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**ON THE RECORD. THE LIMITED VALUE-FOR-MONEY OF INTERNATIONAL TECHNICAL  
COOPERATION, CAPACITY-DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM SUPPORT.**

*Effective Advising in Statebuilding and Peacebuilding Contexts – Why*

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'Technical Cooperation' or 'Technical Assistance', mostly 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. A review of the literature signals that there are problems related to the recipients of the external assistance, to the international 'experts' and 'advisors', and to the 'development partners' providing the assistance.

### **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. *Staffed 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);
- e. *Staff turnover*: The capacities of various civil servants, including senior ones, 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;
- f. *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 a new budget (possibly from external sources) nothing can be done;
- *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 creates resentment; sometimes national personnel has been unwilling to take on work previously done by expatriate advisors without extra pay;
- g. *Self-interest based resistance or indifference*: This has been attributed to the political level and to senior management (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'). But it has also been attributed to mid-level managers and other personnel closer to the front-line e.g. local authorities or local level public service providers, who will have to implement changes and reforms. If they are not 'on board', they may block actual implementation;
- h. *The 'informal' practices override the 'formal' image* of how the institution is said to be structured and supposed to work: 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 operate according to a logic, but one that is different from the one prescribed by the formal procedures;

- i. *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;
- j. *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);
- k. *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 resources, and 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.
- l. *Discussing with outside experts rather than with domestic constituencies*: The reliance on outside experts and advisors 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;
- m. *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;
- n. *National actors make 'visible' but 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; 'form' does not translate into 'function'.

## **B. Problems Related to the International 'Experts' and 'Advisors'.**

- 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.
- d. *Poor interpersonal and relational skills*: They know their subject, but are weak in developing 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', so do not spend the additional (and in the short term expensive) 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 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;
- 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 much 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 (already the choice of language for the report can be a barrier) for the national actors;
- 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 by other 'experts' and 'advisors' 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 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 this is not the case in the ‘home institutions’. But ‘technical’ solutions cannot address what are often social and political problems.
- b. *Largely ignoring context:* There is limited de facto 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. *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;
- d. *Project thinking:* Extensively pre-designed 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;
- e. *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;
- f. *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;
- g. *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’;
- h. *Weak donor- coordination:* e.g. in relation to material assistance and ‘advisory’ services: Different donors provide different types of equipment (e.g. vehicles) to the same national entity, complicating servicing and maintenance; advisors from different donors may be giving different and even contradictory advice – which may even occur with successive advisors deployed by the same donor;
- i. *Technical assistance remains overpriced:* Particularly expatriate experts/advisors are expensive because of salaries and 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.

- j. *Ambiguous and problematic accountabilities*: Whereas technical assistance advisors 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.
- k. *No capacity-related performance expectations*: There are rarely performance expectations and indicators related to 'capacity strengthening'.

This is an extract from:

Van Brabant, K. 2014: Value for Money. The overall record of technical assistance for institutional and governance reform. Geneva, Interpeace-IPAT

*Referencing: Effective Advising in Statebuilding and Peacebuilding Contexts – Why. On the record. The limited value of technical cooperation. Geneva, Interpeace-IPAT 2015.*