

Paradoxical successes, expected failures

Development projects in Africa

By Helmut Asche

aid

Extensive research has been conducted into economic development and the international aid that is meant to ensure its progress. Although development aid is not a bona fide Africa topic in research, it is an important part of socioeconomic life in almost all the 55 African states. Libraries are filled with studies on development, emergency or humanitarian aid and their transitional forms. They have still not convincingly shown why development policy has become a permanent feature of modern societies since the 1950s and an established field of governmental policy alongside, say, trade or defence. However, it is clear that despite fundamental criticism from many sides, development aid has generated an entire institutional landscape which extends deep into the civil societies of the Global North and the Global South.

Even if the mandated term for what the rest of the world knows simply as “aid” is “Entwicklungszusammenarbeit” (development cooperation) in the German-speaking world, suggesting an equal footing, the fundamental imbalance between donors and recipients is still inherent. That doesn’t mean that individual development projects cannot be successful. If a country uses development aid to drill a well, it might work out, provided that maintenance is in place and unintended side effects do not counter the impact. Accordingly, reports from practically all donor organisations across all sectors worldwide show a success rate for aid projects of 66–75% – a phenomenon which I coined some time ago as “the iron law of development success”. Frustratingly, it is very rare that this leads to corresponding macroeconomic development which lifts the recipient countries to a new level of self-sustained growth. The result is

what Mosley back in 1987 called the micro-macro paradox: successes at the technical micro level, but no significant progress at the macro level, despite some measurable effects on growth. As this finding cannot be easily ignored, reform efforts in the past decades have taken at least three directions.

Small-scale and competitive

The typical microeconomic form of international aid is still the individual “project”, which describes an external intervention limited in terms of time, space, goals and resources. During the early stages of reform efforts, the first direction taken by aid organisations was to bundle projects either as sectoral or intersectoral programmes in order to increase impact, for example in integrated rural development. When numerous developing countries went bankrupt at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, entire reform programmes were imposed on them as a condition for continued aid. The most important were the structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, whose partly indispensable, partly radically market-biased packages of measures still exist today under different names, often as poverty alleviation programmes. Despite all reform efforts in the direction of programme, sector or budget aid, the “project” has remained the archetype of international aid. Successes have remained mixed, partly because donor coordination in such programmes has made only modest progress. Although most development agencies are not market actors but government agencies, competition between the donors themselves remains a key feature of development aid.

Participation and ownership

Secondly, an entire series of international summits, from Paris in 2005 and Accra in 2008 to Busan in 2011, has attempted to change the ownership structure of development aid projects and programmes. In theory, the principles of *ownership* and *partnership* should ensure that national stakeholders are involved on an equal footing. Donor coordination should also ideally be carried out by local partners. With the exception of a few, very self-confident *developmental states* such as Rwanda or, until recently, Ethiopia, this has only been moderately successful on an international scale, as donors are reluctant to relinquish their authority and prefer to pursue their domestic political agenda.

Ownership & Partnership

The outdated *logical framework approach* formerly adopted by the military as a planning instrument was the typical methodology of external project planning from the top down, in which partner institutions and recipients had an associated role at best. In the course of development reforms, the *logical framework approach* has long since been replaced by “participation” in planning and implementation. However, the fundamental imbalance has remained. It is not the donors who participate in projects developed locally but vice versa: in practice, participation means that of local stakeholders in third-party projects. In this issue (page 42), Melina Kalfelis analyses the neo-colonial working conditions that result from this and reveals how much the perception of temporal and procedural processes differ on both sides of NGO partnerships. Social anthropologists such as Behrends, Bierschenk, Rottenburg and others have described the continuing tradition of foreign narratives being imposed on local development realities – originally in relation to conflict management projects in Africa – as *travelling models*. In almost all cases, the journey only goes from north to south.

Developmental States

Logical Framework

Improvements in evaluation but no ideal solution

Thirdly, development aid in the last decades has attempted to make fewer mistakes in the socio-technical design of projects through more methodologically elaborate evaluation. Systematic comparison with situations that are as similar as possible but without project intervention makes it possible to identify attributable effects more precisely and ascertain which approach is the most effective. Such *randomised controlled trials* have also made their way into development aid in the last decades, although German development aid has lagged behind in this regard. The study on *community-driven development* in The Gambia by Matthias Schündeln and co-authors (page 38) and funded by the World Bank is very enlightening here, as it describes a key element of the “resource curse” that massive subsidies from outside can bring with them: growing social inequality.

Travelling Models

Nevertheless, few would regard *randomised controlled trials* as the only true standard of evaluation, as they are hardly applicable to nationwide programmes or to national policy advice. Today, a comprehensive *theory of change* is required to better describe intended and unin-

Theory of Change

tended effects, among others. Something else is more important: Olivier de Sardan has astutely analysed that typical projects and especially projects steered by *randomised controlled trials* try to conceal different contexts as far as possible in favour of uniform measures – until what he called *La revanche des contextes*, which is also the title of his seminal work from 2021, catches up with them. There is apparently no ideal solution in conventional development aid.

La revanche des contextes

Is it time for a radical rethink?

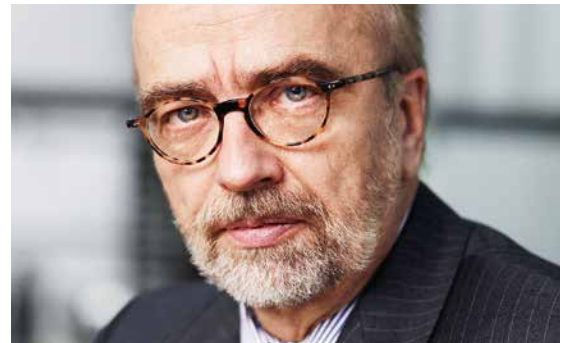
What are the radical alternatives? Turning *community-driven development* upside down and rethinking it properly could be a solution. Take a recent, strategically important example: the countries of the Central Sahel – Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad – are facing an existential crisis triggered by the interaction of external and internal threats. The military strategy of combating terrorism dominated here by France has been just as unsuccessful as in Afghanistan, and its interconnectedness with conventional civil aid, as described above, has also failed to restore peace in society.

Randomised Controlled Trials

A group from the Association for African Studies in Germany, with the significant participation of researchers from Goethe University Frankfurt, including the anthropologist Hans Peter Hahn, has summarised their diverse research results and experience in the proposition for a necessary “reversal of the stakeholder’s perspective”: since the central state and the established political classes in the Sahel have

Community- Driven Development

largely failed, it is primarily solutions on the ground, resulting from negotiations between local stakeholders and including armed groups, which promise a break-through in this desperate situation. They can and must be supported – but not managed – by international cooperation. Of course, this too does not offer a panacea. ●



The author

Professor Helmut Asche, born in 1951, is an economist and sociologist. From 1986 to 1998, he was government advisor in Burkina Faso, Rwanda and Kenya. Since 2000, he has worked at the GTZ headquarters (now GIZ) in Eschborn, most recently as regional chief economist for Africa. From 2006 to 2011, he was professor at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Leipzig. From 2004 to 2008, he was a member of the Advisory Board of the Centre for Interdisciplinary African Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt. In 2012, Asche was appointed by the Federal Government as director of the newly founded German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) in Bonn. Since 2011, Asche has also taught as an honorary professor at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at the University of Mainz. He recently published “Regional Integration, Trade and Industry in Africa” (Heidelberg 2021) in the book series “Advances in African Economic, Social and Political Development”.

asche@uni-mainz.de