The Delusion of Knowledge Transfer

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Questioning the ‘knowledge is like light’ assumption which prevails in international donor circles, this study set out to explain the intricacies of expert advice in the aid context by developing a generalised description of underlying mechanisms and conditions. Such an enterprise has to meet two requirements: first, the availability of “rich descriptions of empirical phenomena” that can be analysed, and second, a variance in data which “can be obtained by comparative case studies” (Gläser & Laudel 2013). The qualitative empirical study is based on 73 semi-structured expert interviews conducted in South Africa and Tanzania during four field trips in the years 2011, 2012 and 2013. A standardised background questionnaire distributed to informants and a comprehensive body of documents produced by government authorities and aid agencies were used to complement and contextualise the interview material.

As sociologists of knowledge have shown, results gained through academic research are always products of constructive processes rather than a detection of facts (Schütz 1953; Knorr-Cetina 1981; Knorr-Cetina 1984). In the following, we delineate the creative aspects of our empirical work and unfold experiences made ‘in the field’ which inevitably affected the interpretation of findings.

**Tools of data generation: Expert interviews, questionnaires and document analysis**

Since this study aimed to explore the impact of expert advice on policy processes in developing democracies, the focus of research was not on the technical content of policies as such, but rather on the processes through which they were developed. In order to reconstruct the latter, we approached the
decisive actors involved therein, using expert interviews as the main method of investigation.\footnote{A policy analysis based on documents might have had the potential to trace external influences to some extent, for example, by scrutinising national policy documents for their references to global conventions or normative guidelines of the international community. This approach, however, would have fallen short of revealing how external influences come into play, by whom they are enforced, and how they are dealt with. One could argue that participant observation would have allowed a more direct insight into negotiation processes between the different actors in the realm of policy-making. However, here this method would neither have been feasible nor would it have been the most appropriate one. Apart from the difficulty in getting direct access to policy negotiations and advisory situations as a researcher, the long-term character of policy processes would have been a major obstacle, given the time-frame of the study. It would also not have been possible to directly observe processes in three sectors and two countries, which would have meant that we lacked the variance of data required for comparison.}

What constitutes an individual as an ‘expert’ in the expert interview as a method of qualitative research is his or her exclusive knowledge on the researcher’s object (Littig 2008).\footnote{Littig (2008) provides an analysis of commonalities and differences regarding the discussion of expert and elite interviews in the German and English literature. The term ‘expert’ in this context is used as a relational concept decoupled from the professional roles or formal occupational status of interviewees (Meuser & Nagel 2009).} It is particularly his or her knowledge and interpretation of the social situation – the process and interpretative dimension of expert knowledge – that is relevant for reconstructing social objects the researcher is not able to observe directly.\footnote{Bogner and Menz (2009) deconstruct expert knowledge into three dimensions: technical, process and interpretative knowledge. The first is closely related to the specialised knowledge the expert has accumulated in a particular technical area through formal qualification and training. Process knowledge, in contrast, is mainly gained through experience and relates to “sequences of actions, interaction routines, organizational constellations, and past or current events” (Bogner & Menz 2009: 52) in which the expert was involved through his/her practical activity. Interpretative knowledge as a third dimension includes “the expert’s subjective orientations, rules, points of view and interpretations” (Bogner & Menz 2009: 52).} Applying this concept to this study, the ‘expert status’ has been ascribed to those who play a major role in policy-making in South Africa and Tanzania, and, given their direct participation therein, possess exclusive knowledge on how and to what extent decisions are influenced by external advice.

Suitable protagonists in this regard were found in government bodies, donor agencies, and partly in academia and civil society. The variety of their roles and functions required a flexible use of the interview guidelines that were designed to ensure comparability by focusing the interviews on specific major topics. We used the guidelines more as a memo than as a pre-fixed list of questions. A rather open interview approach was instructive insofar as it provided room for interviewees to “report cases of decision-making for reconstructing the supra-individual, field-specific patterns of expert knowledge” (Meuser & Nagel 2009: 31). Such reports and narratives about specific episodes, conflicts and problem solutions in the experts’ professional activities are considered key points of reference for tapping “the tacit aspects of expert knowledge, which
she or he is not fully aware of and which, on the contrary, become noticed only gradually in the course of the narration” (Meuser & Nagel 2009: 32). Narrative interview passages became particularly useful when interviewees seemed to provide more of an official answer rather than actual experience, hesitant to directly criticise prevailing practices or unwilling to disclose their expert knowledge for other reasons. Letting interviewees report about concrete cases often brought forward implicit patterns of social action and interpretations that were not explicitly formulated. It also helped to avoid socially desirable responses. The perception of the interviewers’ roles, competencies and assumed intentions may impact on the interviewee’s way of responding. For example, our nationality as Germans led a few interviewees to emphasise their ‘good experiences’ with German development cooperation. Hence, we explicitly informed the interviewees about the academic background of our research interests. Providing preliminary assumptions and hypotheses was particularly instructive to obtain experts’ reactions and interpretations that pointed to underlying patterns and principles of acting in advisory situations.

In assessing “the meaning and significance” of interview statements, it is crucial to take into account the “institutional-organizational context within which the expert’s position is embedded” (Meuser & Nagel 2009: 35). The standardised questionnaire was one tool which helped to define the different contexts of interviewees in the sample. It covered a maximum of 30 questions on the personal and professional background, the cooperation with partners, and the access to and management of knowledge. The questionnaire was distributed online prior to meeting the interviewees; however, the majority of them completed it after the interview was done, either online or using the paper version. Overall, we received a response rate of 82%. It is important to emphasise, however, that the questionnaire was not designed to gain data which claim statistical significance. Instead, it has been used to describe our sample and to illustrate patterns with regard to qualifications, experiences and routine practices of the participants’ professional activity. The data generated by the survey thus complement the qualitative findings taken from the interview material.

In order to contextualise the latter, an extensive corpus of documents related to relevant advisory and policy processes was gathered. The collection included a variety of text types such as project and programme reports disclosed by international organisations, job descriptions, evaluation studies, sector reviews, policy documents and official government publications. Juxtaposing...

20 For a typology of interaction situations and interview strategies, see Bogner and Menz (2009).
22 60 out of 73 interviewees approached fully completed the questionnaire.
the interview statements with ‘natural’ text generated in the field of the interviewees’ professional activity not only helped to embed narrations in a broader ‘story’, but also to compare, confirm or contrast representations of processes the interviewees were part of. Contradictions that emerge through this approach are not treated as irregularities or distortions of the findings; instead, they reveal different patterns of legitimation and thereby crucial aspects of the research objective.

The sample: Development experts, government officials, academics and activists

As outlined above, the aim of the expert interview is to access the exclusive knowledge of experts in order to be able to reconstruct social situations and processes in which they participated (Gläser & Laudel 2010). Thus, the main criteria for selecting potential interviewees in our study was their engagement in one of three policy areas we were interested in, namely health, education and environment.

In order to identify relevant actors on the donor side, we contacted country offices, embassies and ‘development partner’ secretariats in South Africa and Tanzania, and screened documents such as minutes of policy meetings, joint sector reviews, progress and evaluation reports of major projects and programmes which usually list participants or responsible staff. While the names of the current health specialist or an education advisor in a particular donor agency were found relatively easily (in some cases by mere online search), it was far more complicated to identify their ‘counterparts’ in government authorities (i.e. the Tanzanian or South African officials they interact with). Gaining contact details of policy-makers and technical staff from abroad proved challenging for a number of reasons. Compared to donor websites, the online presence of ministries and departments is often rudimentary and not up to date regarding office holders, phone numbers or email addresses. This appeared to be connected with a high staff turn-over in these organisations. Calling operators did not always help either. Lastly, being less familiar with formal organisational structures and informal power relations, it was difficult for us in the beginning to figure out the pivotal people within the bureaucracies who do have a say in policy decisions.

In this regard, recommendations of a few key actors with years of experience on government or donor side were extremely useful and often functioned as a door opener for arranging meetings with high-level role-players. To give just one example: a German health expert who had spent around eight years in Tanzania allowed us to refer to him when contacting his former partners. Doing
so evoked a surprising turn-around of reaction in many cases. After hearing his name, Tanzanian officials, who were first hesitant to meet, now warmheartedly invited us to visit them, sending best wishes to their ‘colleague’ and ‘friend’ – one even responded: “People in Tanzania will never forget what he has done for our country. You are most welcome!” This anecdote points to the great importance of personal relationships in the realm of development cooperation which we not only experienced during the research, but which also came up as a major issue in the interviews. The fact that we arrived at a point where we were given congruent recommendations of whom to meet from different people (referring us to the ones who had suggested them) hints at a marked feature of governance particularly in Tanzania, namely that policy-making power is held by a rather small group of protagonists.

During the second rounds of interviews in South Africa and Tanzania, we came to a point where we felt to have reached ‘saturation’ in the sense that interviews did not reveal new aspects or perspectives on the topic, but reconfirmed prior statements and legitimation patterns. Altogether, we conducted 73 interviews which took place in Dar es Salaam, Pretoria, Johannesburg and Berlin. The sample consists of a fairly heterogeneous group of interviewees who can broadly be grouped into three categories:

- **Experts working for bi- and multilateral organisations.** Experts working for bi- and multilateral organisations are deployed in the field in various different positions (see Chapter 4); hence the titles of our interviewees were manifold: amongst others, we spoke to senior (technical) advisors, programme managers, first secretaries, counsellors, team leaders, sector specialists, professional officers, attachés, and consultants. The variety of functions and relevance of positions result from the fact that donor and recipient countries organise the management of aid in very different ways. The majority of interviewees from this group ranked themselves as being a senior staff member or at medium level in the hierarchy of their organisation. One third of them had between 21 and 30 years of experience in development cooperation; roughly 50% between 11 and 20 years; and a smaller number less than ten years.

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23 For details on aid management structures in South Africa and Tanzania, see Chapter 3. For an overview of different organisational types on the donor side, see Chapter 4.

24 The allocation of questionnaire answers related to the level of seniority in detail: head of organisation/mission: 3.7%; high-ranking manager (e.g. vice-president, vice-chairperson, director): 3.7%; senior member of staff (e.g. head of department, team leader): 59.3%; medium level of seniority (e.g. attaché, advisor, project manager): 29.6%; other: 3.7% (= 100%).

25 The allocation of questionnaire answers related to the work experience of external experts in detail: 1–5 years: 7.4%; 6–10 years: 7.4%; 11–20 years: 51.9%; 21–30 years: 33.3%; 31 and more years: 0% (= 100%).
While 18 interviewees in this group were foreigners coming from Europe or North America, nine were ‘local internationals’ (i.e. Tanzanians and South Africans working for an international organisation). As many of them had prior experience in working for their governments and thus were knowledgeable of the problems and pressures on both the recipient and donor side, they had particularly interesting perspectives on the topic.

- **Government officials in recipient authorities.** The second critical group of interviewees in our sample is made up of those who constitute the main target group for external policy advice: the cadre of senior government officials who are the designated ‘counterparts’ of aid experts. Entering national ministries, departments and other government bodies, we spoke to permanent secretaries, deputy director-generals, heads of government agencies, and directors and programme officers who regularly interact with donor staff. Asked for the number of years of experience in development cooperation, answers ranged from two to 30 years. Among those with decades of experience, some were already retired from government service. Their statements based on years of dealing with donors were particularly fruitful for gaining a long-term perspective on developments both in the respective sector and the aid community. Having a more distant view on day-to-day politics, the senior interviewees provided valuable reflections on changing relationships, paradigm shifts and the overall impact of external advice on sector policies over time. While retired interviewees were able to speak frankly about conflicts and failures, government officials still in service seemed more cautious in their assessments, although we guaranteed anonymity with regard to the use of the material. Yet, we felt that most of them were quite honest in speaking about current policy processes and the involvement of external actors therein, with some being outspoken in their criticism and others communicating their messages between the lines.

- **Academics and civil society activists.** Academics and leading civil society activists make up the smallest group of interviewees in our study. Including them in the sample was instructive insofar as their experience of being or not being consulted by governments or donors was an important aspect of our research. Their assessment of who pulls the strings in policy-making complemented the picture painted by external experts and government officials with a third perspective. Moreover, they provided useful comments on preliminary hypotheses, argumentation lines and impressions that came up during the field trips.
On average, the interviews took around one hour. While some appointments were arranged in hotel lobbies or other venues suggested by interviewees, we usually met them at their workplace. It is worth making a side note on the experience these visits provided; in Tanzania, we got the impression that the status difference between donors and recipients is in the truest sense of the word cemented in the buildings of government authorities, country offices and embassies.

**A note on interview locations**

Scheduling meetings with aid experts in Dar es Salaam turned out to be relatively easy in the sense that except for the compound of the United States Embassy, a high security fort in the northern district, most foreign embassies and country offices of international organisations are located within a radius of three square kilometres in the city centre. Due to sophisticated registration and security check procedures, entering these buildings often took longer than expected. Once inside, we found ourselves in shining, air-conditioned entrance halls or foyers. After a fluent English-speaking (usually Tanzanian) receptionist had informed the interview partner about our arrival, we were picked up and guided to an office properly equipped with modern furniture and ICT, as it is standard in Western countries.

The contrast between the setting we found in donor edifices and the conditions in government buildings was striking. The facilities available for officials in ministries and departments are not comparable to the ones of foreigners working in the country in terms of both their outside appearance and the interior. Piles of paper stored on ledges and handwritten notes loosely stacked on desks were a common picture in Tanzanian offices, which often lacked not only technological equipment, but also basic office supplies such as shelves and files. The fact that it seemed easier to arrange appointments with government officials by phone (using private mobile numbers) than by email was not surprising, given the fragile power supply and network infrastructure at their workplace.

In South Africa, the contrast between donor and government buildings was certainly less extreme, but still apparent. With this anecdotal description of the field we encountered, we want to point out that local and foreign actors in the aid context obviously operate in two quite different worlds. Meeting our interviewees in their respective professional environments reinforced the impression of a rather unequal setting for cooperation between ‘partners’.
Steps of analysis: Coding, interpretation and data consolidation

The findings of this study were produced through an iterative process of data collection and analysis. After each phase of fieldwork, the respective interviews were transcribed and subjected to an inductive process of coding (i.e. indexing themes in the text in order to structure the material). Deriving the codes from the empirical data, the coding system was constantly refined until a set of categories was developed that represented a first step of empirical generalisation. The information base constructed through the process helped us to selectively retrieve the text in search for patterns and causal explanations which were finally integrated into “a systematic, theoretically embedded explanation” (Gläser & Laudel 2013). Compiling the findings, we supplemented them with additional material taken from the collection of documents and the results of the questionnaire where suitable.

26 This is suggested by the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

27 For coding the interview material, we used the software Maxqda Version 11.