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## Knowledge is power: Experts as a strategic group

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## Working Paper Series

### 8a

Hans-Dieter Evers and Solvay Gerke

## Knowledge is Power:

Experts as a Strategic Group

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Research Group  
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# Knowledge is Power

## Experts as Strategic Group

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### Summary

The theory of strategic groups assumes that strategic groups are built when new resources become available as a result of social change. This paper examines the extent to which the process of globalization creates new chances for the acquisition of resources, which also leads to the creation of global strategic groups. Knowledge is identified as one of such strategic resources that makes it possible for strategic groups to be formed. This paper attempts to prove how experts, in particular development experts, form such a strategic group which applies knowledge gained from experience and action strategies to obtain resources for themselves and for their projects

# 1. Globalization of Strategic Groups

The main elements of the theory of strategic groups have already been established and used in several studies. There has also been a critical discussion of the theory. This discussion has, however, been rather argumentative and based less on the result of empirical research work conducted (Neelsen 1988; Berner 2001). According to the original theory, any time resources within a society become available as a result of a power vacuum or through technological progress, organizational change or a change in the geopolitical structures, there is the possibility that new strategic groups will be formed. The newly-formed strategic groups will try to acquire these resources in the long term (Evers 1973; Evers and Schiel 1988). The group may form a coalition with other groups or expand its area of operation. This means that there is usually a hybridization of the group's strategy of acquiring resources. One such new constellation that involved the release of resources, with a corresponding buildup of a new strategic group, was the transition from colonial rule to the formation of nation-states. This constellation has been researched into and analyzed in many studies with the theory of strategic groups (Bierschenk 1988; Bierschenk, Chaveau et al. 2001; Evers 1973; Evers and Schiel 1988; Gerke 1999; Nas 1989; Schubert, Tetzlaff und Vennwald 1993, Sungsidh Piriyaangsan 1989 etc).

The concept of the strategic group stands out from that of the social class and the elite; it postulates the vertical networking of persons beyond their social level and their social class. The strategic group of the military, for example, stretches from the lowest ranking soldier to the general, but includes other groups of persons who are linked to the military, such as the members of their family, suppliers of weapons and equipment or under certain circumstances, the entire population of a garrison town. Such a strategic group defines itself through a common interest in maintaining, or if necessary, expanding the resources that will ensure the functioning of the entire complex of the strategic group, but does not necessarily imply the existence of specific links through interactions.

The membership of a strategic group is therefore a theoretical construct. It does not necessarily create an identity or assume the existence of social interaction (e.g. in the form of a network) among actors as a precondition. Quite often, a simple assent, a mere nodding of the head to an action undertaken by members of the strategic group who are politically active, is enough to give power to a strategic group in Max Weber's sense of the term. Members of the strategic group are, at least, able to build up power that is formed on the basis of this assent and can rely on it. This is likely to lead to "lifestyling" according to Gerke's (1995) definition or to the production of ideology. Both produce coherence and a basis for collective action.

The concept of strategic group is embedded in the paradigm of power. Strategic groups have the power to shape society, economy and the political system in a way that the long-term optimal conditions for the acquisition of resources are created. The sequence in which strategic groups are created is fundamentally important because it sets the conditions that other strategic groups have to reckon with.

So far, we have made a few comments on the "classical" theory of strategic groups, that have dealt mainly with the postcolonial situation in the developing countries, or sometimes, researched into the processes of strategic groups at the local level (for example, Bierschenk und Olivier de Sardan 1997). Since the debate on globalization is currently dominating the social sciences, it appears appropriate to subject the theory of strategic groups to the test of time.

If one were to follow the views formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein which indicate that the modern world system already commenced during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and that the states that resulted from this time until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were of less importance in comparison to the "modern world system", then the investigations so far conducted on strategic groups within the framework of the nation state are merely of historical importance. This is because they have as their unit of analysis, the nation-state, which is a "dying species". One can also claim that this also applies to a large part of the theories developed within the social sciences. In the meantime, there are considerable reservations about the view that considers the state to be a "dying species". Government bureaucracies would also continue to form strategic groups. However, in their attempt to secure their resources they would have to compete with newly-created globally-oriented groups. The threats by global strategic groups to abandon their locations within a country and as a result withhold taxes from the state or the bureaucracy are a normal part of the political order today. In the next section, we will attempt to further the discussion on the process of globalization with the help of the theory of strategic groups.

## 2. Knowledge as a Strategic Resource

In the next section, we shall deal with another globalizing strategic group that uses knowledge as a strategic resource. Knowledge is considered as a new factor of production that is increasingly becoming more important than "older" factors of production such as capital and labour (Evers 2000, Menkhoff/Evers/Chay 2005). The 1998/99 Development Report of the World Bank states unequivocally that „knowledge“ is the decisive strategic resource required for scientific development on a global scale (World Bank 1999). Using a few simple statistics, the report indicates that the development gap between the First and the Third World countries, or rather, between the OECD countries and the rest of the world is bigger when measured using knowledge as a criteria instead of the usual GNP measurement. Closing the knowledge gap is therefore recommended as a development strategy (Evers 2003a). This implies the need to make up for development, which if one were to follow the theory of peripheral capitalism, is bound to fail. Which type of strategic constellation of groups could be analyzed with the use of knowledge as a strategic resource?

Knowledge has, of course, since time immemorial been considered a strategic resource. Scribes, monks and brahmins have used it to play an active part in the process of state building and to make it possible for them to have access to resources. The power of being able to make sense, that is, giving meaning to actions and objects was just as important as the acquisition of land, temple treasures or other values. A typical hybridization was the use of religiously inclined networks for trade and moneylending. Examples of this include the moneylending Chettiar of Southern India who secured their trade using the religious authority of Hindu temples, or Islamic traders who combined their missionary work (Dakwah) with their trading activities and as a result spread their religious doctrines and acquired valuable goods with profit (Evers/Schrader 1994).

The differentiation and the institutionalization of science expresses itself in the increasing importance of a strategic group, that has since the 1970s also been quite successful in the developing countries. An increasing number of university lecturers, researchers and the accompanying support staff have been able to attract national and international resources for themselves to the extent that although their salaries remain low, they have been able to obtain at least other comforts of life such as attractive university buildings, opulently organized meetings in luxurious hotels and consultancy honorarium from state institutions and private

foundations. The tendency of hybridization that is now so common in the scientific world - scientists are at least civil/public servants – and the increasing engagement of scientists as government advisers, ambassadors or private entrepreneurs have increased the chances of acquisition for this strategic group but not always supported their scientific outputs.

### 3. Experts as a strategic Group

In the literature, experts are often described as being "knowledge elite" who use knowledge that has been produced elsewhere in specifically defined contexts. Hitzler et al. (1994) speak in this connection from an institutionalized competence for the construction of reality. We would like to draw attention here to the constructivistic approach to the sociology of knowledge by Karin Knorr-Cetina, Hitzler and others. Knowledge – also with regard to questions on developing countries – is presented in organizations, universities and think tanks within the context of a specifically "epistemic culture" as a social process (Knorr Cetina 1999). The cultural term as used here is derived from the theory of communication and describes a communicative and/or symbolically conveyed epistemic community. Haas' (1992) forward-looking definition of "epistemic communities" refers to them as a "network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area". This approach, which is derived from the general sociology of knowledge (see among others, the contributions in Pickering 1992) has not yet been utilized in the area of development research.

The theory of strategic groups (Evers und Schiel 1988) assumes that resources, in this case development funds, will be appropriated by a group that then implements a strategy of securing resources in the long term and attempts to build the social, political and economic environment towards this goal. Development experts can thus be considered as globally operating strategic groups. Within the context of development projects, experts as Bierschenk (1988: 158) has found out, are considered to be in a "process of continuous negotiations" with other strategic groups. Risse (1998: 1) has, in this connection, drawn attention to the tendency for transnational networks and their actors to be decoupled from national and local issues. The results of our empirical studies in selected developing countries have so far not confirmed the existence of a process of decoupling.

Our empirical research into the internal structure of the strategic group of development experts was conducted using the new theory of network. This included, in particular, the empirical works about global networks of Chinese businessmen (Hamilton et al. 1990; Menkhoff 1993 and many others) as well the role of "trust" in sustaining the networks (Misztal 1996 etc.). In general, the result of our studies from Nepal and Indonesia indicate that the networks are much more hierarchically organized, that is, there is a close link and a channel of control from the superiors to the top hierarchy of the development organizations and also within each organization. Large development organizations such as the German Development Cooperation (GTZ) have tried to establish networks for the spread of technical knowledge (the so-called "Fachverbände" or thematic Groups). These networks have considerably improved knowledge management within the organization but have not particularly supported a world-wide integration.

## The Profession of the Experts

Quite often experts are generally considered to be academics, specialists or professionals. However, the professionalism of the experts have to be defended, certified and is constantly being tested. The politics of the profession is therefore considered to be an integral part of an exceptional occupational group that is characterized by their specialized knowledge. The German literature partly makes a distinction between experts and professionals. Professionals are, in line with their career, permanently engaged in their profession while experts are only occasionally hired to speak on a specific topic. However, in the area of development politics, experts have become professionals with specific descriptive careers. There are already job descriptions, ethic commissions and occupational associations for expatriates working for institutions in development policy abroad as well as for consultants working in the area of development cooperation.

From the perspective of the sociology of work, one can distinguish between longterm and shortterm experts. The typical "shorttimers" (a term frequently used in development cooperation) have a parallel career in their home countries either working in the public services or a professional career with large service-oriented organisations (banks, educational sector). Shortterm experts without such permanent jobs are usually working with consulting firms and have in between their engagements periods of unpaid work and compulsory breaks. Longterm experts, on the other hand, have permanent jobs or longterm contracts. In the last 10 years a trend towards shortterm engagements can be observed.

Consulting firms have recently become the focus of attention in social science research (Bloomfield und Best 1992; McKenna 1995; Peet 1988; Menkhoff und Evers 2001). The organizations of the firms as well as their economic power have been the main focus area of this research. The basis for the rapid spread of the consulting business is attributed to the expansion in modern means of communication and the accompanying potential for increases in productivity. The knowledge of experts is required to be able to make use of these potentials. The increasing awareness of risks in the modern global society has resulted in the increasing use of experts. These aspects are discussed in detail below.

## Strategic Groups and Social Networks

The theory of strategic groups (Evers und Schiel 1988) assumes that resources, that is here development funds, will be appropriated by a group that will then implement a strategy of securing the resources on a longterm basis and ensure that the appropriate social, political and economic environment is created. Development experts can thus be considered to be a globally operating strategic group. Within the context of development projects, there are experts who according to Bierschenk (1988: 158) are engaged in a process of continuous negotiations with other strategic groups. In this context, Risse (1998: 1) has drawn attention to the tendency for transnational networks to be decoupled from the national and local issues. The results of our empirical studies in selected developing countries have so far only partially confirmed the existence of a process of decoupling.

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## Sociology of the Stranger and the Expatriates

Earlier studies suggest that development experts could be considered as expatriates (Cohen 1977, 1984) and strangers and studied within the context of what Simmel (1908) has referred to as the sociology of the stranger. Because the phenomenon of being an expert is a subject that cuts across borders and has become global there are some theoretical similarities with the sociology of the stranger and persons in the diaspora. Within the context of the creation of a world society, Stichweh (1992: 311) argues that the stranger (and this also includes experts) becomes, on the one hand, increasingly visible but, on the other hand, it is equally possible for the social figure of the stranger to disappear. The employment of experts worldwide and the typical relationship between experts and the local community can be considered to be depicting the structural form of a world society that is in the process of being formed. In this context, development experts also play a role as cultural commuters who exhibit several levels of identity links depending on how long they reside and their respective lifestyles and who operate in the tense atmosphere of their local habitat. One of our earlier studies has in this respect identified and analyzed the fact that German experts in Malaysia tended to be socially and culturally isolated from the society (Betke et al. 1978). Here, we are dealing with a micro structure of the world society because the experts are transnationally connected beyond the borders of the country where they work, but are not linked up with the local communication structures beyond their own "community of practice".

## The Role of Experts as Political Advisers

The role of experts as political advisers in the Western industrialized nations has been under study for some time now (e.g. Granovetter 1985 et al; on the American think tanks see for eg. Leggewie 1990; for a broader perspective see Suzuki and Ueno 1993; for a critical analysis see Illich 1979). These works draw attention to the increasing tendency to see the advice given to governments as part of the general consulting business. Government contracts now constitute about 30% of the income earned from consulting jobs in Britain and about 10% in the USA. Contracts from the UN organizations also show a similarly rising trend. Haas (1992) has noted that the coordination of the international policies has not only become essential because of the complexity of the global problems (environmental issues etc.) and the increasing technical problems but has also become more difficult.

Development experts have often been the target of intense criticism but have seldom been the object of scientific study (Braun 1988). Goulet (1980) describes development experts as being "one-eyed giants" who unilaterally implement scientific-rational knowledge without taking into account the cultural and religious context of their guest societies. They thereby

neglect the use of local knowledge (Lachenmann 1994). Questions have as a result been raised about the effectiveness of employing expensive development experts (more than half of the German government's development assistance in Africa is spent on experts) and there have been suggestions about using local expertise instead (for a critical review see Lohmeier 1994). Besides, the effect of this on the local scientific landscape has been the subject of discussion (Mkandawire 1998; Kaiser 1997). Furthermore, it is becoming apparent that in line with a structural adjustment policy, only high-ranking experts are currently being sent while the number of experts who work on concrete projects that benefit the poor sections of the population is decreasing. The ability of the strategic group of development experts, who have learnt to appreciate the power and influence of those at the helm of affairs in the national governments and in international circles, to push through their own interests has become quite clear (Bierschenk 1992: 6; Risse 1998: 1).

The problems relating to the use of foreign personnel in developing countries are sometimes discussed in the literature on business administration and organizational theory. The issues of job satisfaction, the break-up of contracts and the role of spouses accompanying their partners have been at the centre of the discussions.<sup>1</sup> Besides, it is mainly the strategic alliances among firms that are discussed (for e.g. Baldauf 1996).

## 4. Development Experts: The Rise of a Strategic Group

### Development Experts at Work

The problems associated with using and marketing of knowledge are particularly evident in the developing countries, that is, those countries at the periphery of the modern world system (Wallerstein 1974) and those societies in transformation following the collapse of the planned economic system. Because research and development (R&D) are mainly done in the capitalist industrial countries, there is the need to constantly transfer knowledge into another cultural and economic context. This has given rise to the development of the special profession of development experts and advisers who are expected to use knowledge mainly for the creation of the appropriate basic conditions for economic, social and scientific development. In spite of all the lip services paid to the relevance of participation in projects involving development cooperation, the top-down approach is still the dominant approach used. Development experts and advisers to governments are increasingly being used in order to make it possible to introduce or expand the market economy. Development experts and government advisers are thus employed as agents of change who are expected to design the economy and society according to perspectives based on their own knowledge. This function of working as "agents of change" in the countries in transformation stresses not only the specialist knowledge but also the building up of competencies in the area of the market economy. The diffusion of new ideas and information can result in a change in behaviour and is therefore an important determinant of international policy coordination (Haas 1992). Another difficult aspect of this task is that in line with the cooperation agreements, development cooperation should always be embedded in the development policies of the respective developing countries. Experts are also expected to tailor their work towards changes in these policies. A conflict of interest is therefore inevitable. This has been witnessed in the arguments between government representatives in the

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<sup>1</sup> Reineke and Sülzer 1995, for example, deal generally with the work of the development expert.

developing countries and experts of the World Bank and the IMF during the implementation of the structural adjustment policies.

Although development experts for the most part are sent from national development organizations such as the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), the job outline of the experts are increasingly being restrictive and transnational. The results of our interviews indicate that the way experts see themselves, their globally defined tasks as well as their "social construction of the developing societies" tend to converge. In other words, development experts are able to free themselves from the context of their national interests and consider themselves as part of the global society. We have developed the thesis that a transnational strategic group of experts has been created who are increasingly setting their own goals where necessary, and try to push through these goals even when they run counter to those of their national government. According to Hass (1992) insecurity, interpretation and institutionalization are the main dynamics. Insecurity arises as a result of the increasing dependence of states on each other with respect to policy choices. Insecurity leads to the need for a particularly transnational knowledge. Development experts offer such knowledge in the form of experiences (tacit knowledge) and instructions (explicit knowledge). When the demand for such knowledge increases, networks of "epistemic community" of experts are built that are able to place their knowledge at the disposal of others, and in return, to commandeer the necessary resources for themselves and their projects. The conditions for this development are to be found in the global context within which the formation of strategic groups occur. The strategic groups of development experts hereby competes with the state bureaucracy on the one hand and private companies on the other hand. According to the principles of the strategic group analysis, cooperation, conflict or hybridization are the alternative strategies. Pressure to form private-public partnerships (PPP) or the outsourcing of development projects to private firms are indicators of the corresponding strategic example used.

## Development Advice

Consultancy work for companies and governments are amongst the most dynamic areas of the rapidly expanding service sectors worldwide. Peet (1988: 1) estimates that about half of all consultancy firms that were existing during the mid-1980s were founded within the last five years. The number of experts, in particular the development experts, have been rising with the increasing globalization of knowledge. In 2003, the GTZ employed about 10,000 persons (1,042 in the Headoffice, 1,430 were working abroad and 7,081 local workers). In 1991 there were 927 persons of German nationality working for the various UN organizations. It is estimated that several million persons are currently employed through the "sale of knowledge" work of development consultancy firms worldwide. Many of these are working out of their own countries, that is, as expatriates.

The globalization of experts has for its part led to the creation of an internal community in the form of stabilizing transnational networks to complex of themes in development policies (thematic groups und communities of practice), which all together form the strategic group of development experts. We can therefore define the strategic group of development experts structurally as a global network that is characterized by a specific epistemic culture.

## The Epistemic Culture of Development Experts

Development experts officially support, or as a personal construction of reality, specific development concepts and strategies. Basic needs strategies, fighting against poverty, target group oriented development, participation, structural adjustment and conflict prevention are some of these concepts that were for some time considered to be "authoritative" or are still considered so (see GTZ 1997 for the various terms used in the German bilateral cooperation). We can state categorically that the concepts in use are becoming quite homogenous worldwide. Haas (1992), on his part, surmises that national epistemic cultures become a transnational epistemic culture through the diffusion of ideas. This can have a systemic effect when their ideas are transferred to decision makers at the government level who also influence other states through international organizations or other institutions. He presumes further that the influence of transnational epistemic cultures of experts is durable and considerable because of the big network for the diffusion of ideas that is created. The "belief" in common basic concepts in development policy creates coherence within the strategic group of experts, or rather, it contributes to its development. According to an "orthodox consensus", however, it is possible for further differentiation to occur.

One aspect that has not been highlighted much but which we consider to be very important is the social construction of underdevelopment. Development experts and development sociologists have the power to determine what should be considered as underdevelopment. We assume that experts construct and create underdevelopment taking trends into consideration and then try to eliminate the phenomenon. Knowledge about underdevelopment is developed in the universities and the think tanks but also in the practice of development cooperation. This happens within the context of an "epistemic culture" that makes it possible to create knowledge about development and underdevelopment as a specifically constructed fragment of a practically oriented science.

## Lifestyle of Development Experts

The conditions for decoupling the local from the national contexts, or rather, the transition from the local to the global is, besides the knowledge dimension as the structural cause of its origin (have a lead in knowledge, epistemic power) the development of a specific lifestyle that promotes a sense of community within and has the effect of closing off against outsiders. The employment of experts worldwide, that is, the relocation of residence in new social, cultural and political environments demands a particular style of living. Shortterm experts live in a sort of "polygamous residential form" (Ortspolygamie) Beck 1997. On the other hand one can argue that a lifestyle that is dependent on being mobile globally is required in order to ensure the expert's physical survival.<sup>2</sup> "Life-styling" (Gerke 1999) is then used as an instrument of exclusion, in order to decouple oneself from the local milieu or to have a psychological (emotional) stability in view of the constantly changing habitat. The specific way of living ("Lebensführung" in the sense of Max Weber) of the experts results on the one hand in a cultural globalization but on the other hand leads possibly to a sharp division between the private (domestic) and the public areas in the working environment. This problem is, in our view, quite typical for all experts but is worsened by the cultural and social differences in the working environment of the development expert. The globalized lifestyle is more or less sharply

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<sup>2</sup> Frühere Arbeiten über Expatriate Communities werden von Cohen (1977) zusammengefasst, wobei sichtbar wird, dass die Untersuchungen über Entwicklungsexperten nur einen geringen Teil ausmachen.

separated from the social and the cultural environment. There is therefore a sharp division or conflicts between the contrasting living environment of the expert and that of the local population. The increasing competition between local and foreign experts and the fact that local consultancy firms are pushing into the knowledge market and think tanks is likely to produce another area of conflict.

The way development experts live is a necessary condition for the building of global strategic groups on one hand and the dramaturgical dynamics of the quarrel with the local and that which is culturally different, on the other hand, is becoming worldwide very clear. As a result of this, the concepts and strategies that are preferred in the development policies are those that solve this dialectic in the way of living or reduces it. This is currently happening through the repetitive use of the concept of participation and partnership. Participatory planning of development projects demands continuous dialog with partners, that is, the indigenous population even when in the reality of the project work the partners are excluded and presented with a completed project plan that only leave room for minor additions during the process of participatory planning. A virtual world is then constructed in the project reports that indicate that the local population, that is, the project partners made some suggestions and are involved in the implementation and monitoring of the project. The contrasts between the local habitus and the globalized world of the experts are thus virtually resolved.

## The Power of Strategic Groups to Define

With increasing globalization and the accompanying structure of a world society that is developing with it, knowledge workers are on the one hand decoupling from the national contexts in order to build transnational strategic groups (Evers 2000, Evers/Kaiser/Müller 2003). On the other hand, one can remark that the decoupling process will proceed very differently. While the epistemic culture continues to be increasingly globalized and results in the creation of "global epistemic communities", access to material resources required for carrying out research and development in certain areas remain under national control. The 1998/99 World Development Report has already indicated a sharp increase but also an unequal division of the financial resources and personnel that are expended on research and development. The knowledge gap has since then further increased (Evers/Gerke 2005). The interests of transnational organizations and their R&D departments have become more important with respect to the division of resources and the accompanying production of knowledge. The professionally self-organized scientists in the universities and the public research institutes can only resist this power of transnational organizations to define. At the federal government level in Germany, this means more engineering sciences and less sociology. The pressure to move in this direction can also be clearly seen in the Southeast Asian countries. The call by the World Bank for closing the knowledge gap has been reduced only to the level of applied technology.

## 5. Self-critical Conclusion

There are more questions than clear results to be derived from what has been said so far. First of all, is it possible to talk of a strategic group of knowledge workers and experts or should this rather be divided in clearly defined groups? Secondly, to what extent are knowledge-based strategic groups dependent on state resources such that it is possible to further decouple this from the national contexts and the globalization process? Thirdly, to what extent can the power of the scribes be said to be derived from outside. This means, to what extent are other strategic groups steering the process of knowledge production and the determination of its significance?

We have tried to reproduce the building of global strategic groups using the example of experts, in particular, development experts. The personnel of transnational organizations as well as the development experts of national development organizations appear to the most important strategic group for the restructuring of a global knowledge society in view of the resources that they have been able to accumulate. However, because of the tendency for research work to be increasingly concentrated in the R&D departments of large companies while consulting jobs in the development cooperation are increasingly been privatized, one can speak of the tendency of "forced hybridization". Knowledge workers and experts are engaged in the corporative structures and are as a result increasingly losing their own strategic competence. How experts are going to be integrated into the field of other global strategic groups and what sequence of strategic group building would evolve is a task that is yet to be resolved by the theory and analysis of strategic groups.

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