The Delusion of Knowledge Transfer

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Chapter 8

THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This book began by referring to the repeated critique and persistent failure of expert advice that has become a prime tool of foreign aid, with the rise of the ‘knowledge for development’ paradigm. We argued that the chronic ineffectiveness of ‘technical assistance’ – the label under which advisory activities are commonly subsumed – does not primarily result from deficient implementation (as it is often suggested by evaluation studies) but from structural constraints that frustrate knowledge transfer in the context of development cooperation. Moreover, the engagement of external experts in the policy space of recipient countries must be considered dangerous for young democracies insofar as it opens up room for outside interference; ultimately, thus our thesis, posing a threat to the legitimacy of these countries’ governments as they risk losing control over their own policy agendas. Using South Africa and Tanzania as sites of empirical investigation, we aimed to identify the conditions which determine recipients’ ability to retain their agenda-setting autonomy. We sought to identify general impediments that explain why aid-related expert advice keeps developing countries in a status of dependency, rather than making them self-reliant as is claimed by the aid community.

The inherently political nature and especially the vested interests attached to aid are key explanatory factors in this regard (see Chapter 4). Donor governments use development assistance as a device to promote foreign policy and economic objectives. Thus, expertise provided in this setting is inherently not as ‘neutral’ as is usually claimed by those who emphasise its ‘evidence-based’ grounding. The extent to which advice is tied to donors’ agendas varies depending on their policies and organisational set-ups. In any case, it needs to be at least broadly in line with the political views of the funding governments.
Since the preferences of the latter shift with elections, as well as with global trends and fads in aid policies, priorities and modalities of aid frequently change. This ephemerality is detrimental to advisory processes insofar as they require a certain degree of continuance and stability if they are to have any sustained impact (see Chapter 5).

The linkage between aid and politics also explains the supply-driven nature of expert activities which has consistently been criticised as a major flaw by assessment studies (see, for instance, Forss et al. 1988; Berg 1993; Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs Norway & Asplan Analyse 1994; Williams et al. 2003; Land 2007; European Commission 2008; World Bank Independent Evaluation Group 2008). Most of these reports call for a greater involvement of recipients in identifying their needs or defining the terms of reference for external support. However, such suggestions, we have argued, will not solve the root cause of the prevailing mismatch between demand and supply (see Chapter 5). For donor governments and their respective implementing agencies, placing experts in recipient authorities not only helps to support policy ideas that conform to their own political convictions but also to trace the use of their taxpayers' money. Some donor governments (e.g. the US) make that a condition of their aid programmes. To cede decision-making over expert assistance to beneficiaries in order to increase local ‘ownership’ and commitment would mean to give up control and influence. From the donor perspective, this would counteract efforts to legitimate aid spending and to prove accountability vis-à-vis domestic constituencies. Therefore, expert advice in aid will remain oriented at funders’ interests, even if recipients are formally being given more say.

Another set of problems are flaws pertaining to expert employment: the absence of clear concepts of knowledge transfer on the donor side, an insufficient fit of advisors’ expertise, experience and competencies, and adverse employment conditions that impede the building of trust and social ties (see Chapter 5). In view of such constraints, external experts at best fill gaps in recipient authorities, but contribute little to ‘capacitating’ counterparts as it is purported by aid providers. In actual fact, the latter profit from this failure insofar as their support would eventually become obsolete if knowledge transfer was achieved.

A third root cause of the inefficacy of expert advice was identified in the unequal relations that – despite all rhetoric of ‘partnership’ – continue to exist in development cooperation (see Chapter 5). The imbalance which derives from the situation that one party depends on the assistance of the other – be it financially or in terms of specialist knowledge – is reinforced by the fact that advisory relations in aid are structured along a knowledge hierarchy which places ‘international’ (i.e. Northern) over ‘local’ knowledge. It manifests
itself in stark discrepancies concerning the quality and credibility accredited to expertise. Aid agencies perpetuate this hierarchical classification through procurement practices that marginalise expert communities in recipient countries and solidify the pre-eminence of their own expert cadres. The obvious status difference between ‘international’ advisors and their counterparts in government authorities hampers the building of relationships which would allow for knowledge transfer, exchange and mutual learning.

The intricacies resulting from hierarchical relations and vested interests underlying aid partly explain why decades of ‘technical assistance’ have had so little impact in terms of ‘capacity-building’, and why technocratic suggestions are unlikely to increase its effectiveness. The intrinsic constraints of aid-related expert advice delineated in this study account for its failure to help recipient governments in becoming independent. Policy-makers in developing countries, thus, continue to rely on experts financed and provided by donor agencies. The persistent presence of external actors in their policy space, however, implies the constant risk of foreign interference in decision-making. The sector studies from South Africa and Tanzania (see Chapter 7) document the close involvement of aid experts in policy processes but also show that the extent to which they are able to shape agendas varies considerably. Recipients’ ability to retain the lead in decision-making is to some extent dependent on the degree of their financial dependence. Our analysis revealed that it is also determined by the strength of their administrations and science communities in the respective fields. Also, the finding that policy-makers who faced similar structural conditions positioned themselves differently towards the aid community, for example by adopting an attitude of resignation or by employing strategies of resistance, hinted at the significance of agency within a given context (see Chapter 7).

All in all, the case studies show that external advice has different effects on young democracies. The case of the Tanzanian education sector most strongly supports the initial thesis that such advice threatens the legitimacy of governments insofar as it makes decision-making responsive to the preferences of foreign actors rather than to those of domestic stakeholders. The orientation towards donor demands undermines the ‘input’ legitimacy of educational governance. ‘Output’ legitimacy is undermined since programmes developed from outside largely fail to bring about substantial change. The fact that the government formally bears the blame for policy failure in education, although decisions are largely driven by donors, hints at the accountability problems entailed in the reliance on external advice. The dominance of aid experts has narrowed down if not eliminated the space for endogenous policy thinking in responsible authorities. Unable to provide a genuine policy vision, leaders
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The Tanzanian education sector represents the most extreme case in our study, but indications for a loss of policy-making authority were found in the fields of health and environment as well. The case studies from Tanzania thus substantiate the claim that aid-related expert advice potentially jeopardises the legitimacy of democratic governments if these are not able to maintain their decision-making autonomy to advance their own agendas. That this is possible in principle, if recipients possess resources that allow them to scrutinise external expertise and adapt it to national policy visions, can be seen in South Africa. In all three fields under investigation, policy-makers have managed to retain the lead in decision-making despite drawing on external assistance. Yet, as repeatedly pointed out, the country is a rather unusual case, given its outstanding financial and institutional strength. Most young democracies in sub-Saharan Africa rather face conditions as found in Tanzania. Hence, the risk that their governments similarly lose (or have lost) legitimacy due to their dependence on donor funding and advice is high.

The findings of this study indicate the pertinence of this peril. Yet, it would be overstating the case if we do not admit to some weaknesses in the empirical approach. First, the loss of legitimacy has to be theoretically inferred rather than actually being ‘measurable’. The limitations of the scope of empirical inquiry did not allow us to ascertain the public acceptance of policies or the assessment of government performance by citizens. Such evidence would provide ultimate proof of the thesis that loss of control over agenda-setting actually puts the legitimacy of young democratic regimes at risk. Obviously it could only be gathered by large-scale surveys in each country. It is important to note that the scarcity of social science research and public opinion polls in developing countries not only poses a problem for research on the link between government policy positions and citizens’ preferences, it is also problematic for the democratic system insofar as important indicators of representation are missing.

An auxiliary approach for investigating to what extent policy agendas reflect local concerns (as opposed to priorities of foreign actors) would have been to include parliamentary debates about sectoral challenges and reform proposals into the analysis. This might have been feasible for South Africa where records of parliamentary committee meetings are provided online in English. However, access to Tanzania’s National Assembly records requires Swahili skills not at our disposal.

Given these constraints, we tried to mitigate this missing evidence by including the perspectives of academics and civil society activists who, while counting among elites, can be considered part of ‘the public’. In fact, they

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theoretically represent the vocal public which influences public discourses and shapes public opinion. The focus of the investigation is on tracing the policy interests of two groups of actors, namely the government (represented by policy-makers and senior bureaucrats) and donors (represented by experts of aid agencies in their various roles). Thereby, we classified the interests of the former as ‘local’ and those of the latter as ‘external’. To be sure, this is a generalisation that oversimplifies reality. Yet, it helped to reconstruct struggles over policies and to understand which side was more successful in shaping the outcomes of the discourse. The fact that we primarily relied on the protagonists involved in such processes to give an account of their own and others’ roles meant that no ‘unbiased’ material (if such exists) to draw on was available. Using expert interviews in spite of their methodological limitations (see Chapter 2) allowed us to carry out sector studies in two countries, and to include past and present policy processes. The variety of cases, in turn, helped to reveal general complexities of expert advice in the aid setting, as well as to identify conditions which determine its effects. Similar empirical research covering other aid-receiving countries in Africa and other world regions would be instructive to test the generalisability of findings and their validity in different contexts, nationally, culturally, economically and with respect to the pertinent aid policies. It would surely be advantageous if this research was carried out by or in collaboration with local scholars who might have a deeper understanding of historical developments, social realities and the political scenes in their countries than researchers from the North.

Much literature about aid emanates from political science and economics, and focuses on its political and institutional effects in recipient countries. This study contributes to the debate with insights from the sociology of science and provides a new perspective which highlights the complexities of knowledge transfer as the ultimate aim of expert advice. While international organisations have been promoting knowledge transfer through expert advice as the new panacea for development, this study provides explanations why in most cases it fails to be of use for recipients, or, even worse, has a detrimental impact on the fragile fabric of their democracies.

It needs to be emphasised at this point that we do not insinuate that harming recipients’ institutions is the intention of anyone involved in the aid business. Most experts we met in country offices, embassies and government authorities conveyed the impression that they truly sought to help their South African or Tanzanian counterparts in coping with the massive problems related to healthcare, education systems or the environment. Some advisors were themselves highly critical of their own organisations’ practices, and seemed seriously interested in how to bring about change. The findings of our research, however, suggest that providing developing countries with experts
from outside will not achieve this change, irrespective of the commitment and
good will of individual actors or attempts to refine approaches. This conclusion
sounds rather pessimistic and in a way prompts the withdrawal of a large
amount of aid immediately. In fact, the results of this study tempt one to
dissuade donors from continuing to supply advice to countries that obviously
lack the absorptive capacity to adequately deal with it.

It would probably be more constructive to use the available means to support
the knowledge communities in developing countries so that these become able
to produce a critical mass of local experts who qualify as producers and critical
scrutinisers of expertise. This support does not necessarily need to (or should
better not?) be delivered through conventional aid programmes since these
are invariably affected by conflicts of interests and accountability pressures
that undermine their actual objectives. It could, instead, take the form of
investment that facilitates institutional cooperation between research centres,
be they university-based or ‘think tanks’ outside the academic system. It could
also be provided in the form of educational scholarships that enable students
to enter higher education paths, notably not only abroad (which, most often,
means in the North) but in their own countries. It could mean making funding
available for the setup of new university programmes that are locally designed
and oriented at the specific country challenges. None of these suggestions are
new, but they seem to have faded from the spotlight of foreign funders. One
reason, probably the most important one, is the difficulty in gaining visible
results from such kind of investment in a relatively short time, the kind of
tangible evidence that can be demonstrated to the taxpayers/voters at home.
In terms of value for the societies of developing countries, however, such
a strategy is likely to have more effect than using ‘parachute experts’ from
outside to provide technical assistance that all too often does not respond to
these countries’ political agendas.

Examples that hint at the potential of science-related initiatives can already
be found. In Tanzania, cooperation between the Muhimbili University College
of Health Sciences in Dar es Salaam, the University of Heidelberg (Germany)
and GTZ in the early 2000s led to the introduction of a first Master of Public
Health Programme. Producing a crucial cadre of public health specialists, the
annual course is still being offered by the School of Public Health and Social
Sciences, and the two universities have continued collaboration and exchange.
In South Africa, remarkable achievements regarding the transformation of
the higher education landscape were accomplished through the so-called
‘South Africa Norway Tertiary Education Programme’ (SANTED). Starting in
2000, it aimed at improving the access, retention and success of previously
disadvantaged students, enhancing the administrative and academic capacity
of selected universities, and facilitating regional cooperation. When the
programme formally ended in 2010, it had – despite a comparatively small amount of foreign investment – catalysed structural changes and institutional linkages spanning 16 universities in South Africa and the SADC region (see Gibbon 2014).

It is certainly difficult to ‘measure’ the impact of such initiatives directly. However, the fact that they outlast the time frames of external support indicates a degree of sustainability which many aid projects are lacking. The value of students who benefit from better education opportunities in their countries and empower their societies through building an endogenous knowledge base must not be underestimated just because it cannot be easily expressed in numerical terms. The long-term profit from building ‘human capital’ in developing democracies through strengthening their higher education systems should be considered by those who have the means to provide support but also by the governments in these countries themselves. Surely, investing in tertiary education may seem like an unaffordable luxury for decision-makers facing a myriad of social problems that require attention and budget. This may explain why some science systems in sub-Saharan Africa are underfunded to such an extent that they operate “in a ‘subsistence mode’ where they struggle to reproduce themselves” (Mouton et al. 2008: 200). Their absolute dependency on foreign funders in many cases bars them from playing a systemic role insofar as they are unable to set their own research agendas independently from external influences (Mouton et al. 2008). To carry out science in response to local needs, universities would need to be “backed by long-term commitment of adequate resources from government and the private sector” (Girvan 2007: 33). The provision of domestic means for research and higher education is critical because

*only on this basis do external support and collaboration stand a chance of success. In this, as in all other areas, external inputs cannot substitute for internal effort.* (Girvan 2007: 33)

It needs to be acknowledged that many African leaders increasingly try to put science on their political agendas. Although these endeavours have not always or not yet been translated into budgets, newly formulated policy frameworks and intensified efforts to produce data on science and technology systems signal rising awareness of their potential (see NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency 2014). At the same time, however, it is noticeable that this potential is often reduced to stimulating economic growth through innovation, whereas the value of science communities for policy-making and governance is neglected. This manifests itself in the weak and sometimes non-existent links between the political sphere and academia. Various researchers we met for this study,
particularly in Tanzania, complained about the disinterest of decision-makers in their findings. Such complaints, of course, are neither new nor confined to developing countries, and the tense relationship between science and politics has been a topic of debate for a while (see Barker & Peters 1993; Bechmann 2003; Lentsch & Weingart 2009b). Yet, the disregard of local knowledge by policy-makers in young African democracies is specifically distressing insofar as an important resource that could strengthen their sovereignty is left unexploited.

Certainly, expert communities in developing countries are still small in many fields and require internal and external support to grow. They nonetheless constitute a source of expertise that – if tapped by their governments – could contribute to decreasing the dependence on advice from outside and to abolishing the asymmetry between foreign and local experts. For young democracies, using the knowledge and capacity of their own societies seems indispensable if they want to find and realise their own policy visions.