexts that assumption is naïve. The distinction between ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ expertise does make a difference.

Given the endemic weakness of the education and science systems of African countries, their governments are at the mercy of the international donor community – again with considerable differences between countries.
The realisation that this dependence is threatening their national and cultural identities, beyond posing a danger to their democratic institutions where they exist, has led to the appeal to ‘indigenous knowledge’. The United Nations declared the period 1995–2004 as the ‘International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People’ which was extended, as the second decade, to 2015. South Africa’s National Research Fund established the interface of indigenous knowledge (IK) and Western science as a research focus. This emphasis on IK is clearly motivated by a quest for cultural and national identity; it implies a paradigm shift insofar as it places knowledge at the centre of development strategies, and recognises the importance of ‘local’ knowledge and participation (see Weingart 2006: 184). Some authors have propagated IK as an alternative to Western science. That is the most concrete suggestion but it is also the least realistic option because it would isolate the countries that would follow this course from the global community, apart from the fact that the knowledge base would be far too small to allow full scale sustainable development. However, as Girvan (2007: 40) points out, the more realistic option to obtain a degree of independence is not to take the road into intellectual isolation but to set up local and regional knowledge centres in order to strengthen the respective science bases.

The real importance of ‘local expertise’ rests elsewhere. Experts who have been socialised and educated in the respective country at stake are representatives of the ‘local’ culture and the values that are being shared by its citizens, they speak the language. They have first-hand knowledge of the country’s problems and needs and how to meet them. Educated both in the respective country and often also abroad as many of the local academic elite are, they are able to absorb knowledge (i.e. function as critical interpreters who scrutinise expertise with regard to its relevance, as well as underlying paradigms and implicit interests). All these qualities allow them to be equal partners in the negotiation of projects with ‘foreign experts’. Finally, belonging to the recipient country’s expert community is a crucial condition for having credibility with local policy-makers and the public at large because it is assumed that primary allegiance is to the own country.

‘Capacity-building’ and foreign experts

In response to the perceived weakness of the local knowledge bases in developing countries the concept of ‘capacity-building’ has been used to

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15 In Tanzania, the significance of indigenous knowledge was already highlighted by the country’s first post-colonial leader Julius K Nyerere in his ‘education for self-reliance’ policy (Nyerere 1967); for details, see Chapter 7.
circumscribe a prime objective of aid programmes. In fact, the notion of ‘capacity-building’ goes back to the end of the 1960s when it had become apparent that the transfer of knowledge embodied in technology required, apart from an economic infrastructure, an education base. Already then it had become clear that the copying of knowledge alone was not sufficient but that an ‘absorptive capacity’ had to be built, meaning an indigenous base of knowledge production. The UN Economic and Social Council stated already in its 1969 ‘World Plan’:

_It is difficult for a developing country without a science and technology capacity of its own, and particularly without the trained people involved, to know what useful technology exists elsewhere, to understand it, to select it, to adapt, to absorb, to repair and maintain, to operate._ (United Nations Economic and Social Council 1971: 102)

It thus considered it “a fundamental necessity to build up indigenous scientific capability in the developing countries” (United Nations Economic and Social Council 1971: 102).

If the problem of absorption is addressed here with reference to the transfer of technology, it has become even more acute as aid programmes have since shifted to more abstract issues: governance in general, administration and accounting procedures in particular, therefore involving not only natural science knowledge but also economic, social and political science knowledge. ‘Capacity-building’ as it is being used by the World Bank, for example, includes increasing the “effectiveness of the states in designing and managing public policies and programs; in implementing regulatory frameworks; in delivering public services; and in promoting accountability and transparency in economic, financial and administrative governance” (World Bank 2010a).16 Thus, the term itself has become inflated and rather than addressing the issue of creating specifically a capacity for absorbing knowledge refers more generally to improving governance and financial management capabilities.

This is related to the kinds of experts who are engaged from ‘outside’. Knack and Rahman (2007: 194) state that donors should be careful not to disturb the market for skilled labour by bringing in expensive expatriates (usually because they are well trained abroad) because not only may this “prevent valuable learning-by-doing on the part of local staff” but also “those same benefits could be obtained, without the negative consequences, from using the funds to increase salaries of underpaid civil servants, or through general..."

16 This is taken from a World Bank project information document related to its African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) Regional Capacity Building Project (Project ID P122478) running from 2011 to 2017.
budget support”. The provision of advice as the dominant form of knowledge transfer is a process whose success hinges on mutual trust between advisor and his/her counterpart and on the ability of the latter to receive the advice with the competence to assess its value in the context of his/her problems and to apply and develop it further. Where these conditions are not met advice is inevitably the imposition of the advisor's interests and values on the recipient. The extensive use of experts from developed countries rests on the donors’ perception that the administrations in developing countries are not meeting their standards. Their interest in obtaining visible results as fast as possible thus pushes them to rely on ‘external’ experts rather than to improve the competence of local ones. The legitimacy pressures on the donors override the need for legitimacy on the recipients’ side.

The political intricacies of ‘knowledge transfer’

As will be shown later in detail (see Chapter 5), donor organisations rarely have precise concepts about how to communicate knowledge in advisory processes, about the nature of the knowledge to be communicated (i.e. whether it is based on evidence or more loosely on experience), about what it entails on the recipients’ side to actually absorb the knowledge offered and to build on it locally in a sustained fashion. Aid programmes are almost without exception targeted to operational problems such as the improvement of healthcare or the introduction of advanced accounting practices etc., but they do not reflect on the conditions of the transfer process itself. Providing aid is an activity that is ruled by criteria such as time constraints, efficiency and efficacy, it is oriented to achieving set objectives. In addition, the ‘experts’ that are being sent by the donor organisations or represent them act on their own and/or their organisation’s behalf (see Chapter 4). Reflecting on the conditions of knowledge transfer is not one of their concerns, and even if it were, the realities of organisations prove to be dominating. In his analysis of knowledge management among the experts within the German GTZ (now GIZ) Hüsken (2006: 246) states that the “collection, evaluation and the exchange of knowledge between headquarter, country bureaus and projects is unsystematic, and it is subject to conflicts of interests and power” (translated by authors). Note that this does not even refer to the advisory process executed by GTZ experts to their counterparts in developing countries.

In addition, the aid programmes of the international donor community are subject to changing paradigms of aid:
Over the past three decades, Western aid policies towards Africa have been dominated by, in roughly chronological and cumulative sequence, economic conditionalities around structural adjustment programmes; political conditionalities around respect for human rights and governance; and ‘partnership’ policies involving intensive and extensive redesigning of policy formation and budgetary processes in recipient countries. (Brown 2013: 263)

Several authors have argued that these programmes amount to “intrusions by outside agencies” (Plank 1993: 408). But regardless of whether analysts and critics believe that the actual control of nations over agenda-setting and outcomes may be threatened or if they regard modern aid programmes as a continuation of colonialism there can be little doubt that development experts as representatives of aid organisations and government officials of recipient countries enter a relationship which is characterised by potentially conflicting interests and inequality of control and discretionary powers. Even if the rhetoric of ‘conditionality’ has been abandoned, donors can and factually do determine which conditions the recipient has to meet in order to obtain aid. The power differential and, thus, the vulnerability of the young democracies’ agenda-setting control remains and – contrary to the World Bank’s assessment – is even more difficult to escape when the chief currency of aid is knowledge. Their legitimacy may be threatened even if that is no one’s intention.