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New Markets for Local Experts in Africa?

Dirk Kohnert

I. Roots of the Fashionable Call for Local Experts

In recent years the call for an increasing involvement of local experts in planning and evaluation of development projects has steadily increased.⁴ This applies to sub-Saharan Africa too, although it may be considered a special case: first, because of the considerable dependency of African states (most of them LLDCs) on development aid (high "aid ratio" compared with GNP or state budget), and second, because it is said that consulting and management qualifications are relatively low developed in Africa compared with Asia or Latin America. Nevertheless, there exists a growing pressure by African governments and NGO's, *vis a vis* foreign donors, to employ more local experts. This demand has increasingly been considered as justified, not just by churches or other NGOs, but even by major donor agencies of official development aid, for the following reasons:

- All parties concerned share - at least rhetorically - the same basic aims and policies of development cooperation, i.e. self-reliance, guarantee of sustainability of development projects by the use of indigenous resources, the principle of subsidiary aid, and last not least, the desire to learn from one another; therefore, an equal, or even predominant part concerning employment of local experts has been demanded.

⁴ cf. Jaycox (1993); Braun (1993); Hampel (1993); DAC 1992. By "local experts" we understand national experts who live and work in the country where they are meant to use their expertise; "international experts" (expatriates) by contrast are those experts, employed outside the borders of their homeland; i.e. Africans, too, may either be "local" or "international" experts, depending on their nationality, qualification and contract.

- More than half of the aid money for Africa (about 60 % according to UNDP estimates; cf. Berg 1993) was spent in the past for salaries of expatriate technical staff. In some African countries, recurrent costs of expatriate experts and volunteers go even beyond state expenditure for government employees. Therefore, the political pressure by both donors and recipient countries for a major stake of local experts in development projects cannot be overheard. For African governments and radical Western liberal economists alike, it would be the best to substitute "technical" by "financial" cooperation", i.e. to transfer the aid money directly to recipient governments or NGOs on which the latter could decide independently. International donor agencies are increasingly responsive to these demands, not just because of shared common aims (see above), but also because of "economies" employing "cheap" local experts in view of stagnant financial resources and growing criticism of the ineffectiveness of development aid.
- For at least two decades, local experts has been increasingly recognized and used (by the international donor community) as "door openers" for their expatriate counterparts because of their intimate knowledge of the socio-cultural and political setting of their home country, and because of their personal affiliation to major decision makers *in* domestic governmental or implementing agencies. Therefore, they are considered to be an indispensable part of any international planning- or evaluation team.
- The availability of (by international standards) qualified local development experts is growing, even in many least developed countries in Africa. However, as in these countries there does not yet exist an effective independent domestic demand for the services of local experts, the latter are still, to a great degree, dependent on contracts of foreign donor agencies. Domestic demand will be even further restricted by the effects of structural adjustment programmes in the near future. Therefore, "locals" are trying to compete on the same terms with foreign international development experts.

- In addition, local experts - just like other professionals in the world - are keen to reserve a greater piece out of the "cake" of the consulting market in LLDCs (financed by the international donor community) for themselves.
- Local experts of African LDCs (e.g. Zimbabwe, Kenya, Nigeria) are gradually gaining bargaining power doing consulting for foreign donor agencies, both at local and international levels. This, however, is not due just to growing individual qualification. But it may be considered, as well as the effect of corporate strategies of the concerned, i.e. of creating professional organisations and pressure groups and/or by advocating "closed shops", in delimitation against expatriates, as well as against the so-called "pirates" in the business, i.e. unorganized local competitors. These are said to be unqualified by international standards or suspected of offering their services at dumping prices. Concerning this political or other lobbying, the backing of their demands by African governments may be taken for granted, as the network of clienteles in African countries is for specific socio-cultural reasons even more effective than in Western countries.

2. On the Socio-cultural Setting of Local Experts

The social structure and the socio-cultural setting in most African developing countries has been dominated since colonial times by clienteles, patronage, the socio-economic system of the "command state" and prebend economy. Even the second wave of democratization, experienced for about three years in African countries, will not change this situation in the short run. On the contrary, there are indicators that even in model cases like the Benin Republic, corruption and nepotism among the newly elected elite are still increasing (cf. Engel et al 1994:2-10).

This may have strong repercussions on the work of local development experts. First, because local experts belong as a rule to the upper social strata of the society or the "intelligentsia", and they often share the same socio-cultural background as the new breed of the political class of "technocrats", dominating many of the new democratically elected governments, like in Benin, Senegal or Cote d'Ivoire. As these experts are deeply rooted in their socio-cultural system, they too must honour the demands of clienteles and the prebend economy, otherwise they are threatened by economic and social sanctions. These sanctions are related to the degree of disrespect of established "traditional" rules of solidarity *vis a vis* their own extended family, ethnic- or peer group; already the threat of sanctions has to be considered as effective, because these threats - extending even into the realm of supernatural threats (e.g. magic and witchcraft) - apparently still exert greater power in African countries than in most other developing countries. The same applies to ethnicity, which - considering the high degree of monopolization of political power in Africa - is an effective barrier to capacity building. Decision makers build up distrust against anyone who could threaten them intellectually or professionally, especially if he belongs to another ethnic group (cf. Jaycox 1993:73). In view of such a considerable social and economic pressure, the independence of judgement and action of local experts is supposed to be seriously affected and endangered in cases of conflict between their role as expert and their role within the clientele system in which they are embedded.

Second, experts, in general, are supposed to have a certain distortion of judgement or blinkers *vis a vis* the analysis of their own society; given the social background of local experts in African LDCs (see above), we have to pose the question as to whether many of them are not exposed to even greater bias in relation to certain basic problems of development planning (e.g. concerning the recognition of gender-, environmental- or human rights problems, or concerning concepts of the "poor" and poverty-oriented planning). According to my own experience in West Africa for example, local experts are often less target group and poverty oriented. Either because, according to their standards, anybody living in the countryside is considered to be a

poor "small-holder", or because they have to honour their obligations *vis a vis* political or administrative decision makers in their country, who (e.g. as part-time farmers) want to get their piece of the "cake". They may be even less accepted by the poor, because the latter consider them to be part of the suppressive state structure. Even though expatriate experts more often than not do share the same status barriers in communication with the poor, and do have the disadvantage of not being able to talk to the target groups without an interpreter, they often profit from the fact that they are not involved in local political, ethnic or religious antagonisms. The latter, however, may very well be the case, e.g. of a Yoruba consultant, doing interviews on sensitive issues with Hausa peasants in Northern Nigeria.

Third, according to own experience in West Africa, local experts in African LLDCs are especially liable to back outdated development theories, like theories of modernization, relying principally on the transfer of technology. This point has been raised, not trying to assert that the undue reliance on concepts of technology transfer has been already eradicated within the circles of the international expert community. But professional blindness, e.g. *vis a vis* indigenous innovations by African peasants and peasant experimentation, is especially difficult to overcome in the presence of vested interests of the upper class in accelerated growth according to the lines of Western development. This holds even more true in case the experts should be interested not just in the transfer of technology, but also in the transfer of equipment, inputs, and finance, incorporated in this technology and benefiting more or less directly the upper class to which they belong (cf. Kohnert/Weber 1991).

We have to stress once again: all this has nothing to do with the lack of academic or intellectual qualification; therefore the biases mentioned above are (if at all) difficult to eliminate by training-programmes for the promotion of local experts or by government programmes for "capacity building" or to improve "good government" as promoted by the World Bank (cf. Jaycox 1993).

3. On the Self-esteem of Local Experts

Quite a lot of local experts in Africa are nowadays - according to their own opinion - as qualified and independent as their expatriate colleagues. However, they deplore formal and informal market barriers which prevent fair and equal competition on the international market. They want them to be removed by the international donor community. In addition, more stress should be put on "professionalism"; notably the so-called "pirates" should be thrown out of business by giving contracts only to proven experts, honouring professional "codes of conduct" and/or belonging to corporate professional organizations. Compared with their international competitors, local experts, according to their own point of view, dispose of special advantages, especially their familiarity with local languages, the socio-cultural setting, and indigenous innovations; in addition they consider themselves more accepted by implementing agencies as well as by target groups (cf. the "S.W.E.T." - Model by Mbagathi 1993).

African experts see their major disadvantage, compared with their Western colleagues, in the lack of equipment, capital, and international experience, as well as in insufficient training and access to donors. These experts counter the assertion of special ideological or other biases on the part of local consultants with the argument that the donors are the ones who draft the terms of reference of contracts, and that local experts do just what they are asked to do. Thus, i.e. the blame, if accepted at all, is put back on the donors in a rather technocratic interpretation of their work, which seems to be even more widespread among African than among Western experts.

4. Past Experience with Local Experts

4.1 The View of Foreign Donors and Expatriate Counterparts

Rhetorically, both donors and expatriates alike propagate the view that local experts should be treated on an equal footing with their foreign counterparts (see above fn. 2). In practice, however, local

counterparts are still today most often used in Africa as "door opener" or as "junior brother", i.e. assistant, and they are treated and paid accordingly. Two reasons are usually given for this. First, experience showed in the past that the service of local experts was not very reliable. Often - it is said - they did not honour the terms of reference of their contract, did not deliver the report in time (or not at all), and even if they delivered, the quality of the report and analysis was rather low. Although these assertions are certainly exaggerated by Western experts in the interest of fencing the market, there may be a grain of truth in it. To begin with, local experts themselves readily admit that there is still a great need of training and further qualification in almost all African countries. But they maintain as well that local experts are generally badly paid, and even in case they should receive an adequate salary, they would have to give part of it to their "patrons", and/or they have to honour the demands of their extended family. As they are therefore always obliged to look for secondary sources of income, they are mostly short of time. In addition, they may hold the view that it is only fair if they work according to pay, i.e. low quality for low payment, both measured by international standards. The low payment, and here we come to our second point, is at least partly explained by donor agencies with the situation of the domestic labour market in African LDCs, where they are advised by governments and national NGOs alike not to pay too high salaries in order to prevent distortions of the local salary structure, and to stop or even reverse the brain drain.

4.2 The View of Implementing (Partner) Organisations

The view of the implementing agencies in recipient countries corresponds a great deal to the view of the local experts, with one or two important distinctions. Local governments and NGOs do want donors to pay more for "institution building" and "human capital development" in general, i.e. for training of staff on all levels in order to reduce dependency on external expertise, whether local or foreign. In general, technical assistance is considered to be imposed by donors. Therefore, national partners of bilateral official aid - recently joined by World Bank officials (cf. Jaycox 1993:74) - urge international do-

nors to replace technical cooperation by direct transfer of aid money in order to be able to employ their own national consultants, if it should prove to be necessary. And finally, most partners overseas (especially from the NGO sector) want foreign donors to respect the national wage structure, and not to create an artificial demand which siphons away the best qualified manpower and contributes to the already severe brain drain in Africa.

4.3 The View of Target Groups

Empirical studies on the perspective "from below", i.e. the view of the target groups, on relative advantages of employment of local versus expatriate experts in development projects in Africa are still scarce. However, available evidence points in the direction that expatriate volunteers and experts are often seen as a positive anti-stereotype to national project staff (cf. Elwert-Kretschmer/Elwert 1991: 342-349). Out of bad experiences with failed development projects in Africa over the past two or three generations, target groups are in general quite skeptical concerning innovations and recommendations of both white or black experts. Therefore, they are mainly interested in the direct transfer of inputs and credit down to the grass-roots. In this respect, the "white" expert, as a rule, is held to be the one directly responsible to be addressed; sometimes he is even considered to be a more impartial broker of development aid than his "junior colleague", the local expert, who may be exposed to the suspicion - on the part of the villagers - of siding with those representatives of the state or the political class who are said to be mainly interested in exploiting the peasantry.

5. The Quest for a New Division of Labour between Local and International Experts

In view of the points made above, an unconditional assistance of training and employment of local counterparts - as suggested by Jaycox (1993) and others - would be counter-productive with respect to target group- and poverty-oriented development policies. Under the

prevailing socio-cultural conditions of clientele, the command state and the prebend economy in Africa, such a policy would not only increase disallocation of project funds, it would probably spread corruption and nepotism, and thus promote social differentiation rather than alleviating poverty. In short, such a policy would be neither effective nor sustainable. The negative effects of such a policy would even multiply if donors were to agree to recent demands of Western and African decision makers (cf. Hampel 1993:19) to replace technical assistance by budget aid, enabling indigenous implementing agencies to employ local experts in line with their proper aims and interests.

Instead, what should be required now is an increased but conditional technical cooperation which would meet the requirements of the overall aims of poverty alleviation and self-reliance. To this end we recommend a new division of labour between local and international experts according to the comparative advantages of either group. Local experts should concentrate on consulting for and in the interest of the target groups and be trained, paid, and employed accordingly. International experts (including Africans) should concentrate on technical and management consultancy for international donors or national implementing organisations (African governments and NGOs). In order to prevent a further consolidation of the "two tiers society of consultants" of the past, it should be seen to that local experts are no longer misused as "door openers" for their expatriate senior colleagues.

The task of consulting target groups is a very demanding task, both concerning professional qualification, e.g. as moderator and facilitator, and technical knowledge, as well as concerning the physical and psychological stress of working and living for weeks or even months together with the poor under deprived local conditions. At present very few local, and probably even fewer foreign experts, do have these qualifications as well as the will to do this job. A great deal of training, and maybe even a kind of "re-education", e.g. exposure programmes or training together with members of target groups, would be necessary to create a pool of this new breed of target group consultants. In order to find consultants really qualified, independent

of their patronage network, and dedicated to this task, it has to be valued and paid accordingly, that is at least as much as that of international experts. Thus, the tricky problem of interference in the domestic salary structure would still remain unsolved however.

In view of a target group- and poverty-oriented development policy, the relationship between local and international experts should be reversed; consultant-teams should be directed by target group specialists, responsible for the general orientation of the project or programme. International experts should assist them concerning the planning or evaluation of implementation of the programme.

For the time being these propositions are still far from having realistic chances of implementation. There are too many counteracting vested interests on the side of nearly all parties involved. As international experts, Africans still have to cope with informal barriers to access to decision makers of major international donors, and it would be unrealistic to expect radical changes in this respect in the near future. Therefore it will be difficult for them to compete with their Western colleagues in this realm of consulting. However, concerning consulting target groups there still exists an unexplored market in which local experts would have considerable comparative advantage *vis a vis* expatriates, if they could only overcome the barriers of elite-thinking and of clienteles. Why not assist them in taking advantage of this situation to promote market differentiation and development in the above indicated direction? Networks like ILEIA, financed by the Dutch government, the French *Reseau Recherche-Développement*, or the recent promotion of an African counterpart of a big rural, regional integrated development project, assisted by German official development aid as director of a German GTZ-team in a neighbouring African country, are the first encouraging examples in the right direction.

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