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## **EntwicklungsexpertInnen**

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THOMAS HÜSKEN

**Outside the Whale<sup>1</sup>: The Contested Life and Work of  
Development Experts**

In critical studies of development cooperation the role of development experts as agents of change and transformation has often been questioned. This is particularly true with regard to the anthropology and sociology of development. Particular studies (Betke et al. 1978) have dealt with the selective perception of experts towards the complex realities of developing societies. Such critiques typically focused on the adoption of elite perspectives towards such societies, instead of dealing with the worldviews and needs of ordinary people.

The German social anthropologists and sociologists Karola Elwert-Kretschmer and Georg Elwert (1991) have presented the counter perspective on the development of the local population in Benin in their book *Mit den Augen der Beniner, eine Evaluation von 25 Jahren DED in Benin* (In the eyes of the people of Benin – an evaluation of 25 years of the German Development Service in Benin). The phenomenon of development experts' insulation from the surrounding society was one finding of their study. Gudrun Lachenmann (1991) studied how expert discourses constitute a specific reality. Her study shows how these discourses systematically exclude forms of knowledge and practice that do not conform to the technocratic paradigm of development experts. Thus, the development discourse creates 'systems of ignorance' by disconnecting expert knowledge from other forms of knowledge. On the international level, Arturo Escobar (1995) criticized the discursive power of development by emphasizing the 'invention' of the third world by think tanks and the professionals involved in development cooperation. There is no doubt that these critical contributions have fundamentally changed the discussion on development cooperation. However, the critique also promotes the perception of development as a coherent and

powerful institutional formation and mindset. Hence, it turns into a kind of development machinery (Ferguson 1990)<sup>2</sup> that is perceived to be instrumental in furthering a selective understanding of development within societies.

As other social anthropological studies on development have shown (Bierschenk 2008), the diversity of ideas and understandings of development are a core problem in projects and programmes, just as are power and the control over resources. In this understanding, development projects are competitive arenas in which strategically operating actors each pursue their particular ends. My own research shows that this competition is very much determined by informal processes with a multiplicity of actors, rules and power-relations (Hüsken 2006). Instead of common notions about the superiority of expert discourses and practices, my article tries to explore the contested life and work of development experts. This contested life and practice lies beyond the formal discourse of policy papers or the documents of inter-governmental negotiations and their academic critique. My paper predominantly refers to those processes of development that take place in concrete projects and programmes. Similar to Mosse (2004), I understand these realms as a particular sphere of action that establishes ideologies and practices which differ from the official development discourse.

My article is based on participant observation, interviews and a quantitative survey in governmental development projects of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and their social environments in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen and Palestine in the years between 2000–2004 (Hüsken 2006). In 2008 and 2009 the empirical basis was broadened by additional field studies in Egypt and Libya, and by interviews and group discussions with 20 development experts of the GTZ who worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia<sup>3</sup>. Whenever I talk about research findings, they are based on these studies.

## **I. Experts**

Development experts are commonly viewed as representatives of the development machinery. They are often treated as a coherent professional group with similar educational backgrounds, professional ethics and world-

views. However, my research on German development experts in the Middle East contradicts this notion.

The German development economist Dieter Weiss has shown that the consensus on ethics and values among colonial public and military servants formed a cornerstone of the British Empire (Weiss 1994: 11). However, a consensus of this kind does not exist among modern development experts. Instead, they differ in worldviews and orientations and in their educational backgrounds. Development experts represent a very heterogeneous professional group that lacks a coherent professional organisation and suffers from the absence of long-term prospects<sup>4</sup>. The job market for development experts is precarious and insecure: positions are created or cancelled depending on the budgets of the public sector, which themselves depend on the shifting agendas of politicians and on parliamentary decision making. Thus, development experts find themselves in an intense competition for jobs that are relatively scarce. One remedy against this situation is a form of self-organisation based on networking and clientelism. Experts form clans and networks in which information, mutualities and services are circulated and exchanged. This is particularly true for the distribution of jobs. However, what might be a successful strategy within these networks makes for a very low job market transparency for outsiders. The scale of these networks is relatively small and they are based on the face-to-face relations of a limited number of specific individuals. Thus, the experts I dealt with are not part of a newly emerging transnational strategic group in the global arena, as Evers (2005) has described them.

The days of development cooperation as mere technical assistance are long gone. Nowadays the moderation and organisation of different social, political, economical and cultural interests (and their agents) in contexts of change, transition and conflict (or post-conflict) belong to the tasks of development experts. They do this work in an environment of unclear mandates, a weak back up of their agencies and almost no means of enforcing their targets (Vogt-Moritz 1991). Development experts are not protected by international law like diplomats are. As a general rule, they have only temporary job contracts with no guarantee for further employment, and they cannot force partners to cooperate.

The institutional actors and the formal and informal agents in the development arenas are diverse and quite different in type and rationale. Although

the classical relation between experts and the local target group is still relevant, we also have to consider the influence of government bureaucracies in the donating and the recipient country, as well as in the central offices of development organizations. In addition, the role of different development organisations acting as competitors in a ‘market of development’ creates a tendency for quick deals (in order to appropriate budgets) instead of measured and critical evaluations. In countries such as Yemen or Afghanistan the emergence of non-state forces in politics, such as warlords, resistance fighters and organized crime, play a particular role. Here, the increasing influence of the military and secret services has transformed the meaning and realities of development into a rationale of security policies. Thus, the arena has changed over time and the setting has become more heterogeneous.

## **2. Partners and Political Environments in Development**

As a rule, governmental development organisations have to deal with the authorities and local institutions of the state in the recipient countries. In the past two decades a great deal of the German governmental development cooperation effort has been dedicated to the reform of governance. In more recent years this spectrum has included the reconstruction or rehabilitation of statehood in countries like Afghanistan and Yemen.

Although the slogan ‘good governance’ has been successfully marketed in the political field in the West, little is known about its practical implications for development experts. In countries like Egypt, Jordan, Yemen or Palestine the reform of governance and of the state is a highly politicised endeavour. Although a country like Egypt seems to be comparatively stable and capable of acting on its own, recent studies reveal complex micro-politics that take place beyond the facade of statehood (Kienle 2001). Development experts in Egypt are confronted with a regime of competing and cooperating networks that have successfully privatised the state. These networks – among them the old and the new neoliberal elites and particularly the extended neo-royal family of Hosni Mubarak – use the state for the legal and illegal appropriation of material resources and the accumulation of power. State institutions and agencies are pervaded by informal arrangements such as old boy and family networks. Consequently, the development of compe-

tent policies and reform programmes is often hindered by a general struggle for power which forms an impediment to attaining such goals (Weiss 1994). This is particularly true for development programmes that contain policies of privatisation, deregulation, or simply of budget cuts. In the case of Jordan and even more so in Yemen we find neo-tribal forms of political organisation that dominate or at least influence the character of statehood. This has consequences for development experts in their relations with local partners. Furthermore, it is a matter of fact that countries of geo-strategic importance, such as Egypt, can rely on a 'market of development offers' that does not run dry even when development agreements and contracts are undermined, violated or broken.

Despite the shift that has occurred since the 1990s from concrete local projects to a somewhat more complex programme approach, the classical relation between experts and the local target group is still relevant. However, some actors and practices have changed. This is particularly true with regard to recipient ministries and other state agencies. Development experts are confronted with a growing number of 'local experts' trained at western universities, experts who reverse the traditional relation between the knowledgeable foreigner and the local partner in need of advice. Quite frequently, working groups of such local experts 'coordinate' development activities and development experts according to the local agenda.

Even in the more 'classical' field of rural development in countries like Yemen or Afghanistan, the world of development has changed. As a consequence, foreign experts are challenged by professional development brokers, who are skilled specialists in the appropriation of aid and assistance. These brokers try to reformulate activities according to local agendas – and quite frequently also according to their own entrepreneurial plans. For non-state actors such as warlords and political entrepreneurs in countries like Afghanistan, aid is a resource in their struggle for political power. In both cases we are not dealing with naïve actors who will easily conform to the advice of development experts. On the contrary, even rural development is politically charged and the role of locally and regionally powerful actors is virulent.

### 3. The Distribution of Power

Despite the above-mentioned post-modern criticism of the hegemonic aspects of development, the analysis of the practice of development provides us with a more differentiated picture that reveals the faulty design of the process as such. To this day, a key problem has been that models and programmes of development are almost solely fabricated in the headquarters of development agencies. They represent a selective understanding of what development is and how measures should be designed and implemented. Although this structural defect does not in itself cause a hegemonic relationship, it does affect the controversial processes of appropriation where development actually takes place.

It is common knowledge among the development experts I visited and interviewed that depoliticised development plans are translated into a rationale for technical assistance (Ferguson 1990; Rottenburg 2009). Such plans may work in the world of intergovernmental delegations and negotiations but they exclude local stakeholders and local ideas. As a result, they have only little to do with the practice of development. Hence, the traveling models<sup>5</sup> of development have to be reconceptualised and translated to fit the local arena. This controversial practice begins after contracts have been signed and the delegations disappear. The formal western legal security of *pacta sunt servanda* has little meaning 'on the ground'. Once abroad, development experts become part of a local political arena in which the actual shape of a development project has yet to be negotiated. The distribution of power in these arenas is polycentric and diverse and it varies according to the situation, the context and the actors involved. Development experts must work with unclear mandates, weak support from the home organisation and almost no means of enforcing their views. They are not as sacrosanct as diplomats and they lack the force that the military can apply. The extension of their limited contracts is often connected to the 'good conduct' of the project and is not furthered by the disclosure of hidden politics. The threat of closing a project down does not unduly scare local actors. They know that the development market will provide the next project before too long.

Quite frequently, maintaining the balance of power and interests among the strategic actors that have a role to play in the project environment becomes the main task of the development expert (Hüsken 2006). Thus, a

bricolage of formal and informal practices instead of rational bureaucracy is at stake. Such processes can take quite different shapes. In some cases, we can observe informal but effective cooperation between development experts and local actors. In addition, my own long term study of a GTZ-Project in the borderland of Egypt and Libya shows how local actors like Bedouin political entrepreneurs have far more decision making power over the implementation of development policies than development experts (Hüsken 2009). In other cases, such as in Afghanistan, alliances between experts and the locally and regionally powerful might be in conflict with the general development plan for the country. Here, the term “twilight institutions” introduced by Lundt (2006) ironically refers to development practices and not to emerging forms of politics between state and non-state bodies. Another perspective focuses on the takeover of central functions of the state by development organisations. This does not only induce the erosion of the state’s legitimacy (Neubert 1997), but can also lead to a ‘para-sovereign rule of development’ (Klute/Trotha 1999).

#### **4. Development Agencies**

The interaction between development experts and the head office in Germany, as well as with the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, are complex, contradictory and delicate. First of all, we can identify an elementary difference between the logic and practices in the head office and those of development experts in the field. At the head office it is imperative to look for new budgets. Plans have to adapt to the currents of national politics. Thus, there is a need to produce development concepts and plans that conform with requirements and politics. Experts in the field look how to get things done in more pragmatic ways. A coherent combination of these approaches has not yet been achieved. At times the practical work cannot keep up with the speed with which new concepts and ideas are produced.

Consequently, it is not uncommon that a project is carried out in, for example, rural development, whereas the experts in the headquarters consider this approach dead and buried. The relations between the centre (headquarters) and the periphery (projects and programmes) are therefore

also shaped by concrete conflicts of interest. The antagonism between the inside and the outside turns into an emotionally loaded competition about ideas, power and budgets.

Yet another aspect of development agencies might be even more important. This aspect is connected to what I call 'permanent revolution and fragile moral economy'. The seemingly infinite series of organisational reforms in the German development apparatus has led to the abolishment of the institutional separation of tradition and innovation. The experts in the headquarters are exposed to a vortex of change in which reliability is replaced by insecurity about what should be kept and what needs to be changed (Elwert 2000). However, incomplete organisational reforms can produce massive development blockades. Ironically, what seems to be a characteristic of developing countries is also a predicament of development agencies. This fragility is further nurtured by the already mentioned policy of temporary contracts, which not only creates a lack of formal security for the experts but also causes a lack of trust towards the employing agency, a factor that has emotional and psychological effects.

However, there is still another topic that needs to be discussed. In the past twenty years the scope of German governmental development cooperation has dramatically expanded. Nowadays, development experts are expected to rehabilitate statehood in Afghanistan, they are sent to introduce models of conflict mediation in Palestine and are expected to reform the vocational training sector in Egypt. However, the increasing complexities of development tasks are not accompanied by coherent and clear concepts of management, policy skills and intercultural communication. The process of supervision of the work on the ground is particularly weak and it leaves development experts, with all their experience and challenges, to fend for themselves. They themselves have to ensure predictability and trust. We find networks and clans who form informal moral and strategic groups<sup>6</sup> in order to anticipate the complexities of the field and the organisational turmoil of their German employer. It is beyond doubt that informal relations and practices play an important role in bureaucratic organisations. They are the domain of the 'moral economy' (Elwert 1985), which is an informal economy of gifts and reciprocal exchange among people who work in an institution. The moral economy produces trust and is an indispensable element of the stability of institutions. People within these groups and inter-

personal networks exchange knowledge, share experience and effectively organise assistance. In the world of development experts these networks and moral communities consist of colleagues from previous projects, consultants who have contributed to the success of a programme, as well as former fellow students who work in other projects or are situated in agency headquarters or ministries. These networks create predictability and trust. They are specialized in bypassing extensive bureaucratic routines in order to accelerate decision-making. However, as the access to these networks for outsiders is limited, they also carry the air of exclusivity and transience. Networks might change or even disappear when people leave and interpersonal ties change. Hence, they cannot replace a functioning formal organisation that treats every member of an institution according to a set of clear and authoritative rules. If informal relations are not accompanied by a reliable and effective formal order, the character of an organisation can change into a polycentric order of competing informal networks. The decentralised structure of projects and programmes enforces this phenomenon. Although these problems are commonly acknowledged by experts in the field and in the headquarters, they are not officially addressed because they do not fit the image of development agencies as ‘worldwide partners for the future’<sup>7</sup>.

Looking at the way development organisations interact reveals another secret and precarious dimension. To their partners, development organisations advocate transparency and cooperation as key elements of good governance. However, this conduct is not typical of their own practice. On the contrary, competition and insularity characterise the way development organisations deal with each other. To understand this, we have to consider the fact that development organisations act as competitors in a world wide ‘market of development’. This market is shaped by a specific political economy of aid and development assistance that directs budgets and resources according to the geo-strategic considerations of governments in the leading industrial nations. However, these budgets are raised within the public sector and are financed through taxes. Thus, they are limited in scale and in most of the cases also temporal. Beyond the realms of policies and conceptions every development organisation seeks to secure its continued existence as an organisation. This is why the appropriation of budgets is vital (Quarles van Ufford 1993). In the words of a development expert working in Afghanistan, “[t]he development caravan follows the budgets and not

the conceptions” (group-discussion with four GTZ experts, Berlin 2009). When budgets are announced and resources are allocated development agencies place their bids. They become competitors instead of partners. The willingness to cooperate and to coordinate is replaced by a culture of distrust (Hüsken 2008). As a leading development expert in Pakistan puts it: “It is already difficult enough to deal with the Pakistani official partners but the fellow donors are worse. Meetings are used to draw us out. We do not trust each other. Instead we compete for budgets in a very severe and unfair way” (Interview with GTZ expert, Berlin 2009).

The results of these processes are multifold. To begin with, the lack of coordination is an impediment to coherence. Instead, a multiplicity of different development approaches with contradictory trajectories has evolved. In Egypt, four international governmental donors currently promote their own national concepts of vocational training without any kind of coordination. In Afghanistan, the development market is enlarged and diversified further by the military. Here, the German army not only performs military tasks, but is also active in development assistance – without any kind of particular qualification or institutional experience.

With regard to the experiences on the African continent, authors such as Beck (1991) have uncovered the appropriation of development aid as a core strategy of ‘predatory elites and regimes’ (Fatton 1992). However, we also find situations in which the administrations of the recipient countries are simply overwhelmed by the competing and contradictory approaches and offers of development organisations<sup>8</sup>. Here, the failure of development is not caused by corrupt regimes but by the heterogeneous conceptions and contradictory practices of development.

## **5. Conclusion**

What Salman Rushdie (1991) has identified as the predicament of intellectuals in globalization is also true for development experts: they are not isolated from the turmoil of globalisation like Jonah in the belly of the whale, nor are they protected by a secure and powerful institutional framework. On the contrary, they are thrown into a stormy sea of cultural norms and identity constructions in flux, into dynamic societies, and even more

so into polycentric currents of social, political and economic interests and power relations. Here, they are not architects or masters of change but actors in a dynamic and controversial process we call development.

As I have discussed above, the construction of the development world is one of the biggest challenges in this context. Hence, development is not only what the recipient countries and people have to achieve. There is a serious need for a conceptual and organisational change in the development apparatus itself. Projects and programmes which are fabricated in the headquarters of development agencies and are transmitted as universal models of development will always suffer from lack of adequacy, because the partners and stake holders in the recipient countries do not participate in the making of these models.

Instead, we should focus on a concerted identification and analysis of development problems and a shared construction of models, and ways of how to change them, which involves western development experts and local and regional partners. Hence, a project or programme should ideally emerge out of a problem analysis ‘from below’<sup>1</sup>. However, such an approach would be demanding. Although it would not abolish the central offices and development think tanks of the West, it would indeed shift the emphasis in the identification and resolution of development problems to local and regional arenas, where the actual stakeholders and the target groups live. It would also shift authority. In such a new setting western development experts could become ‘knowledge-brokers’, concerned with the connection and exchange of global and local knowledge in order to initiate creative processes (Evers et al. 2003: 45). One might argue that authoritarian regimes in the developing world would not allow such a form of local and regional participation. Nevertheless, the experience of Christian Vogt-Moritz (Vogt-Moritz 1991) describes such an approach in Senegal on behalf of the GTZ.

In a less radical perspective, we should at least think about the minimum requirements that development experts need in order to transform strategy into cooperative action. Here, as I have tried to illustrate, the management and supervision of processes and also the legal and moral security of experts need development.

<sup>1</sup> The expression “Outside the Whale” is borrowed from the essay *Outside the Whale* by Salman Rushdie (1991).

- 2 Ferguson (1990) uses the term “Anti Politics Machine” to tackle the bureaucratic and technocratic routines of development organisations that systematically negate and exclude the political dimension of development.
- 3 These interviews and group discussions were conducted in Berlin, Jülchendorf, and Eschborn, in Germany.
- 4 Development experts do not belong to a trade union or association of any kind. The majority of experts who work abroad have temporary job contracts (2-4 years).
- 5 I use the term “travelling model” according to Reyna (2007). A travelling model is a procedural plan and practice to identify and solve problems. Typically, one finds these models in the world of development, where a certain plan is designed and fabricated in development think tanks and then exported and applied in other places. See also the research project managed by Richard Rottenburg, “Travelling Models in Conflict Management. A comparative research and network building project in six African countries (Chad, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Sudan)”, which analyses the local adaptation/appropriation of Western models in conflict resolution, as applied in development. The hypothesis of the project is that generalised models about conflicts produced in the West and exported to the South shape local discourses and modes of action.
- 6 ‘Moral’ groups are based on a moral principle of trust and solidarity that shapes the actions and the identity of its members. Strategic groups pursue interests and material goals.
- 7 See <http://www.gtz.de/en/>, 20.8.2010.
- 8 In 2005, Germany, France, The United Kingdom, the United States of America and the United Nations promoted five different and parallel approaches in vocational training in the Governorate of Cairo.
- 9 Evaluation and planning tools partly inspired by Social Anthropology, such as the ‘Participatory Rural Appraisal’ (PRA), have certainly improved the situation. However, the PRA is still an instrument developed by Western scholars and development experts in order to improve the condition of the situation to be developed. The latter are certainly invited to participate, but it is quite questionable as to what extent they really have authority over the potential trajectories of development approaches.

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## **Abstracts**

Dieser Artikel beschäftigt sich mit Prozessen der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit, die sich in konkreten Projekten und Programmen vollziehen. Ich verstehe diese Bereiche als spezifische Handlungssphären, in denen sich Ideologien und Praktiken artikulieren, die vom offiziellen Entwicklungsdiskurs abweichen. Hier agieren EntwicklungsexpertInnen nicht als ArchitektInnen von Wandlungsprozessen, geschützt von machtvollen Entwicklungsagenturen. Vielmehr finden sie sich in die stürmischen, in ständigem Umbruch befindlichen Gewässer aus kulturellen Normen und Identitätskonstruktionen, dynamischen Gesellschaften und insbesondere vielgestal-

tigen sozialen, politischen und ökonomischen Interessengeflechten und Machtverhältnissen geworfen. Auf diese Weise werden sie zu AkteurInnen eines dynamischen und kontroversiellen Prozesses, den wir Entwicklung nennen.

This article refers to those processes of development that take place in practice in specific projects and programmes. I understand these realms as a particular sphere of action that establishes ideologies and practices, which often differ from the official development discourse. Here, development experts are not architects or masters of change protected by a secure and powerful institutional framework. On the contrary, they are thrown into a stormy sea of cultural norms and identity constructions in flux, into dynamic societies, and even more so into polycentric currents of social, political and economic interests and power relations. Thus, they become actors in a dynamic and controversial process we call development.

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