

**VALUE-FOR-MONEY?  
THE OVERALL RECORD OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE  
FOR INSTITUTIONAL AND GOVERNANCE REFORM.**

**EFFECTIVE ADVISING IN COMPLEX AND FRAGILE SITUATIONS. WORKING PAPER 1.**

---

**ABSTRACT:** ‘Technical assistance’ in the form of international experts and advisors, and loans and grants for ‘institutional reform’ constitute a huge share of official development assistance. Yet a growing body of comparative and cumulative evaluations, further bolstered by academic research, show that its overall effectiveness in terms of better functioning governments, is limited at best. There is a whole range of reasons for these, with the bulk of the blame often laid on the recipient countries. But there are also well-known problems with the quality of the ‘experts’ and ‘advisers’ being deployed, and long-standing and deep-seated problems generated by the predominant bureaucratic cultures of the ‘donor’ agencies. Based on reflection and learning from experience, there is strong convergence among many different sources about what are more productive ways of engaging for the purpose of sustained improvements in public sector capacities and performance. Part of this lies with the recipient actors who can be more assertive in maintaining control of their own agendas and strategies. But under any given scenario, it requires from ‘experts’ and ‘advisers’ a much broader range of competencies, and from the ‘donors’ a change in actual practices, that would bring these more in line with their professed policy principles.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

- I. QUESTIONABLE VALUE-FOR-MONEY?**
  - A. Big Money: The Scale of Technical Assistance and Institutional Reform in International (DAC) Aid.
  - B. Limited Value.
- II. WHY SUCH LIMITED VALUE-FOR-MONEY?**
  - A. Problems Related to the Recipients of the External Assistance.
  - B. Problems Related to the International ‘Experts’ and ‘Advisers’.
  - C. Problems Related to the ‘Development Partners’ Providing the Assistance.
- III. THE NON-TECHNICAL NATURE OF PUBLIC SECTOR CAPACITY-DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM.**
  - A. Not So Technocratic Bureaucracies.
  - B. Some Learning about Effective Institutional Reform.
- IV. IMPROVING ‘TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE’.**
  - A. Demand-Driven Capacity Strengthening and Institutional Reform?
  - B. New Ways of Working among the Development Partners?
  - C. A Broader Range of Competencies among International Experts and Advisers and Different Deployment Modalities.
- V. SOURCE MATERIALS**

## I. QUESTIONABLE VALUE-FOR-MONEY?

### A. Big Money: The Scale of Technical Assistance and Institutional Reform in International (DAC) Aid.

For several decades, the 'international community', or at least the 'Western' aid donors, have been providing assistance to countries struggling with challenges of development, security and peacefulness. Broad overall goals for this assistance are general economic growth, pro-poor development, 'stabilisation', sustainable peace, the creation or rebuilding of effective 'states' and improved governance.

Various modalities are being used for this purpose: e.g. investment, trade and aid. A significant part of the 'aid' comes in the form of 'technical cooperation'. As defined by the OECD, 'technical cooperation' (TC) refers to the overall efforts to transfer or adapt knowledge, practices or skills to foster development. Specifically this refers to:

- The provision of 'technical assistance' or TA, notably deployment of international or national 'experts' as doers and/or advisers for a longer or shorter term;
- Research into the problems of developing countries or fragile states;
- Study and training assistance for nationals of developing countries or fragile states.

The bulk of 'technical cooperation aid' goes to 'expert personnel'. The amounts of money involved are huge: One report held it to be some US \$ 19 billion in 2004. Another report estimated that between 1961 and 2011, member countries of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) spent some US \$ 400 billion on 'technical cooperation'. 'Technical assistance' currently makes up between a quarter to a third of all Official Development Assistance (ODA).

To illustrate this with the example of a tiny country, albeit of strategic interest to the European Union: Between 2007/8 and 2011, the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) spent some Euro 680 million, and had some 2500 staff working on capacity-development (some of these also carried out certain executive functions). In Afghanistan, another country in which the international community has invested heavily, it is estimated that in the 5 years from 2001-2006, 'technical assistance' cost US \$ 1.6 billion.

As of the 1980s, public sector reform has also gained growing attention from the international development community. Projects that incorporate public sector institutional reform objectives

made up 65% of all World Bank operations between 2000 and 2010. Between 2006 and 2011 the World Bank allocated more than US \$ 50 billion to such projects, a quarter of all spending in the period.

## **B. Limited Value.**

Yet there is a broad acknowledgment today that, even though there are some real success stories, the overall record of technical assistance and institutional reform support, is mediocre at best. This critical assessment is not new: the 1969 report of the Pearson Commission on International Development, assessing the effectiveness of World Bank development support over the two earlier decades, had already made a similar observation. Examining the World Bank and IMF's own comparative assessments of the effectiveness of 'conditionality' to incite policy changes in favour of 'structural adjustment', Killick in 1998 observed that they have not brought about significant improvements in economic policies. The main reason for this are the failures of implementation.

Another comparative research project examined the impacts of international assistance to elections, human rights and media in eight post-conflict countries: Cambodia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, El Salvador and Guatemala. It concludes that international assistance had often been instrumental in setting up new organizations, but relatively unsuccessful in consolidating effective democratic institutions. Post-conflict democratisation programmes tend to consist mainly of technical, material and financial assistance and of short-term project aid. This approach may stimulate a growth in training activities, but proves unsustainable and largely insignificant in the wider process of democratization.

The same overall assessment is repeated in a 2006 OECD report: "*While a few countries have done well, donor efforts in many countries have produced little to show in terms of sustainable country capacity*", and in an evaluation for DFID published in the same year: "*...it is only in a minority of the cases reviewed that a capacity development impact can be identified.*"

Subsequent evaluations of cumulative efforts all confirm the same message: For example, a 2012 assessment by the European Court of Auditors of the EU's rule of law assistance to Kosovo (2007-2011) observes that "*EU assistance to Kosovo in the field of the rule of law has not been sufficiently effective*" and expresses doubts about the sustainability of the results. An earlier EU Court of Auditors report about the effectiveness of the EU Commission's projects in the area of 'justice' and

'home affairs' in the western Balkans had reached similar conclusions: "... *the Court found that the results of institution-building projects were only partially satisfactory and unlikely to be sustainable.*"

In exceptional cases (Kosovo, Timor Leste, Iraq) the international actors established a transitional public administration, bringing in large numbers of international 'experts' with executive authority way beyond the 'advisory role'. Even at an impressionistic level, one can question the overall effectiveness of this unusual ability to direct and shape the governance institutions. One insider reflected on the overall performance of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) as "*building state failure*".

M. Andrews of the Harvard Kennedy School for Government has examined at length why these efforts at institutional reform are not more successful (2013). He draws on various donor instigated assessments, among them assessments by the African and Asian Development Banks and especially by the World Bank. This includes the 2008 World Bank evaluation of public sector reforms, a subsequent 2011 study revisiting the same issues, and a variety of project/programme reports. Comparisons of the state of governance over time in various countries, are made with the help of e.g. the World Governance Indicators or the World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment scores. The overall picture emerging is that, particularly when compared over a somewhat longer time periods, between a third and sixty per cent of countries do not show improved governance after institutional reform efforts, even where these reform efforts have been significant in overall numbers and financial scale. Worryingly, some countries actually show a decline in governance performance.

Not surprisingly, some have concluded that about half of the money spent on 'technical assistance' is '*wasted*' (e.g. Jones 2013, drawing on Actionaid 2011). Actionaid identifies poor quality technical assistance as a major component of '*substandard aid*' (2011:45), and has actually argued that when aid money is spent to provide business to companies and experts of the donor countries, it doesn't constitute 'real aid' but should be considered '*phantom aid*'.

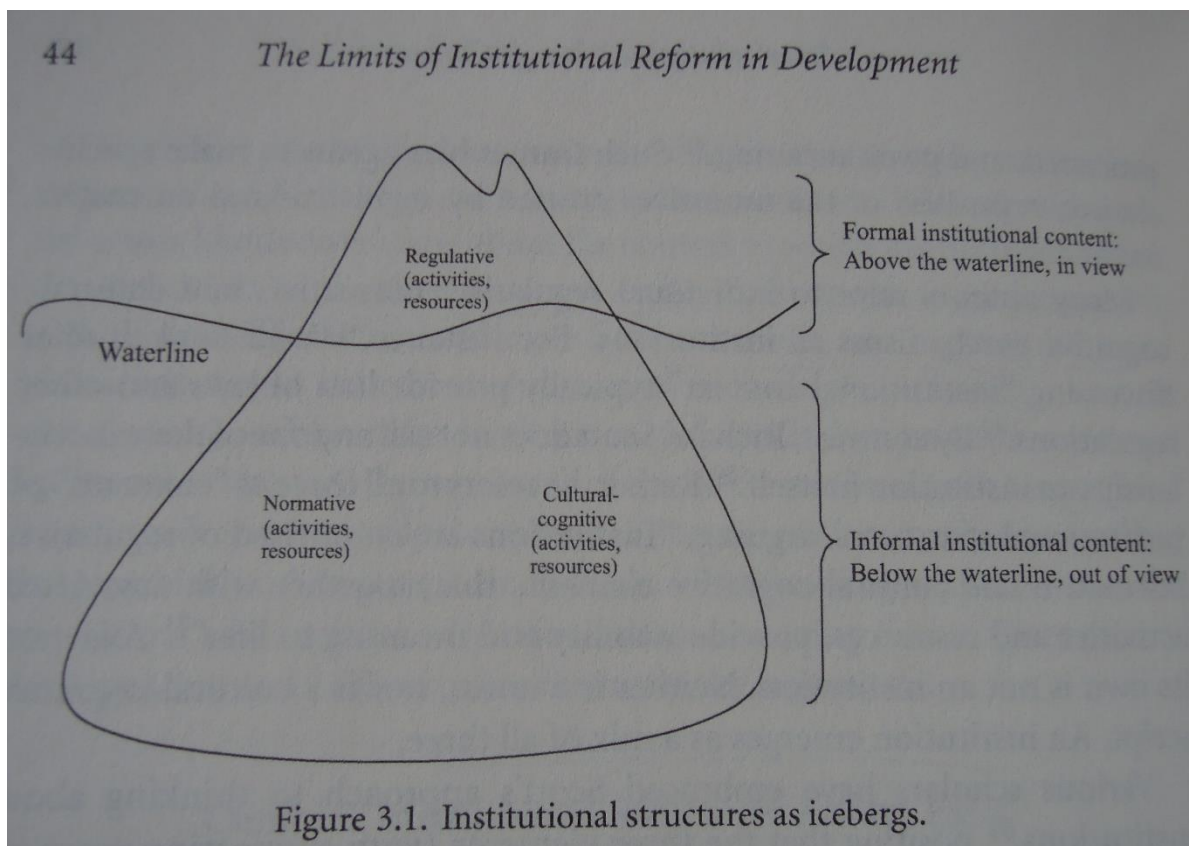
## II. WHY SUCH LIMITED VALUE-FOR-MONEY?

### A. Problems Related to the Recipients of the External Assistance.

The most frequently heard 'explanation' from external actors why not more has been achieved, are the absence of 'political will' and/or 'lack of capacities' among the recipients of the TA and advice. Case examples, anecdotes and published reports provide a more detailed picture of what the 'problems' on the 'recipient' side may be:

- a. *Basic shortage of material resources.* Parts of the public service are expected to operate with hardly any financial resources and without often even the most basic equipment; or equipment has been provided but the budgets and skills for maintenance and servicing are not available;
- b. *Lack of basic competencies.* In some instances, especially after prolonged violence that may have led to the virtual collapse of the state, the people in charge at the political and senior public administration level, actually lack even basic experience with public administration and policy making;
- c. *Managerial inefficiencies.* e.g. people in senior positions monopolise all decision-making creating bottlenecks and endless delays; meetings are inefficient; decisions taken are not effectively minuted and communicated;
- d. *Low capacity to absorb 'new' knowledge and learning.* Just as the organisation cannot absorb significant financial investment, its personnel cannot absorb significant amounts of new information and knowledge that are expected to drive new ways of doing things;
- e. *Individual staff trained face the 're-entry problem':* Individuals that have learned new things on training courses find themselves unable to apply much of that new learning when they return to their normal working environment with its prevailing modus operandi (a particular problem where training is not part of or integrated in a broader institutional capacity-strengthening strategy);
- f. *Staff turnover.* The capacities of various civil servants, including senior ones, may have been strengthened, but a change of government leads to their being replaced; or low salaries and politicised career prospects encourages the newly trained personnel to leave government service for better prospects elsewhere, including with international organisations;

- g. *Low morale and motivation*: Public servants have low morale and little incentive and hence low motivation to improve performance; the prevailing attitude is that unless there is new money (often only available from external sources) nothing can be done;
- h. *Problematic attitudes towards the external actors*: This can range from an over-dependence on the foreigners ("outsourcing the thinking"), waiting for the foreigners to 'do' something, to a strong suspicion of and resistance to the 'foreigner', sometimes leading to a strong assertion of 'national sovereignty'. Big salary differentials between internationals and their national counterparts also create resentment; sometimes national personnel has been unwilling to take on work previously done by expatriate advisors without extra pay;
- i. *Weak mandate and limited high-level influence*: The organisation being supported with external expertise and advice has no clear and strong mandate, and its head is not highly placed within the governmental hierarchy.
- j. *Self-interest based resistance or indifference*: At senior political and/or managerial level, but also at mid-level and among the 'front line' civil servants, there is resistance to reforms that are seen as a threat to personal interests, or indifference to proposed changes because there is 'nothing in it for me'. Even if lower-level personnel have no strong formal authority, they may block actual implementation if they are not 'on board',
- k. *The 'informal' practices override the 'formal' image* of how the institution is said to be structured and supposed to work: What you see is not what you get: The hierarchies of the organigram may not represent the de facto distribution of power and influence and identify where the decisions are really made; civil servants may be operating according to a logic that is different from the one prescribed by the formal procedures;
- l. *Lack of collaboration between different institutions*: The functional effectiveness of one governmental institution may depend on collaboration with others. For example, effective rule of law will require close collaboration between the various police services, the judiciary and the penitentiary system, but may also require supportive action from the Ministry of Finance;
- m. *There is no broad demand for change and improvement*: The larger public or citizenry seems to be indifferent to the situation as it is and to accept the 'status quo' (which may be the result of many different possible reasons).



*This figure from Matt Andrews' book (2013:44) draws attention to the fact that the formal aspects of an institution, here a public sector organization, such as its legal basis, official organigram, formal procedures etc. are only the tip of the 'iceberg'. Its actual functioning depends on deeper underpinnings, such as social values and norms, and people's mindsets. Trying to effect changes at the top of the iceberg, without taking into account the active influence and effects of what is underpinning its actual 'behaviour', is likely to result in failure.*

- n. *Technical expertise is treated as a 'free good'*: National actors have actually no interest in the TA but accept it as an inevitable part of the 'aid package'. Their real interest is in the financial resource, so they treat the TA as a 'free good' which is not valued as an opportunity. Many recipient countries do not overly question the provision of TA and its cost, as there is no real option to use the money otherwise (i.e. it is not possible to consider its opportunity cost), and because it is often implicitly or explicitly tied up with the wider financial assistance.
- o. *Discussing with outside experts rather than with domestic constituencies*: The reliance on outside experts and advisers can preclude and prevent parliamentary and public discussion of what are recognized to be serious economic, social and political problems, and how to address them;

- p. *National authorities do not take, or have not been allowed to take, real ownership* of the capacity-strengthening and institutional development and reform agenda and strategy;
- q. *No real government commitment to reform*: National actors make 'visible' but only surface changes such as developing certain plans, creating a new commission or institution, or voting new legislation. But these remain largely unimplemented 'signals' to sustain development partner support and get good scores on governance indicators. In other words 'form' does not translate into 'function'.

**Deeper realities: State Bureaucracy and Governance in West francophone Africa. One analysis.**

Researching the actual functioning of the public administration in various francophone African countries, such as Mali, Niger, Benin, Senegal, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, researchers found the same type of bureaucratic governance notwithstanding the ostensible political differences. Common characteristics are: the heavy weight of 'clientelism'; a significant difference between the formal and official representation of the public administration and its de facto functioning; an 'each for oneself' attitude; quick suspicion and allegations over any attempts at collective action; lack of motivation among civil servants - access to the privileges of a (very poorly paid) public service position being a primary motivator; the generalized exchange of favours; contempt for anonymous users; unproductiveness due to archaic procedures and high degrees of absenteeism; systemic corruption; a culture of impunity; and a double language: that of the modern state for national political ceremonies and conversations with outsiders, and that of tricks, favours, intrigues and negotiations for the actual reality of the civil service functioning.

The existence of such problematic type of bureaucratic governance is traced back to the characteristics of the colonial administration and -experience, and the indifference towards and even undermining of 'good governance' concerns during the Cold War period. But it also reflects the difficulties in absorbing and internalizing the notion of a 'neutral bureaucracy' that treats everyone equally, irrespective of their socio-economic profile, with the risk that everyone becomes and is treated like a 'number'. Faced with such treat, or reality, over-personalisation becomes the only means to get one's interests attended to.

This analysis not only points at deep-seated attitudinal problems, but also the 'systemic nature' of the situation, with many factors that reinforce each other. It doesn't imply that everybody is happy with the status quo, but this is not a situation that can be easily changed, and certainly not with a series of relatively short-term, extensively pre-designed and predetermined 'projects'.

This draws on de Sardan 2005



**B. Problems Related to the International 'Experts' and 'Advisers'.**

- a. *Not such 'expertise' after all.* While they may have good practical experience of the structures, procedures and practices of their own home countries, they don't have much of a broader comparative perspective on how different countries deal with the same challenge, nor much of the 'collective learning' that is available;
- b. *Poor at knowledge and skill transfer.* They know their subject, but do not have the skills to effectively share and transfer that as part of a deliberate capacity-strengthening effort;
- c. *Failing to acknowledge the two-way learning.* Nationals argue that often internationals actually also learn a lot from them, and need them and use them as 'instructors' and 'advisors' to understand local culture and politics. Failure to acknowledge this and arrogantly playing the 'expert' role, creates resentment and resistance;
- d. *Poor interpersonal and relational skills:* A frequently made complaint by those who 'receive' the international expert-adviser. The experts know their subject, but their effectiveness is limited by their inability to develop good working relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders;
- e. *Leaning towards 'doing' rather than 'advising' or 'building capacity':* They respond to the real or perceived expectation/pressure from their 'sender' to 'get the job done' and to 'deliver results'. Given that their time is expensive, they do not spend the additional time to strengthen national capacities. High salaries for the international experts create a systemic incentive to 'do' quickly rather than support others doing, more slowly;
- f. *Importing 'models' and 'solutions' rather than joint problem-solving.* They propose and may even try to impose 'solutions' that do not 'fit well' in the eco-system or environment of the national actors and institutions. This attitude of the 'expert' who comes with the answers in a context s/he hardly understands was already criticised long ago by Albert Hirschman as the '*visiting economist syndrome*'.
- g. *Overreliance on high-level national 'champions':* (This situation may not be the making of the advisor, but one s/he is put in!) This tend to be a limited number of individuals that are at the top of formal hierarchies, usually of 'central' government, and that can 'talk Western'. There is an assumption that they will act with an eye to the public interest, and that their authority will be sufficient to ensure implementation. This is not supported by the evidence, which shows that 'change' requires many enabling factors, among them sufficiently broader-based support.

- h. *Talking the home country or 'international' circle talk:* They continue to talk the jargon of, and produce reports that fit within the organizational cultures of the 'internationals', but are not necessarily user-friendly or even understandable for the national actors (already the choice of language for the report can be a barrier);
- i. *No active responsibility towards a situation of conflicting advice:* The 'expert' shows no recognition of the fact that s/he may be giving advice that is different from that given by her or his predecessor or that is given at the same time by other 'experts' and 'advisers' to the same national actors and institutions, and of the problems this creates for the latter;
- j. *No strong sense of responsibility for strengthening national capacities and allowing strong national ownership:* People deployed for short terms (12 months or less) may take an attitude that any problems lie really with the national actors or their predecessors, and may not take responsibility for the consequences of their advice and actions (or inactions). Or worse: some international experts may quite intentionally not motivate and strengthen the capacity of national actors, so as to perpetuate their own position.

**C. Problems Related to the 'Development Partners' Providing the Assistance.**

- a. *The assumption that it is a 'knowledge' problem:* Development partners (partially) continue to operate on the assumption that weak development or governmental performance is the result of economic and knowledge 'gaps' that simply need to be 'filled'. This also assumes that national actors will act entirely and only on a technical, evidence-based rationality, even though the development partners know this is not the case in their own public institutions at home. But 'technical' solutions cannot address what are often social and political problems.
- b. *Largely ignoring context:* Notwithstanding the policy discourse that 'context' comes first, in practice there is limited recognition of the crucial importance of understanding the local political, social and cultural context, and of the potentially greater longer-term effectiveness of 'local solutions'. 'Context' here can partially refer to political interests and power, with power brokers being indifferent to or actively resisting changes that offer no political benefit or are perceived as a threat to their interests. Even where 'context' is taken into account and described in reports prior to the design of an intervention, there is a tendency to overlook the 'invisible' aspects of 'context' that really drive behaviours, notably social norms and values, and the cultural-cognitive frameworks through which people ascribe meaning;
- c. *No differentiation between shorter-term 'transactional' objectives and longer-term 'transformational' objectives:* There may be legitimate reasons to deploy 'expert-advisers' to help an organisation perform its normal functions. But any sustained capacity-strengthening will usually require some fundamental changes in how the recipient organisation operates and/or in the environmental conditions that enable or constrain its potential. This inevitably requires a different, more transformational and longer-term approach;
- d. *Unhelpful 'terms of reference':* As a result of the above, many 'expert-advisers' discover that their 'mandate/Terms of Reference' do not fit at all with the actual situation they find themselves in. The creative, committed and confident ones will then pragmatically interpret or renegotiate their ToR, but others will not;
- e. *'Best-practice', international standard solution-driven approaches:* Development partners seek to impose external 'models' or blueprints and 'solutions' which are, not always correctly, presented as 'international standards' or 'best practice'. This tends to lead to extensively pre-designed, over-specified plans, which do not allow for experimental joint

learning and adaptation, eventually resulting in a 'best fit'. The 'best fit' at a given moment in time may not be so close to 'international standards', but it may actually yield some improved functionality and create a platform for further iterative capacity-strengthening and reform driven by the national actors;

- f. *Project thinking*: Extensively predesigned and predetermined 'projects', of a relatively short term, with pre-determined speeds and linear pathways, are particularly ill-adapted to the messy and relatively unpredictable 'reactions' of what is often a deep-seated, systemic 'status quo' way of doing things. They also encourage 'solution-oriented' rather than more open 'problem-oriented' engagements. Organisational capacity-strengthening and institutional reforms take however a lot of successive efforts, at various levels and building on small successes, responsive to new problems and obstacles arising, and sustained over a long period of time. The prevailing project format is not a suitable approach for this. Moreover, where 'projects' also provide salary complements for the national staff, they may be creating a situation that in the medium-term is fiscally unsustainable.
- g. *Creating parallel systems*: Rather than working with and strengthening the national systems, parallel 'project management units' are created which allow tighter control over finance and quality, and promise quicker delivery of 'results', attributable to a particular donor. But de facto this does not strengthen the national capacities. It may actually undermine them, directly by taking over some of its best national personnel, and indirectly by weakening the perceived legitimacy of the governmental institutions in the eyes of the citizenry;
- h. *Impatience*: Institutions in their contemporary form in the donor countries have taken long time periods to evolve, and their own domestic reforms typically take many years to be conceived, legislated and implemented, at least partially. And yet development partners want to see major and 'quick results' in other countries in just a few years. As the text box on the next page shows, significant public sector reforms take on average in the order of twenty years if not more;
- i. *Reform overload*: Just as national institutions may have limited financial absorption capacity, they certainly also have limited 'reform' absorption capacity. Pushing too many reforms at the same time, is likely to contribute to wastage, increase resistance and may actually undermine 'national capacities';

**REALISTIC TIME FRAMES FOR GOVERNANCE REFORM: A “generation”.**

To make reasoned judgments about time frames, it is important to have historical reference points. A useful approach is to compare current rates of institutional development among today’s fragile states against rates of more recent “transformers.” Historically, the fastest transformations have taken a generation. Well-known institutional indices are relevant to reducing the risk of violence—the rule of law, corruption, human rights, democratic governance, bureaucratic quality, oversight of the security sectors, and equity for the disadvantaged. How much time has it taken to move from current average levels in fragile states around the world to a threshold of “good enough governance”? The results are striking. It took the 20 fastest-moving countries an average of 17 years to get the military out of politics, 20 years to achieve functioning bureaucratic quality, and 27 years to bring corruption under reasonable control. This did not mean perfection, but rather adequacy. Nor should these targets be considered easy benchmarks for most of today’s fragile and violence-affected countries, since the “fastest transformers” described above often had more favorable starting conditions than today’s fragile states. Portugal and the Republic of Korea are among the fastest institutional transformers of the 20th century, but both started their transformations with a foundation of extensive state institutional experience, and with literacy rates far higher than those in, say, the Democratic Republic of Congo or Haiti today.

**Box 3.6 Fastest progress in institutional transformation—An estimate of realistic ranges**

*The table shows the historical range of timings that the fastest reformers in the 20th century took to achieve basic governance transformations.*

**Scenarios for dimensions of “state capability”**

Indicator	Years to threshold at pace of:	
	Fastest 20	Fastest over the threshold
Bureaucratic quality (0–4)	20	12
Corruption (0–6)	27	14
Military in politics (0–6)	17	10
Government effectiveness	36	13
Control of corruption	27	16
Rule of law	41	17

Source: Pritchett and de Weijer 2010.

Note: Calculations are based on International Country Risk Guide indicators that ranked countries on a 0–4 scale over the period 1985–2009. The column “fastest 20” shows the average number of years the fastest 20 performers have taken to reach the threshold, and the second column shows the time it took the fastest ever country to achieve a threshold indicator score.

Wishful thinking on timing pervades development assistance when it comes to governance and institution

- j. *Weak donor- coordination:* Technical assistance is ad hoc and not strategically targeted or coordinated. This reduces its ability to have more 'cumulative impact'. The lack of coordination can also create practical problems and add to the confusion e.g. in relation to material assistance and 'advisory' services: We still see situations of different donors providing different types of equipment (e.g. vehicles) to the same national entity, complicating servicing and maintenance; advisers from different donors may be giving different and even contradictory advice – a problem that may even occur with successive advisers deployed by the same donor;
- k. *Technical assistance remains overpriced:* Particularly expatriate experts/advisers are expensive because of salaries and especially additional costs such as travel, housing and schooling benefits etc. The costs of such experts remains high because there is no real 'market' to match supply and demand. Fee rates are not normally publicized. Tenders may only be publicized in the national language and are complex, effectively barring national service providers from competing. Many donors tend to have preset budgets for TA and to prefer their own nationals, hence have no incentive to drive down costs. They use TA, alongside conditionality to promote reforms they consider important.
- l. *Ambiguous and problematic accountabilities:* Whereas technical assistance advisers should be accountable to their national counterparts, there are formal or informal expectations they remain primarily accountable to their donor. National governments are also made primarily accountable to their international development partners, rather than their national parliaments and citizens.
- m. *No capacity-related performance expectations:* There are rarely performance expectations and benchmarks, targets or indicators related to 'capacity strengthening'.

### III. THE NON-TECHNICAL NATURE OF PUBLIC SECTOR CD AND REFORM.

#### A. Not-so-Technocratic Bureaucracies.

- a. *Institutions, including the 'public sector', are socio-political and historical constructs.* Their shape and functioning is influenced by the particular contextual history of a place, and by its social and political dynamics. This holds as much in the so-called 'developed' world, as in all other countries. They are not the products of pure 'rational design' and hence changing or reforming them is not just a matter of rational-technical redesign. In that light, it is more appropriate to frame the situation as one of 'state formation' (a particular historical form of 'governance' system) than more technocratic and ahistorical 'state-building';
- b. *Political economy matters.* Being a socio-political construct and reflecting the socio-political dynamics of a society, attempts to make 'changes' in the structure and especially the functioning of the public sector, need to pay active attention to the political economy. This includes, among other things, attention to the interests of and incentives for various stakeholders that are likely to be in asymmetrical power relations. A 'problem' perceived by outsiders may not be ready to be worked on if, in the eyes of the national actors, it is not perceived or constructed as socially and politically 'important'. Alternatively, reform efforts that demand a radical change in the underlying 'logic' of a system, such as turning a public sector built on clientelism into a meritocratic public administration with relative political independence and its own standards of integrity, are also likely to take many years to make some progress.
- c. *Broader civil service reform.* Significant and sustained improvements in public sector institutions are often hampered by wider problems related to who gets recruited into the overall public service and how, if and how they are retained and can advance. In other words, the general incentives and disincentives for public sector service. Significant and sustained improvements in certain parts of the public sector, may often be difficult to achieve if there is no progress in overall civil service reform.

**B. Some Learning about Public Institutions Reform.**

- a. Public sector capacity-strengthening and reform is not a 'technical' issue: It requires a wider framework of action, that takes into account social, cultural, historical, economic and political factors, most of which are well beyond the expertise (and competencies) of the international experts and advisers.
- b. Show a Prospect of Political Pay Offs. Focus on reforms that can providing tangible political pay offs, or present a compelling argument why and how they will, if it is not immediately obvious. Chances for success are higher where reforms that provide public benefits also serve more narrow individual interests.
- c. It's all about implementation: New laws, new policies, new commissions and other 'structures' may mean good intent or just be a tactic to keep the international actors happy. Whichever is the case, in the end it is all about implementation. That means going beyond 'policy dialogue' and celebrating 'signal successes' – progress that is a good sign but ultimately not the real thing. Support, in the form of expertise and advice and capacity-strengthening support, should be maintained beyond the signal successes, to help troubleshooting and adaptation during implementation;
- d. Reform champions and other 'change agents' can't do it alone: Individuals that are potential change agents, will calculate their chances for success: What are the chances to see some reforms implemented; how much support is there for a proposed reform and from whom; what are the potential personal benefits, and will the individual stay long enough in position to see benefits from the reforms? Top-down change typically fails over the 'implementation gap'. Bottom-up change fails because it fails to influence the 'powers that be'. Multiple entry and multiple reform 'movements' are required at the same time, driven by what can be informal 'networks' and 'coalitions' for change. 'Technical' approaches to change will stall unless they are supported by a broader vision, translated into policies and invested with political interest.
- e. State-society collaborations: Greater public participation and demand can help create incentives for reform, especially if non-state sectors not only criticize but work constructively with the public administration and political elite, bringing creative ideas and innovative solutions. This may require some trust-building between citizens and the elites that control



the state and its institutions. Having said this, sometimes significant reforms have come about from narrower and more exclusive alliances, notably between political and business elites, which may or may not deliver broad public benefits.

- f. *Inter-organisational ownership and commitment*: The prevailing tendency has been to focus on the strengthening of the capacities and perhaps reform of single entities/organisations. Yet often 'effective performance' is dependent on the willingness and ability of different organisations to collaborate e.g. the police and the judiciary. This often extends beyond public sector institutions, to include other key stakeholders: in the agricultural sector for example, overall effectiveness will depend not only on commitment and capacities in the Ministry of Agriculture, but the willingness and ability of other actors in the sector to collaborate: farmer associations, agricultural input providers, agro-business, agricultural training colleges etc. 'Capacities between' organized entities can be more critical for driving change than 'capacities within' each of them.
  
- g. *Timing*: Is there a broad awareness that the status quo has become a higher risk that change? Getting reforms going is easier when there is a broad sense that the prevailing practices and situations have reached their limits, and that a crisis is imminent unless there is some serious reform.
  
- h. *Pushing reform or fostering enabling conditions*: The potential for some meaningful and sustained improvements in the performance of a public administration organisation is dependent on many factors. If most of the stars are not aligned, improvements are unlikely to happen or to be sustained. Sound 'astronomical' observation and analysis may indicate whether current efforts are best focused on the (inter-) organisational change itself, or on fostering more enabling conditions.
  
- i. *Enclaves of bureaucratic excellence*: Fundamental civil service reform is rarely likely to happen in even the medium-term, for fiscal and political reasons. Externally and internally supported reform initiatives sometimes create enclaves of excellence. This can happen when there is sustained political support, a high degree of autonomy from the rest of the administration, and good management that creates strong and positive motivation among the personnel. While these will not rapidly influence wider public service performance, they may remain a powerful model of what can be. There are instances however when such

centers of excellence have essentially service the narrow interests of a political and economic elite.

- j. Strategic capacity-development from the outset: While there may be a need for temporary gap-filling with external expertise, the strategic investment should be in capacity-strengthening from day one. 'Training' (and educational grants) are not an organisational or inter-organisational capacity-development strategy. A CD strategy will look at a variety of ways of individual but especially team-learning, and pay attention not only to knowledge and skills but also factors that generate positive motivation and commitment. Investing in national/regional 'capacities' to strengthen capacities, such as an 'Institute for Public Administration' or 'Public Service Training Center' may be more strategic than continuing to fly in international experts for years on end.
- k. Sustained flexible engagement in support of 'national' initiatives: Use a strategic framework but not a master plan or grand design. To be helpful and effective, external actors are advised to build on what there is rather than seeking to redesign everything; be problem-oriented rather solution-driven; engage in joint analysis, reflection and learning, and have the staying power for the often longer-time perspectives that are required. Preplanned and overdesigned 'projects' and 'programmes' are not only ineffective, they can actually be counterproductive. Constructive engagement needs to be more open and open-minded, and operate according to terms that allow for flexibility and iterative adaptation, as new problems will come up and learning takes place. Matt Andrews has called this 'Problem-Driven Iterative Adaption' or PDIA. This is the only way to get 'best fit'. 'Best fit' may not always conform to 'best practice', but is far more likely to be implemented and hence provide a real step forward. A PDIA type of approach must maintain a sense of strategic direction however, to avoid falling into fragmented ad hoc incrementalism.

#### IV. IMPROVING 'TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE'.

If the fairly modest record of 'success' of TA is the result of factors that lie with the recipients, the providers and the 'experts-advisers' in combination with each other, then any significant improvements will also have to come from efforts by all three key actors.

##### A. Demand-driven Capacity-Strengthening and Institutional Reform?

Aid and expertise receiving societies and governments can more strongly assert their desire to maintain control of their own future. They can do this by elaborating and driving their own capacity-strengthening and institutional reform agendas and strategies, and keeping control over the nature and terms of external assistance to these. They can argue for a de-linking of 'expert advice' from a wider aid package. Some have developed a specific policy framework for 'technical assistance', and/or have set up a dedicated unit to handle it throughout all its stages.

They can demand a key say in determining where and when 'expert assistance' is required, in the development of the terms of reference and essential requirements of the 'expert advisers', and in their selection, management and appreciation. Recipient governments have also increasingly been demanding that donor support be used to strengthen the development and employment of the 'national' talent and expertise, which can be found in-country and in the diaspora, and for more advisers from the 'region' or other countries with similar experiences and perhaps cultures ('South-South cooperation').

Recipient governments can put themselves in a better bargaining position if they can demonstrate strong political leadership, with sound policies, planning and financial management, and a public administration that generally demonstrates competence and integrity. They are certainly in a much stronger position when they have reduced their aid dependency. Often neither condition of course exists.

The reality is that 'technical assistance' often works best in situations where it is least needed. That doesn't mean however that some of the problematic, wasteful and counterproductive practices related to the provision of TA cannot be drastically reduced immediately.

## **B. New Ways of Working among the Development Partners?**

In their policy discourse (Paris Declaration 2005; Fragile States Principles 2007; Accra Agenda for Action 2008, Busan Declaration 2011) the traditional 'development partners' i.e. donor countries, have explicitly acknowledged the importance of 'context', of 'ownership', of 'alignment' of the development partners behind the national priorities, of inclusive partnerships, of mutual accountability etc. All of this is seen as contributing to increased aid effectiveness. So what does this mean when it comes to 'technical cooperation' and notably 'technical assistance':

- A much more realistic appreciation of the time required for a legitimate and functioning public sector to take shape in what are often still relatively young 'states'. The costs of impatient engagements does not show up directly in the accounts but is therefore no less real;
- A much better and deeper understanding of the 'context' in which experts and advisers are placed, notably the historical, political, social, cultural contexts in general and the specifics of how this plays out in the core institutions the advisers are expected to be working with;
- Framework approaches that allow the advisers the flexibility to respond creatively and timely to emerging situations, but also to their evolving understanding of what and who really shapes the situation as it is. The world doesn't operate fully 'according to plan'; in reality we need to navigate an only partially known environment with only partially accurate maps: the score skill is to be a good navigator who eventually finds a 'pathway' towards the destination;
- The strategic objective of any development cooperation should be stronger national capacities. "Capacity-development" has to be an explicit and central aim of any 'expertise' mobilized. That implies a drastic reduction in the undermining of national capacities through hiring the best nationals to work for international agencies. Gap-filling', 'go-and-do-it' deployments may occasionally be inevitable, but should go together with sustained investment in 'capacity-development'. If the term 'capacity-development' is not or no longer seen as appropriate, then other words can be found: the central point remains of 'national capacities to constructively handle the many challenges that any government and public administration in the world today is confronted with, and the capacity in-country to develop and innovate.

- Prepare for multi-stakeholder processes: A practice of strictly pairing an expert or adviser with one or a few counterparts is unlikely to be effective. Even if they are willing and able, no actor can make significant improvements or changes on her/his own. A broader set of 'change agents' is required, whose respective efforts can have some more cumulative influence and impact if some 'connection' is created. The 'networks' and 'coalitions' for change don't need to be very formalized, and their concertation can be light, but different efforts cannot be left isolated and fragmented;
- 'Allowing' greater national ownership of the institution-building and reform processes and greater joint management of the expertise that can be called upon. 'Allowing' is a deliberately chosen verb, as 'lack of national ownership' is not the normal state of affairs but comes about when an external actor is somehow exercising significant influence. Relinquishing some 'control' in terms of the selection and management of 'advisers' and around the 'planning' of their work may be seen as 'higher risk' – but there is no 'development effectiveness' with high risk aversion. More importantly, relinquishing some control (which doesn't mean relinquishing all oversight) creates an enabling situation for other actors to take co-responsibility and to co-design actions for better public sector performance;
- Set a 'results' agenda together with those being 'assisted'. Inputs such as training, workshops, educational grants provided etc. are not 'results'. Nor are short-term outputs. Meaningful results appear at the level of outcomes: some can be vital yet not so visible: e.g. improved relationships and greater trust leading to better collaboration; increased internal efficiency, stronger national ownership; others are more visible: e.g. improved service delivery or regulatory efficiency.
- Pooling the 'technical assistance' of development partners is already being experimented with. Whether it will create more enabling conditions will depend on how it is made to work in practice. Recipient government officials may find that it provides them greater opportunity to shape how external 'expertise & advice' are made most useful to them. But they may also have doubts about it, if a coordinated donor action leads to greater donor influence. Some individuals may actually prefer a continuation of the 'project' approach, because it offers material and remuneration benefits that otherwise may no longer be available.
- 'Technical cooperation' may need an organizational home in the form of dedicated staff positions or a unit also in the development partner agencies, to enable a focused and evidence- and learning based reflections on the practice.

- Invest much more in the adequate preparation of 'advisers/experts'. Thematic expertise is necessary but by no means sufficient to be an effective adviser. Experts, advisers need to have very strong interpersonal and communication skills, also across organisational and societal cultures; they need to have the situational intelligence to find the most appropriate role and style; they need to know how constructive multi-stakeholder processes are initiated and maintained; they need to have frameworks to understand 'capacities' and 'change processes' with; and they need to be able to be very pragmatic problem-solvers without losing sight of the strategic direction. Even if they have this broader set of competencies, they always will need time to learn the also less visible 'logic' of the environment in which they are deployed. On average it will take a year before they become more effective. Most short-term deployments do not produce value-for-money.

There is however strong 'resistance to change' also in the donor community: As we have seen, there is ample evidence, not only anecdotal but also from evaluations and comprehensive academic research, that the prevailing modus operandi of the 'development partners', certainly with regard to 'technical assistance' and 'institutional reform', is neither very efficient nor very effective in helping recipient governments function better. Notwithstanding, the donors/development partners have proven fairly unable or unwilling (sic) to fundamentally change how they operate. On the contrary, the investment in loans and grants for institutional reform continues to grow. For the World Bank alone, whose own evaluations are an important source of evidence of the limited effectiveness of the dominant approaches, the commitment to public sector reform seems to have increased from some US \$ 2.7 billion in 2000 to US \$ 3.6 billion in 2010. The internal incentives, rewarding 'spending', and 'project evaluations' which tend to report more satisfactory 'results' in the shorter-term, are two contributing factors to this. In short, the deeper underlying 'culture' of international development organisations themselves can lead to robust 'resilience to change'!

Even if the providers of TA are able to improve their modus operandi, there often remain fundamental differences between aid giving and aid recipient countries, which cannot be ignored. Among them:

- Both countries and governments come from very different histories and traditions and have different institutional constraints. This may lead to different perceptions of which changes are desirable and feasible and of how best to achieve them;
- Donor and recipient governments have to satisfy very different 'domestic' constituencies with different expectations and priorities. Aid providers certainly have strong incentives towards a quick disbursement of funds and fairly quickly 'delivering' visible 'results';

- Both donor and recipient governments are also influenced by the need to maintain internal, domestic, political balance, which influences 'policy decisions' with considerations other than 'technical rationality';
- There are and will continue to be situations with very problematic public sectors and governance practices, where trust in the 'country systems' will take years to develop.
- Recipient governments understandably also resent a certain infringement of their sovereignty, and will point out that they are the ones bearing the costs of mistakes.

In addition, many donor countries also pursue political, security and economic interests in the countries and regions to which they provide aid. Some of these are predominantly linked to self-interest, others express a concern with the rights and wellbeing of the populations of the recipient societies. This too will complicate the partnership relationship, at least with the recipient government.

The potential effectiveness of 'technical assistance' in the form of external experts-advisers, will therefore also depend on the quality of the broader relationship between the provider and recipient.

**C. A Broader Range of Competencies among International Experts and Advisers and Different Deployment Modalities.**

This review clearly signals that what an individual or small team of international 'experts' and 'advisers' can contribute, especially in relation to the public administration, is heavily dependent on factors that are largely out of their control. The expectation that 'they' can 'deliver' quick and meaningful and sustained results quickly, may be very unrealistic and set everybody up for frustration – or for a blame game.

At the same time, this review also clearly suggests that there is often room for improved performance of international experts or advisers within the areas under their control and that they can influence. This depends on mastering a broad spectrum of competencies beyond their specific thematic expertise such as: strong interpersonal skills including across different organisational and societal cultures; excellent communication skills; a firm dedication and ability to learn about the 'context' in which they are operating; political economy analysis; understanding of 'participatory governance'; organizational development and change management; knowledge sharing approaches inspired by adult learning principles; a strong learning and creative thinking ability etc. Given that

few individuals will bring all these competencies, it may make more sense to carefully constitute 'advisory teams' with nationals and outsiders, who together can provide the core competencies.

However experienced and competent they are, 'outside' experts still first need time to learn about the environment in which they find themselves and to develop a broad spectrum of good relationships. De default mode should also be a deployment of more than 12 months with possibly a minimum of 24 months; one year or less is simply too short to make a serious contribution beyond the (temporary) hands-on resolution of a specific issue.

Above all, both international 'experts' and 'advisers' and the development partners sending them, need to stop putting all the blame on the national authorities that receive such 'technical assistance'. Part of the problem of limited effectiveness lies in the –persistent- structural deficiencies of the international cooperation practices, and sometimes in the qualities and capabilities of the so-called 'experts'.



**BROAD BASED 'NATIONAL OWNERSHIP'. A perspective.**

- Why is it important? 'National ownership' is positively perceived for its intrinsic value (respects the dignity, sovereignty, confidence of people) or for its more utilitarian value (its ensures greater efficiency and greater sustainability);
- Why did it become a problem? The apparent 'lack of ownership' is partially a problem self-created by the international assistance actors. They may have become so 'dominant' that the national actors indeed have become passive with regard to their own important affairs.
- When will 'ownership' be transferred back to the national actors? The prevailing paradigm is: 'once their capacity has been sufficiently developed to manage their own affairs'. In practice, the pressure for national actors to 'take responsibility' for their own affairs, can arise when the international actors' political interest wanes and they are looking to reduce their footprint or for an exit strategy'.
- Should we not be cautious about bestowing or allowing too much national 'ownership'? After all, a society collapsing into violence was a clear sign it is not able to manage its own affairs constructively, and there can be valid concerns about a genuine lack of capacities, and the risks of political manipulation and/or corruption and embezzlement. This is true, and strong 'national ownership' does not guarantee better performance, but the record of externally driven models, policies and solutions is unfortunately problematic too.
- Who owns? National ownership does not mean only 'government ownership'. Ownership by government or other authorities/leaders is definitely important, but no sustainable improvements will come about without broad-based support, by different interest groups and across all levels of society. This may be less important for decision-making, but is critical for implementation. Broad-based ownership is central for 'internal legitimacy', legitimacy in the eyes of the societal stakeholders.
- Genuine partnership – joint ownership? 'National ownership' has to be more than simple acceptance of external actor models and policies. But it will also not be a situation where development partners are simply funding anything national actors decide. The middle way may have to be 'joint ownership', with joint responsibility and joint accountability (to each other, but also to the citizens).

Assessing ownership: some indicator questions:

- ✓ Who has been involved and how, in analyzing and defining the problem?
- ✓ Who has been involved and how in setting the agenda and the priorities?
- ✓ Who has been involved and how in considering various options and hammering out possible 'solutions' (or at least 'ways forward')?
- ✓ Who has been involved and how in deciding and designing (the law, the policy, the intervention...)?
- ✓ Is there broad-based understanding of the process and its outcomes, among all key stakeholders, within the organization, in government, among the other political and social actors, among other key stakeholders?
- ✓ Is there broad-based support for the developments or changes being initiated? Is there intellectual support? Is there political support?
- ✓ Who determines the speed of the implementation?
- ✓ Do people refer to the developments and changes being initiated and implemented as 'theirs' ('our policy', 'our institution', 'our programme' etc.
- ✓ Is the social and political support sustained also when there is less external funding & external presence?

This box draws on Killick 1998:86 & Van Brabant 2009

---

## SOURCE MATERIALS

A decision was made not to burden this working paper with references in the text, but the author wants to explicitly acknowledge the following sources and resources drawn on, sometimes extensively:

No author 2014: The Doing Development Differently Manifesto. <http://buildingstatecapability.com/the-ddd-manifesto/>

ActionAid International 2006: Real Aid. Making technical assistance work. Johannesburg

Actionaid International 2011: Ending Aid Dependency. Johannesburg

Andrews, M. 2013: The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development. Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press

Chopra, J. 2002: Building State Failure in East Timor. In 'Development and Change' 33(5):979-1000

de Gramont, D. 2014: Beyond Magic Bullets in Governance Reform. Washington D.C., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

de Sardan, O. 2003: State Bureaucracy and Governance in West francophone Africa. Empirical diagnosis, historical perspective. Revised version of paper presented at CODRESRIA colloquium in Dakar in 2003.

de Zeeuw 2005: Projects do not Create Institutions. The record of democracy assistance in post-conflict societies. In 'Democratisation' 12(4): 481-504

European Court of Auditors 2009: The Effectiveness of the Commission's Projects in the Area of Justice and Home Affairs for the Western Balkans. Brussels

European Court of Auditors 2012: European Union Assistance to Kosovo Related to the Rule of Law. Brussels

Foresti, M., T. O'Neill & L. Wild 2013: Making Sense of the Politics of Delivery. London, ODI.

Fritz, V., B. Levy & R. Ort 2014: Problem-Driven Political Economy Analysis. The World Bank's experience. World Bank, Washington D.C.

Hradsky, J. no date: Technical Cooperation: Reviewing the evidence. Learning Network on Capacity Development (LENCD)

Jones, H. 2013: Technical Assistance: How to get value for money. The Guardian Global development professionals network (29 Jan. 2013). <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network>

Killick, T. (with R. Gunatilaka & A. Marr) 1998: Aid and the Political Economy of Policy Change. London / New York, Routledge

Michailof, S. 2007: Review of Technical Assistance and Capacity Building in Afghanistan. Discussion paper for the Afghanistan Development Forum. No place or publisher

OECD DAC 2006: The Challenge of Capacity Development. Working towards good practice. Paris

Odugbemi, S. & Th. Jacobson (eds.) 2008: Governance Reform under Real World Conditions. World Bank, Washington D.D.

Oxford Policy Management 2006: Developing Capacity? An Evaluation of DFID-funded Technical Cooperation for Economic Management in Sub-Saharan Africa. Synthesis report. Oxford

Pearson, J. 2011: Training and Beyond. Seeking better practices for capacity development. Learning Network on Capacity Development. Commissioned by the OECD, Paris

Skott, Z. 2009: Southern Perspectives on Technical Cooperation. Analytical review and annotated bibliography. London, Governance and Social Development Resource Center

Sokol, D. & K. Stiegert 2008: An Empirical Evaluation of Long Term Advisors and Short Term Interventions in Technical Assistance and Capacity Building. Brugge, Global Competition Law Centre

Tavakoli, H., R. Simson, H. Tilley & D. Booth 2013: Unblocking Results. Using aid to address governance constraints in public service delivery. London, ODI

Van Brabant, K. 2009: Local Ownership. An introduction. Working note. Geneva, Interpeace

World Bank 2011: World Development Report 2011. Washington, D.C.

Author: Koenraad Van Brabant. Senior Peacebuilding Advisor. IPAT-Interpeace. December 2014