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## The Interface Approach

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**Eva Gerharz**

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**INTERFACE APPROACH**

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## Introduction

The British sociologist and social anthropologist Norman Long is widely recognised as the founder of the interface approach. He defines an interface “as the critical point at which structural discontinuity is most likely to occur between different social systems, areas or levels of the social order due to variable normative values and social interests” (1993:217). Thus, the main focus of the interface approach are social situations in which actors with different rationalities encounter each other. Correspondingly he puts the actors and their living environments at the centre of the analysis and thereby distinguishes his approach from structural approaches<sup>1</sup>, which due to their deterministic and linear logic focus more on external influences. A structural approach often means that the practises, autonomy, and rationalities of local actors – for example when analysing transformation processes in the global south – are neglected. In contrast the prime concern of the interface approach is the analysis and comprehension of how social structures change. According to interface analysis, what matters in these situations is not only if perspectives, experiences, and world-views differ between the actors involved, but also how these encounters are shaped by unequal power relations, an approach now common in development cooperation. The interface approach is the result of work by a research group led by Norman Long (Long/Long 1992), whose main focus was development cooperation. In addition, they also reflected upon their own scientific intervention in the global south, and emphasised the significance of managed social changes for the restructuring of a target society. On the one hand the areas in which cooperation takes place differ significantly, on the other hand the diversity of social and cultural contexts continually leads to new challenges.

The interface approach is especially well suited to understanding the specific conditions and processes in development cooperation. Therefore, it has been mainly adopted in development studies, particularly in the field of development sociology. In order to gain an understanding of this approach and the theories behind it, the first part of this paper introduces the essential theoretical premises and their methodological significance. In the second part I use a case from my own fieldwork in Northern Sri Lanka to illustrate how a research design can be developed using the interface approach, and how one might analysed the collected data.

## The Interface Approach as Methodological Instrument

According to Long/Long (1992) societies are ever-changing, highly specific entities which are simultaneously incorporated into global structures. Since the end of World War II, the aim of development cooperation in the global south has been to try and change social structures, using a variety of mechanisms. Among others, the goals of these projects have varied from increasing exports, to securing basic needs, or the decrease of poverty and social inequality. The ambivalent achievements of five decades of development clearly show the limitations of such interventions. Even so, Bierschenk et al. (1993:8) argue that development cooperation has become a constitutive element of social circumstances in

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1 For example modernisation theory but also neo-marxist approaches.

countries in the global south. Hence its impacts cannot be disregarded when analysing change processes. For this reason at least, development research still remains relevant.

To understand how development measures are implemented and how ambivalent their impacts can be, one needs to gain a profound understanding of the underlying structure of an ever-changing society. To this end, Anthony Giddens (1984) developed his influential structuring-theory, which Long/Long make constant references to in their work. According to Giddens, structures are the basis for social action, and at the same time are constituted by these actions. The analysis of this interdependency is the main focus of the interface approach. This means that in development research, an exact understanding of behaviours, actions, and interactions is crucial to analyse social change and development policies' impact upon these changes. Actors are not regarded as passive recipients or victims – for example produced by external interventions – but rather as active stakeholders, who have specific knowledge and a specific scope of action at their disposal. They are *knowledgeable* and *capable*, and enter into each specific social situation with new capacities to act and negotiate. This is the starting point for the interface approach: Assuming that interactions between stakeholders are shaped by different expectations and the interpretation of their counterparts' expectations, researchers can understand how specific measures transform social structures. Only then will it become clear why some measures are unsuccessful or result in different outcomes in different contexts. In development projects, many different stakeholders interact with one another, each of them accompanied by very specific knowledge pools, normative values, interests, and concerns. From this standpoint it should be obvious that the actions of one stakeholder are not always compatible with the interests of another.

Interfaces constitute themselves through interactions between stakeholders and are “of dynamic and potentially contentious nature” (Long 1993: 217). Both individuals and collectives can be stakeholders, whereby in a specific situation the latter are characterised as homogenous and are perceived as a single entity (Long 2001: 56-57; Neubert 2001: 6). Long advocates for a constructivist concept of actors/stakeholders, which, unlike the commonly held practice in the field of development cooperation, does not recognise designated groups as single entities. Whereas in practice women's groups, peasants/farmers, villagers, or households are often seen as collectives with homogeneous interests, the interface approach is more circumspect. Following the constructivist paradigm, manifold social inequalities, interests, and views, as well as an actor's unequal access to the knowledge and resources available are all taken into account. To avoid unjustifiable homogenisation and essentialism it is important to use the term of a collective actor exclusively for analytical purposes. This is because the congruency of interests, goals, and expectations can only be seen as such as it relates to everyday practice (Long 2000: 195). Collective actors such as NGOs, unions and associations, religious institutions, local administrations, and international development agencies are often represented by individuals. However, an essential part of understanding their views are usually the goals of the institutions they represent and the available resources. At the same time, this “interface terrain” is occupied by stakeholders who are not directly linked with development cooperation. An example of this engagement would be the increasing presence of commercial enterprises within the framework of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in recent years.

The interface approach focuses on the interactions between actors. Fixed categories are discarded in favour of emphasising the process of negotiations which take place within so called interventions. "Subject-matter [of the interface approach EG] is the social construction and the constant negotiation and mediation of a development policy within a social area" (translated from: Lachenmann 1997: 108). Special attention is drawn to the "understanding", in the sense of Max Weber: Via the observation and the characterisation of the actions of those actors interacting at the interface, one can comprehend their particular rationalities. Here the differences, power structures, and discontinuities in rationalities become clear. The analysis of this negotiation is always seen in the context of its structural interrelations, since cultural, political, and economic factors influence the actions of individuals, just as their individual knowledge does (Berger/Luckmann 1969). With the combination of societal conditions and individual action the promoters of the interface approach claim to overcome the limitations of methodological individualism. In reference to Giddens, Long argues that "the texture of social structures, which both limit and enable social behaviour, cannot be understood without considering human actions" (Long 1993: 225). This means action is inherently embedded in institutional structures and processes, which in turn are interrelated with an actor's scope of action. Therefore, why an actor acts as they do (or does not) should always be seen in the particular social, political, and cultural context. As an extension of Giddens' reasoning, Long points out the importance of discursive instruments, which make up a part of the knowledge and resources that an actor might use. When setting goals, making demands or in specific behaviour, actors always have alternatives, even if these possibilities are quite limited, as "all actors exercise power, even those in highly subordinated positions" (Giddens 1984: 16).

Stakeholders, who have accrued social experience in different contexts, meet each other in concrete, socially and spatially bounded "arenas". Goetz describes an arena as an alternative to the more static structural-functionalistic concept of political systems and emphasises the relevance of dynamic processes in constituting "the political". He highlights the importance of the "imagination of the political scope of action, by which a defined series of actors participates and accordingly also the imagination of the arena as social and cultural space in which this field is located" (translated from: Goetze 2002: 57). Following this line of thought, development projects can therefore be understood as arenas, where different action strategies can be observed. An intended structural change, within the framework of development work, is not a negotiated social consensus, but an "interaction of different (group) interests, local knowledge, strategies, conflict about norms, compromises and ceasefire which together form the social structure" (translated from: Bierschenk et al. 1993: 31). In the context of development cooperation, therefore, we encounter highly complex social constellations, which are characterised by a wide variety of different rationalities and ways of phrasing these. To be able to perform an adequate analyse, it is useful to define objects of empirical research as clearly and exactly as possible.

A development project is not only situated in territorial respects but also in time. The "internal" temporal sequence of planning and implementation structures procedures, just as changing social contexts do – for example, a change in power structures or another historically significant event. Furthermore, development cooperation is highly influenced by trends. Braunmühls writings on the "Localisation of Development Policies" (2000) have shown that the so-called decades of development were dictated by numerous discussions



and changing priorities. Theories explaining the underlying assumptions behind the basic objectives and strategies of development cooperation are therefore rather diverse.

I have shown that the interface approach is concerned with the analysis of social situations, particularly those in which some form of negotiation takes place based upon conflict which exists in the form of differing social meanings, practises, or moral orientations, whereby the resulting compromise often constitutes a social change. These social situations or interfaces are not only characterised by local relations of power, but are also bound in multiple contexts. The most direct of these is the arena, which refers to a political frame of action in a specific spatial and temporal context. In development cooperation it therefore becomes especially clear how potentially relevant global influences may be in terms of local development. Even if certain measures are bound to one location, not only are stakeholders from all parts of the world involved in their negotiation, but they also utilise knowledge pools which are generated in a multitude of local contexts and thereby create new transnational interrelationships (Long 2000; Lachemann 2011). Overarching strategies and political goals, which attempt to formulate validity on a global scale, play an important role, as illustrated by discussions on global governance or global structural policy. These show the manifold interdependencies of development processes on a global level (Messner/Nuscheler 2007). By focusing on the interface, one can understand the different dimensions of interdependencies, which are difficult to comprehend in methodological and systematic terms. In the following section, I will apply the theories formulated above to an empirical case and illustrate how a research project was conceived and carried out using interface analysis to generate insights into the course of development projects and processes.

### **A Case: Development and Reconstruction in Sri Lanka**

As context plays an important role in understanding and analysing stakeholders' rationalities of action, it is prudent here to present an overview for this empirical case. In February 2002 representatives of the Government of Sri Lanka and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed an armistice agreement and ended combat operations indefinitely. Based on a complex historical background the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka considers itself disadvantaged with respect to the Sinhalese majority. The separatist resistance was formed out of this understanding and its activities eventually developed into an extremely violent and bloody civil war. The Tamil areas in the north and east of the country, and especially on the Jaffna peninsula, were most affected by the resulting destruction. Due to a narrow link to the main island it was possible to almost completely isolate this "locality" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2005) of enormous political and military relevance for several years. The mobility of its inhabitants, but also of all goods which were seen as potentially being of assistance to the military actions of the LTTE, were highly restricted. Not only did thousands among the population die, but many were also highly traumatised.

Alongside local NGOs, which were primarily focused on humanitarian action, other local development partners were formed after the ceasefire: Schools and other educational

institutions, hospitals, as well as local administrative bodies, responsible for infrastructure such as water management or road construction; these, along with other religious institutions were challenged to manage the reconstruction as quickly as possible and to the highest levels that could be expected. Religious institutions were not only charged with rebuilding their temples and churches but also with the provision of social services. These institutions are deeply embedded in the societal mechanisms of reciprocity, and have a social as well as a spiritual function. During this period these local actors were all to some extent actively searching for strong financial partners.

In response to the massive need for measures to tackle the immediate and long term consequences of the war, a number of donors provided large sums for reconstruction work in the affected areas, if for no other reason than the widely accepted view at the time of the ceasefire that development and conflict regulation were inseparably related to one another. Following an intense discussion on the interdependency of conflict and insufficient development, taking place at the time in different parts of the world, the global institutions of development cooperation came up with correspondingly new strategies and approaches. Sri Lanka then became a suitable arena for testing these in practice. Consequentially, donors started working on new measures of conflict regulation immediately after the signing of the ceasefire agreement. Other stakeholders, such as the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) (GIZ since 2010), which provided “development-oriented emergency aid” during the conflict, now realigned its strategy towards “sustainable development in post-conflict situations”.

Even before the start of the war, though mostly since the beginning of the 1980s, a part of the Jaffna population had already started to emigrate: mainly to India, Europe, North America, and Oceania. These migrants were repeatedly stigmatised as warmongers, due to the LTTE receiving a large share of its financial and military support from this so-called diaspora (Gerharz 2009). However, the commitment of Tamils living abroad has always been multifaceted, and is becoming even more so. Alongside political activities and lobbying, aid and financial assistance were transported through various channels. Some organisations – closely aligned to the LTTE- raised money for humanitarian aid. Christian and Hindu associations maintained contact with partners in Jaffna and provided aid packages. The most significant share of this transnational transfer of resources however were individual transfers. Many Jaffna Tamils received payments from relatives living abroad, both during the war and after the ceasefire agreement. During the war those remittances served predominantly to secure livelihoods within the isolated economy of Jaffna, where whole lines of production were disrupted due to the precarious security situation. With the ceasefire agreement and a normalisation of everyday life, new room for manoeuvre emerged: Shops, restaurants, and service companies, for example in the area of information technology, sprung up. Some of these enterprises were financed with the support of funds from abroad, while others were initiated by Tamil returnees.

Many migrants used the more relaxed security situation during the ceasefire to visit their homeland. Even if there was great joy at being reunited, cultural differences quite frequently became apparent during the course of these visits. Whether the lifestyle of the second-generation migrants was met with incomprehension by the Jaffna Tamils, or the returnees did not want to accept the simplicity and intimacy of village life, these situations produced very complex and ambivalent negotiations on identity and belonging (Gerharz

2010b, 2011). Simultaneously, the ceasefire agreement offered room for new forms of engagement besides the established supply of financial support: NGOs started to recruit members of the diaspora as volunteers for a limited engagements. Educational institutions and the health sector also profited from the professional experience and knowledge that diaspora members had acquired abroad. Doctors offered trainings for local staff or practiced medicine themselves in order to fill gaps within the local workforce.

In this complex constellation after the ceasefire agreement, new possibilities for development and reconstruction opened up, though their existence proved to be difficult to understand methodologically. Using the interface approach however, it was possible to identify a number of actors, who, with their entirely different interests, knowledge-pools, strategies, and values, constituted a distinct “arena”. The approach to the field and the development of the research design are examined more closely in the following section.

### **Development of the Research Design and Survey Phase**

During a fieldtrip between November 2002 and April 2003 I started to interview representatives of donor organisations and international NGOs as well as researchers in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. I established contacts with projects in the region and visited various sites in the north of the country. The exceptional significance of migrant actors in the local arena of development only became clear during the first phase of fieldwork. This dimension was neither a subject of discussion in the relevant literature, nor did the institutions of development cooperation see any potential therein. It was not until one spoke to representatives of local institutions and NGOs that the support of diaspora Tamils became visible, and thereby the new recognition of a “new”, until then barely acknowledged, actor in practical development cooperation.

After a first inspection of the collected data it was possible to create a research design that, in essence, attempts to identify the actors mentioned above and the structural interdependencies between them. Constellations with transnational character became the centres of investigation. Based on the trilogy of: development cooperation – local actors/stakeholders – diaspora interfaces; the following five areas showed potential promise with respect to current development activities:

1. Both local and development cooperation partners, especially NGOs and administrative bodies
2. Local NGOs and diaspora involvement
3. The support of hospitals or schools through diaspora actors and development cooperation
4. Religious institutions and diaspora groups or church-based development cooperation
5. Individual return remittances and the creation of co-presences through diaspora circulation

With selected empirical cases I wanted to have a closer look at the “contact points” in particular, i.e. to focus on those situations in which different scopes of action and

experiential context meet, and most likely come into conflict with each other. During a second fieldtrip, nine months after my first visit, I focused on observing interactions at these identified interfaces and tried to talk to as many people as possible, who operate at the interfaces in their everyday lives. But fieldwork is not always predictable. First a severe political crisis led to an early parliamentary re-election, meaning travel to the north was not possible due to security reasons. So the task became finding out as much as possible about the identified interfaces while staying in Colombo. This meant talking to experts, visiting relevant events, and collecting literature and newspaper articles. Also important were the personal exchanges with scientists from national research facilities, who pointed out dimensions which had not been considered up until that point, and who helped me establish contact with people from Jaffna, whom I visited just after the elections. During the following months I was mainly stationed in Jaffna, where I collected data using a mixture of methods (Lachemann 1997). In numerous participatory observations and interviews I found out more and more about the involved actors and was able to find increasing connections between my interfaces. Whenever interviewees spoke about disputes or diverging viewpoints, I tried to get in contact with the “other side” involved, and to look at the situation from that perspective if possible. Accompanied by an local person with a good command of English I talked to representatives of religious and public institutions, doctors, representatives of the local administration, activists, and “normal people” in Jaffna. At local workshops I observed the symbolic system of unequal power relations. I paid attention to body language, ritualized behaviour, and sometimes conflictual disputes. Special attention was paid to those persons, who evidently acted as “agents” between two different “worlds”. Besides the contacts in professional environments, which I established via snowballing, other entry-points also opened up unexpectedly in the course of everyday life. I had a long-term rented room in a small guesthouse, which was also popular among Tamil people who wanted to visit Jaffna. In the attached telephone and internet shop I was able to observe older women, who chatted or emailed their kids in the United States. On different occasions at dinner I met a Tamil doctor from the U.S., who was involved in the reconstruction of the health sector, as well as a volunteer from the Australian branch of a Tamil organisation. My guesthouse host made contact with her boss, the director of a school that had received generous donations from an alumni association from Canada. In the evenings, when the foreign staff of the international organisations gathered to play volleyball, there was the opportunity to maintain contacts, and to gain insights into the views and opinions of the participants. At the conclusion of the second survey phase I had the feeling that I understood a few more things, which would appear later in my analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

After my return from the field I was confronted with a wide range of data. Considering the sensitive topics and the suspicion of my interview partners I was not able to record hardly any of the conversations on tape. Instead, I took notes during the interviews and also wrote protocols and memos afterwards. Pursuant to grounded theory, while still in the field I analysed and reflected on the collected data, in order to present any relevant concepts in

their proper contexts. The material was catalogued and marked with codes on the basis of different categories. Coloured notes and pencils were of great help to mark essential passages and to maintain an overview. Again and again one had to select and structure, but above all to “fit” the material with the help of new, literature-based knowledge. The following examples give some insights into the analysis of interactions at an interface.

During fieldwork we regularly encountered diaspora Tamils who assisted local NGOs with their work. One young man, for example, had spent a year as a volunteer at an organisation which manufactured prostheses for the victims of landmines. As the son of Tamil migrants, he was raised in Great Britain and had just completed his studies in production engineering and industrial design. His father, who in his role as a doctor also had a number of transnational connections, made contact with the local organisation and received support from a British partner organisation. The prostheses were produced locally due to lower production costs but because of a lack of know-how they were not in-line with the latest standards. The volunteer from Great Britain was supposed to apply knowledge gained in his studies to help design lighter and more comfortable prostheses.

Similar transfers of knowledge took place in several different organisations. Exceptionally professional was the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), which due to its close relations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, had for years grown its network of transnational relationships and had established a number of “fundraising centres” in diaspora communities. After the signing of the ceasefire agreement they added sustainable development to their portfolio of humanitarian aid projects. To encompass these extra activities, they had to make some far-reaching changes to their administrative and organisational processes. On the one hand, expanding their field of activities required more funds, in particular from institutions involved in international development cooperation. On the other hand, it was expected that in the case of permanent peace, many of the previous diaspora resources would run dry.

The Tamil Rehabilitation Organization launched a programme to recruit Tamil volunteers, especially those who resided in English-speaking countries. The volunteers were then sent to Sri Lanka’s north east for a period of three to six months. Accommodation and meals during this time were provided by the organisation. No exact numbers for the number of volunteers were available, but interviewees from the TRO stated that around 30 volunteers from Australia arrived in 2003. In July 2004 six or seven volunteers worked at the head office in Kilinochchi. Their tasks were diverse and primarily based on their competencies. The ability of volunteers to speak and teach English were considered especially valuable in developing the competencies of local staff. In addition, knowledge of business management, finance and accounting practices, IT, and ideally experience in development cooperation were highly sort-after.

Operational procedures within the TRO were for the most part still coordinated according to “conditions of war”. Working with computers was not possible until the end of 2003, when electricity was restored to the region. Volunteers were engaged to help build capacity and improve work processes within the organisation as a whole or to offer specific new solutions in various operational areas. Some were instructed to write project proposals which were to be sent to stakeholders in bi- and multinational development cooperation. Knowledge of economics, flawless English, or abilities in computer-based text processing

and presentation promised to deliver better results for the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization in the competition for funding. The competition for international funding saw the participation of some national NGOs, whereas local organisations- those engaged on the ground in the conflict areas- hardly took part, due to a lack of both personnel and capability. As in-depth empirical research at the interface between the TRO and the international donor community would show, the volunteers were able to make a significant contribution here. The (temporary) returnees were particularly selected for positions which involved communication with representatives of donor institutions. They were often present at management negotiations. Especially noticeable was the external appearance and demeanour of many diaspora “experts”. Clothing, haircuts, as well as verbal expressions and body language could clearly be referenced to everyday experiences in western contexts. Development experts who were in contact with the TRO by and large signalled these diaspora members as the representatives and contact persons of the organisation, and stressed their cultural proximity, or to paraphrase: these are the people who the likes of us can easily talk to. It was therefore through these very subtle communication processes that, by employing diaspora volunteers on purpose, the TRO was able to gain a competitive advantage. This led to an advantageous position in the contest for resources, and helped to further strengthen its powerful position in the arena of local development.

The Tamil volunteers from abroad were attributed with being able to empathise with the living environment of the local population due to their knowledge of the social, cultural, and historical context, even when the cultural differences between local and western “contexts of experiences” (Erfahrungskontexten) became quickly obvious (Gerharz 2010b). Additionally, because of their experiences of living abroad in a western country they were able to connect to the culturally specific body of knowledge of the development experts. Therewith the diaspora volunteers personified an intermediate position at the interface outlined above that of the broker, by which is meant an “agent between donors and potential addressees of development aid” and “key-players in the unremitting, active search for projects” (translated from: Bierschenk et al. 2001). On top of this, the authors argue that these brokers are not persons with a conventional career in development aid, but that their implicit knowledge and skills, gained both in practise as well as in other activities, are rather essential. This requires additional experiences outside the locality, which enables them to move between the two “worlds” and play by the varying rules. Rhetorical, organisational, and dramaturgical competencies are just as important as the skills required to build relationships and to network. Furthermore, they need to possess the abilities required to set up a project and to directly approach decision makers.

Bierschenk et al. developed their approach on the basis of extensive fieldwork in Africa, and focused especially on the interface between rural populations and the state- or rather the development cooperation which it controlled. Within the development configuration which I encountered in the north of Sri Lanka, it was the mediation in transnational spaces which played an important role. In this respect, the growing significance of the “migration-development-nexus” (Faist 2008) in current development research becomes more obvious. However, the interface analysis in this case also shows, that migrant engagement is not a one-way flow of resources which is gratefully received by local actors. In fact, the local side is actively involved in the process, and manages the contributions of the diaspora community within the local, developmental cooperation context. Because without the

specific knowledge of local staff on the way that cooperation with international donors functions, as well as local development arenas in general, the Tamil volunteers would be almost incapable of action. Both sides rely on knowledge acquired in the specific contexts of the everyday life of their counterparts to overcome divergences in knowledge between actors at the interface.

## Summary

The interface approach as a methodology which follows a cognitive sociological tradition is suited to conceptualising research project designs, especially in the field of development research. Based on examples of my own research I have shown, how to analyse diverging expectations and goals during the implementation of development activities. The exact research methods chosen should be appropriate with respect to the research issues and the particular context. The interface approach allows us to comprehend situations, in which diverse knowledge pools and expectations come together, allowing us to comprehend actors' different strategies and scopes of action. Knowing this, one can show that "development" does not only manifest itself as a western concept in so-called developing countries, but rather that different actors are constantly negotiating social change (cf. Gerharz 2010a). Therefore, the analysis of interfaces is an actor-orientated approach, in which actors and their actions constitute complex configurations, certainly shaped in part by unequal global power structures, especially regarding access to economic, political, and social resources. Nevertheless, as I have shown, local actors are by all means capable to influence a transfer of resources. They know, for example, how they can use transnational networks to their benefit. The outcome of these actions is not always compatible with the interests of bigger donors.

The aim of the interface approach is to cast a look beyond the structural aspects of development cooperation in order to understand the actions of different actors and to look at initiated processes of participation as arenas of conflict and negotiation (Neubert 2001: 218). The limits of this approach are clearly the complicated matter of generalisation, particularly when one considers that the starting point of the approach is the specifics of every social context, even every temporally/spatially-limited situation. However, the analysis is not restricted to the level of unique, individual situations, in fact the concrete situation should always be contextualised with respect to the structural interrelations. Additionally, the pretence of actor-focused approaches in development research is to identify typical constellations by comparing single cases in different contexts in order to contribute to a better understanding, and ultimately a more successful realisation of development cooperation.

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