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**Development on my terms: development consultants and knowledge for
development**

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Summary

Consultants are an integral component of development aid. Their involvement is based on an assumption of the transferability of knowledge to clients and beneficiaries. However this role, its efficacy and the concept of knowledge transfer have all been questioned. While research has shown interest in northern development consultants in recent years, detailed processes and practices of southern consultants' engagement with knowledge production are less analysed. Drawing on debates about knowledge, power and managing development interventions, and on extensive fieldwork exploring a Bolivian consultancy company's assignments for northern development agencies, we analyse the 'knowledge engagements' between clients, consultants and beneficiaries. The results suggest a novel theorisation: knowledge engagements are shaped by power relations exercised through discourses and financial aid on one hand and shared and unshared lifeworlds and backgrounds of actors on the other. They are also characterised by collusive behaviour with the discourses and practices of aid on the part of consultants and beneficiaries, which in turn influences outcomes. Southern consultants, although aware of these issues, are in a difficult position to challenge these relationships. A greater recognition of the tensions could lead to a new role for

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consultants if collective action were to renegotiate their terms of engagement and aim for a new mutuality.

Key words: collusion, consultants, development aid, knowledge, lifeworlds, power relations, resistance.

1. Introduction

Consultants play a significant role in development aid. In 2004, the International NGO, ActionAid (2006: 3), calculated that about 25% of donor budgets were spent on consultancy, research and training ‘despite a growing body of evidence that technical assistance is often over-priced and ineffective, and in the worst cases destroys rather than builds the capacity of the poorest countries’. A more recent report by Easterly and Pfutze (2008: 22) noted the lack of transparent data in ascertaining how much is spent on employment in aid, including on consultants. While noting the anomalies (in terminology and data) in reporting the use of technical assistance (TA)² or technical co-operation, Easterly and Pfutze nevertheless produce figures on the proportion of aid provided through these means. Some of the highest include 42% in Belgium, 47% in Germany, 43% in the United States, and 58% in Australia (ibid).³

² Easterly and Pfutze (2008: 21) cite the OECD definition of technical assistance: ‘activities whose primary purpose is to augment the level of knowledge, skills, technical know-how or productive aptitudes of the population of developing countries’.

³ In 2011-2012, the Department for International Development (DfID, 2012: 13) spent about £528million, or 13% of its bilateral budget, on technical co-operation. As defined by DfID (2012: 124), ‘Technical Co-operation ... covers primarily: consultancies: the provision of assistance to recipient countries in the form of contracted specialists; knowledge and research: ... grants for agreed programmes of research and development at UK institutions; ... training and scholarships’.

Thus although the precise data are unclear, the use of consultants in international development is now commonplace. Consultancy is also ubiquitous in many other kinds of change management. In particular, management consulting is intended to provide an objective and independent input, helping clients to identify problems, analyse them and recommend solutions (Sadler, 2001: 30). Consultants may perform a number of roles: executive roles, researchers, tutors, conciliators, synergists, powerbrokers, coaches and mediators (Curnow and Reuvid, 2003: 16; Høivik and Føllesdal, 1995: 170). They are often employed to help with the content or structure of many types of management tasks, not necessarily doing the tasks themselves but helping and training those who are (Kubr, 2002: 3).

In development aid, the use of consultants goes back to the use of ‘experts’ in the 1950s, chosen for their technical competence and their ‘sympathetic understanding of the natural backgrounds and specific needs of the countries to be assisted’ (Goldschmidt, 1959: 54-55). In more recent times, they perform a range of roles and tasks including assessments, evaluations, advisory work, training and running programmes (Cohen, 1992), and provide services that an organisation does not itself have the capacity to carry out.

Above all, in development, consultants work as knowledge producers and knowledge brokers, often being contracted by development agencies to produce knowledge about interventions and projects being funded. There has been a growing and critical literature on this activity – for example: Hirschman (2003); Lewis and Mosse ed. (2006); Mosse (2005); Mosse and Lewis ed. (2005); Mosse ed. (2011); Stirrat (2000); Wilson (2007); Wood (1998). A particular focus is on the production and role of knowledge in development, and on how expert knowledge is produced and reproduced for and by

development agencies, particularly through research, monitoring and evaluation. This literature has also focused on the role played by the technologies (Latour, 2005) used in influencing the processes and outcomes of development consultancy (Lewis and Mosse, 2005).

However, there is still relatively limited analysis of (i) the dynamics of the relationship between consultants, clients and beneficiaries⁴ in knowledge production; and (ii) whether southern consultants are able to grapple with the challenges differently from those from the North. In considering the difference between technical advisers and consultants, a notable and illuminating early contribution that also straddles the two issues identified above, is the ethnographic account of the relationship between a technical adviser from a ministry, peasant farmers and ministry officials in Mexico by Arce and Long (1992). Nonetheless there are questions that still need exploring, for example: what relationships are established between southern consultants, clients and beneficiaries? how is knowledge produced and ‘transferred’? on what and on whose terms? for what purposes and for whose agenda? what can new understandings offer policy and practice?

In this article, we pursue these questions by examining the roles and relationships of consultants, clients and beneficiaries in the sharing and production of knowledge (knowledge engagements). The fieldwork focused on a national consultancy company in Bolivia, contracted by international development organisations because of its claimed areas of expertise and knowledge of the national context. The article is based on extensive data that were gathered in Bolivia, in rural Cochabamba and in the capital city

⁴ We use the term beneficiary in this article because it is the most common term in the development assistance discourse.

of La Paz, between August 2006 and May 2007. The data included interviews with consultants, clients and beneficiaries, and observation of formal and informal meetings, workshops and other activities carried out by consultants.

The authors of this article are Bolivian and British nationals respectively, both having experience of working and researching with grassroots organisations. Although ethnographic approaches were used in the research, we are looking at the situation from relative and different distances from the actors concerned. We have explored the development field from a critical academic standpoint that enabled us to approach the study of knowledge engagements and relations between consultants, clients and beneficiaries in a reflective way, with the aim of contributing to policy as well as academic debates. The issues raised in the research are as current and relevant today as they were in 2007 and continue to be challenges for consultants in development.

Analysis and interpretation of the data collected were guided by an open coding process partly informed by a conceptual approach that combined the insights of Foucault and Habermas on power and regimes of truth in the case of the former, and the role of lifeworlds and background consensus in communication in the case of the latter. Both Foucault and Habermas have influenced the critical development and critical management literature for more than two decades. This article continues to acknowledge the contribution of Foucault's and Habermas's ideas in helping understand how power is exercised and resisted, and the importance of lifeworlds and shared background in communication and knowledge production. However, it goes beyond the original analysis (explained in Borda-Rodriguez, 2008) to suggest that there is an action space between power and contestation and resistance on one hand and the role played by shared/unshared backgrounds or lifeworlds, on the other. These two different but

complementary explanations of how knowledge is produced, and for whom, provide a framework for understanding the relations between clients, consultants and beneficiaries. The data show that the power relations between clients, consultants and beneficiaries are mediated by the extent to which lifeworlds and backgrounds are shared, leading to more or less productive knowledge engagements. However the data also show that there are additional – structural and material – dimensions which lead to collusive behaviours, and which play an important role in shaping outcomes.

We structure the article as follows. Section 2 situates literature on consultants in recent debates about the management of development. In Section 3, we outline the context of aid and consultancy in Bolivia. We then examine two consultancy assignments carried out by the Bolivian Consultancy Company (henceforth BCC). Section 4 analyses data from an extreme case leading to an unproductive knowledge engagement combined with collusive behaviour, while Section 5 looks at a case which, on the surface, suggests a more productive outcome. However the outcome in this case is also ultimately shaped by collusion with aid discourse and practices. Section 6 reflects on both cases in the light of the literature as well as the authors' own observations and draws some conclusions.

2. Knowledge, power and practice: implications for development consultancy

How and what knowledge for development is produced, who controls it and how it is used has been a focal point of much debate. In development studies, literature has focused on the recognition of 'beneficiary' or subjects' knowledge (for example, Chambers, 1997; Long and Long, 1992; Richards, 1985), as well as how it is obtained, 'translated' (Lewis and Mosse, 2005) and used in function of particular agendas (Ferguson, 1990/94).

Knowledge tends to be conceptualised in two main ways: as a product or good that can simply be transferred (knowledge transfer), and as a process in which social relations and communication between actors play a central role (knowledge production) (Borda-Rodriguez, 2008). The first conception has been criticised in several ways, but most particularly along the grounds as to whose knowledge is being transferred, created in function of what prior knowledge (and in what historical and cultural setting), and for what purpose; and because of the challenge of transferring tacit knowledge gained through experience that is historically and culturally located (ibid). By contrast, the second conception aims to take into account the historical, social and power dynamics of knowledge production (ibid; Johnson and Wilson, 2009).

These conceptions inform discussion about consultants. For example, Stirrat (2000) argues that consultants represent western modernity and ways of thinking about the world which have continuities with colonial administration (a point also made by Kothari [2006]). The consultant is the embodiment of rational thought applied to development problems. In this respect, indigenous knowledge is only taken into account when it maps on to so-called rational thought (Stirrat, 2000: 39). Other literature argues that because of their expertise and the clients they tend to represent, consultants are able to legitimise political agendas and discourses (Hilhorst et al, 2012). In both business management and development management, consultants can be employed to legitimise strategic intents (Cox, 2009: 222), as well as existing power relations, particularly as they are accountable to the client rather than the subjects and beneficiaries of client activities (Sturdy, 2009). In development, Bevan (2000: 304) has argued that ‘more equal relationships between responsible donors, responsible governments, responsible brokers and responsible consultants’ are required.

However, critical studies literature (for example, Dar and Cooke, 2008) has questioned the ability of development – specifically development management – to bring about such changes to power relations. It is argued that development management is imbued with a global managerialism, which promotes a command and control philosophy that contradicts empowerment goals. This critique calls for a ‘new development management’ while other critics have argued that development management must ‘embrace politics’ (McCourt and Gulrajani, 2010: 84). More recently, Gulrajani (2011: 213) observed that ‘Foreign aid needs to be informed by both a radical’s sensitivity to aid’s latent potential to do harm and a reformist’s conviction of its potential to be made more effective.’ Other writers (in McCourt and Johnson eds., 2012) have questioned whether and how the means of development can have emancipatory ends, and what roles development managers, including consultants, can play.

These debates are longstanding. Bell (1994) argued that development aid facilitates the uncritical application of western mindsets and methodologies. A decade later Curtis (2004) questioned the lack of reflective behaviour amongst aid workers, while Giri and Quarles van Ufford (2004) argued that the development of others requires, above all, development of the self. In the mid-2000s, there were further contributions from anthropology. Mosse’s (2005) analysis of a decade-long engagement as a consultant with a development project in India showed how those involved in the project both created areas of autonomy as well as sustaining the models within which they worked (ibid., p.10). The role of the consultants as described in this project was largely information gathering, analysis and interpretation, and translation to donors (as in Wood, 1998). Consultants therefore had a direct role in knowledge production and also gained knowledge themselves, which could further be used in their own work and

research. These issues were explored further through ethnographic accounts of aid and intervention in Mosse and Lewis (2005) and Lewis and Mosse (2006), which, in addition, followed Latour and actor-network theory in demonstrating the role of development technologies in reproducing aid hierarchies, agendas and particular kinds of knowledge and control over knowledge.

However such processes are not monolithic. McKinnon (2008) focuses on development professionals more broadly (as does Stirrat, 2008) to argue that development processes are ongoing sites of struggle between different hegemonies, creating the possibility of a 'post-development practice' that is continuous and contingent (McKinnon, 2008: 782). Research on spaces for new thinking and action has contributed further to these debates. Examples include Cornwall and Coelho (eds. 2007), while resistance to particular models of governmentality is also raised in Gould (2005) in Mosse and Lewis, and Bebbington et al (2007) demonstrate the challenges to professed empowerment goals in a nuanced analysis of organisational cultures and practices in a multi-actor intervention in Bangladesh.

Much recent literature has borrowed from and been informed by both Foucault and Habermas. There are some obvious reasons. Foucault (1980: 112, 131) is concerned with the exercise of power and its circulation in society through 'regimes of truth' or dominant discourses. Dominant discourses are however continually contested, resisted and re-negotiated (ibid: 112,142), allowing alternatives to emerge. By contrast, Habermas analyses how individuals use a range of communicative tools and skills to produce and establish social relationships; central to this process is human beings' shared material and cultural worlds, which are subject to technical, hermeneutic and emancipatory interests (Habermas, 1972, 1976a), the last two of these being the basis

for communicative action (ibid, 1984). However, in development interventions, cultural and material worlds are typically very different between interveners and intervened. In these circumstances, the ‘stock of skills, competences and knowledge’ (Edgar, 2006:89) – or ‘lifeworlds’ (Habermas, 1976b) – of interveners may be insufficient to the task in hand. In other words, there may be insufficient ‘background consensus’ (Fischer, 2003).

Although Foucault has been criticised for using rigid analytical categories (Jones and Fowles, 1984: 113), and Habermas’s theory of communicative action is said to be intellectualist and unrealistic (Alvesson, 1996: 145), both have been highly influential because they provide complementary theoretical tools to analyse the macro level of development assistance where regimes of truth are constructed, and the micro level of the field where knowledge is produced and communicated between different actors. However, as indicated in the Introduction, our interest is in the action space between power, contestation and resistance on one hand and the role of different backgrounds and lifeworlds on the other. As we found from the fieldwork, there are different kinds of collusion for both unproductive and productive knowledge engagements which consultants, especially because of their short-term assignments and commercial interests, are structurally challenged to change. We now take this argument forward, reflecting further on the field data gathered in 2006-2007 in Bolivia.

3. The political economy of aid in Bolivia

Bolivia’s historical political context has been characterised by its combined and uneven development (Webber 2011) that has perpetuated power elites since colonisation.

Uneven development is also indicated by great inequality and extreme income differences within the population. In 2012, Bolivia had an estimated population of nearly 11 million people, 55% of which are Amerindian (Quechua, Aymara and 34

other ethnic groups), 30% Mestizo and 15% White (INE, 2013). In Bolivia, power elites have historically been formed by professionals of European descent, who, besides sharing the same nationality with the rest of the population (i.e. Quechua and Aymara nations), have very little in common culturally and historically with them. Since the agricultural revolution in the early 1950s, which resulted in the first agrarian reform, to the main structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s, the tensions and differences between power elites and native nations has been present. These disparities have been embedded across all social strata including the development aid arena, where expertise has been typically dominated by European descendants and foreign development experts.

Bolivia started to receive development aid in the form of Technical Assistance (TA) in the early 1950s after the United Nations made explicit its intention to contribute to the prosperity and economic development of poor countries (Berg, 1993; Buron, 1966). In 1951, Bolivia signed one of the very first TA agreements with the UN ‘to promote social progress, better standards of living and increase the welfare and happiness of Bolivian people’ (UN, 1951).

Between 1950 and 1970 development projects had a focus on infrastructure and agriculture (CARE, 1976). The terms ‘experts’ and ‘specialists’ were gradually replaced in the early 1990s by ‘development consultants’. According to interviewees (fieldwork 2006-2007), ‘development consultancy’ became a consolidated service sector in Bolivia during the 1980s when NGOs mushroomed rapidly. The major economic and social programmes implemented in the 1980s (structural adjustment programmes) and 1990s (market liberalisation) allowed the emergence of a professional service sector that provided knowledge services to national NGOs, development aid agencies and

international organisations, most of which have offices across Bolivia (such as those in this article). Between 1998 and 2002, Bolivia received US\$ 614 million annually in official aid from donations and soft loans, increasing to US\$ 766.6 million in 2007 and reducing to US\$ 676 million in 2011⁵; the World Bank alone has funded over 10,000 development projects between 1947 to May 2012⁶.

During the 2000s, the protests of left-wing indigenous movements against the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and petroleum companies set the stage for the victory of Evo Morales who, as Bolivia's first indigenous president, took office in 2006. Despite the radical changes in the national political landscape, the power structure in development aid circuits remained intact (Orellana, 2007). The political context prior to and after the victory of Evo Morales did not substantially affect development consultancy companies or the relationship with aid agencies, whose work continued in much the same way.

The subject of this case study – a Bolivian consultancy company (BCC)⁷ – was set up in the late 1980s. It is a commercial organisation and works for national and international development agencies. BCC's services include project evaluations; capacity building and training; and research and surveys. A claimed strength is knowledge of farming and the rural economy. BCC is one of the most prominent development consultancy companies in Bolivia, and frequently participates in public national tendering processes for the provision of development consultancy services, including the assignments explored in this article.

⁵ <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.CD>; accessed 20th May 2012.

⁶ <http://data.worldbank.org/country/bolivia>; accessed May 22 2012.

⁷ All names of organisations have been changed.

Two of BCC's assignments were researched. In the first, BCC was hired by a European NGO (ENGO) to train farmers and rural artisans, organised in associations, to become small entrepreneurs. In the second assignment, BCC was contracted by a European Government Agency (EGA) to train the employees of a national counterpart - a human rights organisation - in the use of the Logical Framework Approach (LFA). In what follows, we discuss the first assignment (Section 4) as an extreme case (Yin, 1994) of collusion leading to an unproductive knowledge engagement. This collusion comes about through the spaces and tensions between the client, consultants and beneficiaries, in which the consultants carry out an assignment even though they know it is problematic and in which the collusion by the beneficiaries is also a form of covert resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004) towards the client. The second case (Section 5) demonstrates how shared lifeworlds or background can be used to support a productive knowledge engagement. However this engagement is also collusive in a different way, reinforcing discourses and practices in the aid chain: the apparent relatively equal relations between client, consultants and beneficiary, and the shared backgrounds and lifeworlds which provide a good basis for communication. These provide a space for consolidating the discourses of development assistance in ways that leave the underlying tensions hidden from view. We use these examples to launch a broader discussion of the issues and challenges for consultants.

4. Power, lifeworlds, contestation and collusion: Assignment 1

We look first at the assignment in which the BCC consultants were working with farmer and artisan associations. In this assignment, we examine the perspectives of each of the three actors: the client; the consultancy company; and the farmers and artisans.

The client's perspective

ENGO is a Brussels-based NGO that supports development projects in several African and South American countries. It has a particular interest in the development of movements capable of transforming the economic and social spheres of farmers and artisans in rural areas. Through its local office in Bolivia, it has provided financial support for Bolivian Indigenous Economic Associations (Organizaciones Económicas Campesinas, Indígenas y Originarias de Bolivia or OECAs), and had been doing this for 10 years at the time of the research.

OECAs are groups of small producers that seek to improve their living conditions. They are organised as unions and are highly politicised. According to the national association of OECAs, they arose from the struggle of indigenous people to achieve economic self-determination in the context of a capitalist market economy which was perceived as benefiting only a small number of families⁸. Currently there are 778 OECAs, representing more than a million, mostly indigenous families across Bolivia, with the largest single proportion in the Andean region (47%), the remainder living in the valleys (27%) and the lowlands and tropical areas (26%). By far the largest number of OECAs (87%) is dedicated to traditional activities such as agriculture and livestock, with the remaining 13% in the artisan sector, forestry, fish-farming, ecotourism, and processing agricultural produce, among which ‘bio’ products are becoming increasingly important⁹. OECAs’ stated core aim is to improve their income and living standards by commercialising their produce and enhancing value-added in the production of crafts. In order to achieve this aim, OECAs operate in a communitarian form, building co-operation between the associations and farm families. However in the

⁸ <http://www.cioecbolivia.org/>; accessed 14th March 2012.

⁹ <http://www.cioecbolivia.org/>; accessed 25th May 2012.

last two decades, OECAs have experienced some limitations which, as perceived by development agencies, are related to their lack of adequate knowledge of production processes, marketing and leadership, limiting their capacity to grow in economic terms.

ENGO aimed to assist OECAs by hiring BCC consultants to provide training and capacity building. ENGO has the perspective that development is a long-term process and had been providing funds and development assistance to farmers for over ten years with the intention of promoting the transition of OECAs into independent small entrepreneurs. According to the national representative:

‘ENGO wants to consolidate economic agents in the rural areas of Bolivia. The strategy to achieve this goal consists of providing funds and development assistance (e.g. training) to OECAs in rural areas. We want them to be capable of competing in national and international markets. We want to transform rural farm families into small enterprises.’

Behind this stated agenda was the following perspective:

‘In organisational terms, the setting up of OECAs has been heavily influenced by left-wing unions. OECAs operate under the same political principles that traditional unions do. These are the practices and political views that are limiting and undermining their own development’ (National Representative).

Moreover:

‘OECAs lack qualified human resources. At the moment they are incapable of having a critical view of their own conditions. Farmer leaders and farm families

are not educated and therefore lack knowledge and understanding of what is good for them' (ibid).

ENGO's long term perspective on development was strongly influenced by its particular mission as a development organization; it also acknowledged the power of its resources:

'I personally don't know of any ...counterpart ...in the world that does not rely on our financial support. Even the biggest counterparts in Africa need our financial and technical support' (ibid).

Alongside the financial support, ENGO hired BCC consultants intermittently throughout 3 years to train OECA's in production processes and business management. Central assumptions were that BCC consultants would have the right expertise to train the farmers because of their declared strengths in farming and rural economy and that there would be some commonalities with the beneficiaries because of their shared national context. The National Representative's perception of the consultants' work was as follows:

'I believe [BCC] consultants have done a good job. The methodology they've used to build the capacity of OECA's has proven to be effective. Modules, workshops, follow-ups and personal assistance from consultants to farm families have achieved their goal.'

In summary thus far, ENGO had a particular agenda in Bolivia (to support the creation of small entrepreneurs) and a clear idea of the role that the consultants were to play in this process.

We now turn to the perceptions of the consultants and the beneficiaries about this agenda and the assumptions behind it.

The consultants' perspective

As part of ENGO's development assistance, the consultants proceeded to run workshops and group activities with the OECAs. However, differently from ENGO's perceptions, after 3 of years of training BCC's annual report stated that out of a total of 262 members trained across in 32 OECAs, only 3% were implementing what they had learnt in the training workshops and group activities, 33% were making partial use of the training, and 64% were not using anything. Their explanation was as follows.

First, according to the consultants, it appeared as if ENGO did not take into account the OECAs' union base:

‘[ENGO] didn't realise that OECAs are actually real unions. In Bolivia, unions are highly politicised groups of individuals that hold critical views on western capitalism’ (BCC consultant_3).

Second, BCC consultants had the impression that ENGO did not understand the social context in which OECAs are embedded and the challenges involved in transforming family farms into rural enterprises. Some of the challenges included: (i) OECA members not being fluent speakers of Spanish. Thus they struggled to understand the training sessions (‘[ENGO] and [BCC] didn't understand that OECAs are mainly constituted by farmers that live in rural areas where levels of schooling are very low’ BCC Consultant_2); (ii) OECA members have a collective view of themselves which differs from the individualistic development view of ENGO (‘Farmers are used to think[ing] as a group [...] they don't think in an individual form’ BCC Consultant_5).

However, at the same time, the project encouraged members to question the usefulness of the OECAs. Thus, in the course of the training, the BCC consultants emphasised the need for members of OECAs to operate individually and leave behind their collective organisation. This was indeed having an effect; one consultant explained:

‘Farmers and artisans have participated in workshops, and are coming to realize that they can operate outside their associations. Now that project has taught them how to design a budget, how to plan and organize their production and so forth. Attendees are starting to reconsider the usefulness of being associated when they can pursue their own individual development’ (BCC Consultant_5).

This situation was thus quite complex from the consultants’ perspective. On one hand, they were aware that carrying out training in the OECA members’ second language was not optimal, and, in addition, was going against the traditions and the political nature of the OECAs. On the other hand, the consultants were carrying out the agenda of the client, ENGO, in trying to develop small entrepreneurs. The consultants were able to articulate and critically reflect on these issues, and on the problems of ENGO’s agenda, but it did not stop them carrying out the agenda. As observed by two different consultants:

‘I am convinced that everyone is trying to do their best to keep their jobs and also achieve sustainable results. However there are so many mismatches and wrong-thought projects that it will not be difficult to come up with a list of things that donors and agencies need to change. Do I want to do that? No I don’t’ (BCC Consultant_26).

‘We are [BCC] consultants that work for different clients... We as consultants have to operate under their rules... We know that [BCC] works under the rules and norms imposed by clients’ (BCC Consultant_28).

Keeping their jobs, building up the company and being paid are obviously fundamental to a commercial organisation. It seems that the collusion that this situation engenders (see also, for example, Mosse, 2005; Wood, 1998), is structurally embedded in client-consultancy relationships, limiting contestation and resistance and productive knowledge engagements with clients and beneficiaries, a point to which we return.

The beneficiaries’ perspective

To interrogate the beneficiaries’ views, we focus on the interactions between members and consultants in two OECAs. The first was set up in 1999, and is an artisanal association of approximately 600 rural families, most of whom are home-based artisans producing hand-crafted ornaments. The artisanal association receives funds from ENGO, as well as other development organisations, and members were strongly encouraged by ENGO to attend the workshops run by the BCC consultants. The second OECA, is a milk marketing association that brings together milk producers from rural areas near the city of Cochabamba. It has also received funds and development assistance from ENGO for over ten years.

The two associations are typical of many OECAs. On the one hand they are unions or quasi-unions. On the other hand, they are heavily reliant on funds from development organisations and present themselves as associations of farmers/artisans to secure the funding relationship.

From the OECAs' perspectives, training sessions with the consultants were designed with an implicit disregard of the OECAs' prior knowledge of production and commercialisation. In other words, consultants proceeded as if OECAs had no knowledge about the issues being addressed in the workshops. Farmers and artisans had been engaged in production and distribution of their own products for several decades and thus had knowledge and expertise on how to organise and sell their output. They did not have formal academic education about business management but they had tacit knowledge. However the BCC consultants did not seem to take into account, or perhaps ignored the fact that OECAs had tacit and experiential knowledge in these areas. The language along with the terminology used by consultants did not allow farmers and artisans to build on their existing knowledge. As one member of the artisanal association noted:

'[BCC] consultants were teaching us how to budget and organise our production; they assumed that we didn't know how to do it. We are artisans and we have some knowledge of it. It was very irritating to see how the consultants were introducing themselves as experts. They don't know how we do things' (Artisan_3).

Others mentioned:

'The consultants used participatory methodologies, but it was like hollow participation...at the end, we would recite the concepts without understanding them' (Artisan_1).

'We were told that these methodologies and theories were important for us. Consultants made us understand the importance of learning things about

business management. I only had one problem. I couldn't understand well the content of the workshops, nor could I share it with the other members of the OECA' (Artisan_2).

'The way in which the workshops were run assumed that the association was already an enterprise...However...it is an association that operates with a union dynamic' (Farmer_4).

These statements highlight the dilemmas for the OECAs and their relationships with funders and with the types of knowledge engagement designed for them by ENGO and the consultants. They were also caught between wanting external funding and therefore agreeing to the training, while the training and its content were not determined by them. Moreover, the relationship between funding and agency requirements posed even bigger strategic issues for OECAs:

'In my community there are almost 20 international NGOs and development aid agencies doing the same work. We have to decide who to work with. Sometimes they ask us to commit to attend or apply X and Y methodology...Sometimes we feel it is too much so we have to choose carefully who we can work with' (Artisan_4).

Summary

In summary, we have posited this assignment as an example of an extreme case in which the client has resource-based power exercised through a particular agenda and discourse, strongly influencing the consultants' and beneficiaries' engagement. The result is collusion on both parts in what was an unproductive knowledge engagement.

To unpack this observation further, BCC consultants were hired because of their contextual knowledge, which could be seen as a stepping stone towards shared lifeworlds. This assumption was expressed not just by the client, but also the consultants:

‘Bolivia has a highly politicised social environment. From farmers in rural areas to teachers, they are all politicised individuals. Therefore, local consultants are in a better position to engage with development beneficiaries’ (BCC consultant_12).

Paradoxically, however, in spite of their awareness that not all was well with the assignment, the consultants were structurally caught up in a chain and bound in turn by their own commercial needs. In addition the OECAs also colluded with the client’s agenda because they wanted to maintain their access to funding, and as pointed out above, were having to weigh up how many times they had the capacity to collude or comply. The OECAs’ collusion in this case was a form of covert resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004): an undisclosed agenda on the part of the OECAs which drove them to behave as though the knowledge engagements with the consultants would lead to positive (productive) outcomes. Such unproductive knowledge engagements are a common story in development, however unpicking the perspectives and dynamics reveals how the space between the power/contestation/resistance dimension and the shared lifeworld/shared background/communication dimension, is acted on collusively by both consultants and beneficiaries. Moreover it creates a tension which is as difficult to challenge for southern consultancy organisations as it is for those in the North because of the aid chain which consultants are a part of, and from which they make a living.

5. The politics of development assistance: Assignment 2

Of course there are conditions in which the relationship between clients, consultants and beneficiaries leads to productive knowledge engagements. However even productive knowledge engagements may involve collusion because the overall effect is to embed all three parties further in a particular discourse and set of expectations about the kinds of knowledge needed for development. This is not to suggest that this process is monolithic: on the contrary, even unproductive as well as productive knowledge engagements can lead to new spaces for change (for example, in the senses discussed by Cornwall and Coelho, 2006; Johnson et al, 2012; McKinnon, 2008).

We turn to Assignment 2, which provides an example of an apparently productive knowledge engagement. However, as we show below, this engagement involves everyone complying with the politics of development assistance. This BCC assignment for a European Government Agency, EGA involved the training of a national counterpart, a Human Rights Foundation (HRF). The training was in the use and implementation of the Logical Framework Approach (LFA – or logframe), ubiquitous in project planning and management (and, as is well known, subject to considerable critique – see for example, Gasper, 2000). Differently from ENGO, EGA works with counterparts from government ministries to civil society organisations. Knowledge and learning are key components of its development endeavours. Committed to making its development interventions sustainable and its assistance superfluous in the long run, it engages in discussions and negotiations with its counterparts to identify how they can be better supported. In what follows, we aim to capture the dynamics of the three-way engagement between EGA, BCC and HRF.

The client's perspectives

EGA funds projects and promotes capacity-building with counterparts based on a shared development agenda and has a stated philosophy of not imposing methodologies (EGA_Officer_2). One source in EGA was keen to emphasize that the starting point is the existing knowledge base, even though the process, often participatory, is still conceptualized as knowledge transfer:

‘...consultants need to find a way whereby the existing knowledge in the institution is increased. One way of doing it is by transferring knowledge from the consultants to the personnel that work in the counterpart institutions’
(EGA_Officer_1).

In spite of the claim that methodologies are not imposed, the same officer notes that beneficiaries are often not good at formulating their demands and that this is one reason why consultants are hired

‘to train our counterparts how to use methodologies and approaches to articulate their demands and evaluate the outcomes of development projects that we fund’.

In this case, BCC consultants were hired to work with the counterpart, HRF, which, in EGA's view, had had problems articulating its demands and reporting progress. To address that issue, HRF was to learn to use logframe, which would enable the organisation to articulate its demands and report on its activities in a particular donor language. The issue here then, was that ‘articulation’ needed to be understood and validated using a particular methodology required for managing donor-beneficiary relations.

As with ENGO, EGA assumed that local development consultants would understand and communicate with local beneficiaries better than consultants from abroad.

EGA_Officer_1 notes:

‘Consultants that come from abroad to teach or undertake assignments in Bolivia lack knowledge of how organisations work in the region. They can have a wealth of knowledge but don’t know how things are done in Bolivian institutions and therefore their contribution can be terribly weakened.’

However, as observed above, although Bolivian consultants may have a comparative advantage in institutional knowledge, they may have problems in engaging with local beneficiaries. Nevertheless, in this case, BCC consultants shared both a professional background and other aspects of their lives with the beneficiaries. That is, they shared the same development aid vocabulary, language, structure of meanings as well as the urban environment of living in the capital city, La Paz. This was further explained by another EGA staff member, when he described his professional interactions with national counterparts:

‘I know that most of the techniques and methods we suggest were developed in Europe and the USA ... most of the individuals working as our counterparts have degrees from Europe and the USA so we get along well and they understand the need of applying certain methodologies’ (EGA Officer_2).

The consultants' perspective

Some similar features are evident in the BCC perspective. On one hand, consultants were conscious of why they, rather than consultants from the North, were hired for these assignments; one responded:

‘On the one hand, a local development consultant is far cheaper than one from abroad. On the other hand, Bolivia has a highly politicised social environment. From farmers in rural areas to teachers, they are all politicised individuals. Therefore, local consultants are in better to position to engage with development beneficiaries’ (BCC Consultant_12).

The same consultant was appreciative of EGA’s approach (‘one of the few agencies that really cares about contributing to capacity development’). At the same time, the consultant acknowledged that learning and knowledge production are social processes:

‘Whenever I carry out an assignment I try to generate a learning experience on the side of the development beneficiaries. [EGA] has its own development agenda. They can conceptualise development in the way they want....This assignment is fundamentally about capacity building. Therefore I am trying to generate a learning experience where [HRF] is able to learn more about the LFA.’

The consultant also noted the importance, in this case, of the shared backgrounds between consultants and beneficiaries:

‘The people who attended the workshops were professionals [HRF’s personnel]. We didn’t have to spend time explaining too many things. The

whole training process ran relatively fast insofar they knew beforehand some stuff about the LFA.’

The beneficiaries’ perspective

HRF is a non-profit organisation set up in 1991, which provides psychological and legal assistance to vulnerable (abused) women and abandoned children. EGA was funding a project on domestic violence and wanted HRF to learn logframe. HRF already had some knowledge of LFA (the Director notes: ‘but we weren’t that good at it’); in addition HRF already knew the consultants hired to work with them from other projects and assignments.

The response from the Director to the engagement of BCC in support of this capacity-building initiative is very affirmative:

‘I think [BCC] consultants were great. They are using participatory methods. We all get to talk about what we think. [BCC] consultants know very well how to use LFA. We in [HRF] know what we do... This is a good combination, they know a lot, we knew little and now we are hoping to know more about LFA.’

The Director further observed:

‘We both learned: [BCC] consultants and us... We shared our experiences, problems and limitations with them. They got to know about what its like to work with abandoned women and children.’

The Director’s view is suggestive of a productive knowledge engagement in a context of peer relationships. Yet it is also highly influenced by the politics of development assistance: the relatively benign but determining role of the funder who wanted HRF to

use logframe; the knowledge engagement with the consultants; and the need to express reports and funding requirements in the appropriate discourse. The Director notes:

‘I will be preparing a report for [EGA] very soon. In that report I need to detail what are those results achieved in the last six months. I should not have problems in reporting that. [BCC] consultants have explained in detail how to use LFA and how to report project results.’

It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the merits and demerits of LFA, cogently argued in Gasper (2000) particularly with respect to its use in uncertain contexts such as those that involve human rights, and in monitoring and evaluating outcomes. However some comments on the assignment are due. Although the assignment is suggestive of a productive knowledge engagement – both technically and hermeneutically – because of the shared lifeworlds and shared backgrounds involved, it is not so straightforward. In practice, the client’s agenda was to help the beneficiaries engage better with the donor world: to be able to use LFA effectively and to articulate their demands through the LFA discourse. In turn, HRF knew that this was an important skill area for securing ongoing funding. In this case, BCC successfully mediated the ‘collusion’.

At the same time, other knowledge of benefit to the consultants as well as the beneficiaries was produced through the engagement in a way that was not possible in Assignment 1. By contrast, in the OECA case, the client set the agenda and the OECA beneficiaries used the situation opportunistically. The complexities in this situation are quite subtle in that the OECAs wanted to add value to their productive activities and take advantage of markets, however they also had a political agenda, which was not necessarily shared by the client. The training was therefore limited in what it was likely to achieve. However there are also limitations in the knowledge engagement in

Assignment 2. All actors agreed that it was important for HRF to learn logframe. A more transformatory (or emancipatory, in Habermasian terms) knowledge engagement could have led to a different outcome, for example, a recognition and greater understanding of HRF's own discourse by EGA.

6. Final reflections and conclusion

There are therefore different ways in which the space between power, contestation, resistance, on one hand, and shared lifeworlds/background and communication, on the other, is acted on. Assignment 1 is a stark example of the distance between actors and the mechanisms through which they nonetheless collude with each other. Assignment 2 is much less dramatic and presents a rather positive picture between client, consultant and beneficiary. However, it too has some complex and contradictory sides expressed in the discourses and actions of the parties involved, and no less illustrative of the challenges of aid and of the role of consultants in development assistance. In these circumstances, it is quite hard for consultants to challenge such processes, being embedded as they are in the development assistance chain, but also for other reasons on which we now reflect.

The work of consultants is commercial, contract-based and usually short term. It is therefore extremely challenging for consultants to engage in depth with the context of their assignments in a given place at a given time. However, the valuing of beneficiaries' knowledge has considerable importance if knowledge engagements are to have positive outcomes or even to lead to the co-construction of new knowledge (as in Assignment 2). This aspect was an evident problem in Assignment 1, where consultants were not aware of the knowledge held by the OECA members, or of the limits of their own means of communication and use of language. At the same time, to some extent,

the client's agenda was being achieved, as OECA members gradually started to become more distant from their collective formation and aspirations. In spite of the OECAs' own aspirations to enhance productivity and income through commercialisation, one could characterise this change towards individualisation as being drawn into a particular (and dominant) regime of truth. It is much less clear that it constituted a sharing of meaning, or a hermeneutic process, between the three parties involved. In Assignment 2, by contrast, it seemed as though different types of knowledge were both shared and valued, which suggests that the existence of a shared ontology has the upper hand in short-term knowledge engagements, although it also has contradictions and shortcomings, as in this case.

However, there is a further nuance in these processes. A question for unproductive knowledge engagements is whether they reinforce rather than break down entrenched social relations – can the tension and forms of contestation or resistance in this case help create a new space for something different to happen? The latter would require considerable reflexivity on the part of consultants and would present dilemmas for their relationships in the client-consultant-beneficiary triangle. Consultants are inevitably part of the dominant development agendas and have to some extent to meet the agendas of clients if they are to win contracts. In the case of Bolivia, in particular, the growth in involvement of development organisations has been huge in recent decades. Little is done without a project being proposed and undertaken or supported by external funding.

While the presence of national consultancy companies is an advance on employing consultants from other countries with presumed superior knowledge, in practice national consultants face similar challenges to foreign ones. Consultants do not generally advocate a development discourse of their own; by contrast they might, through their

function and position, be reinforcing a discourse of the client. While development consultants are actors whose expertise is authorised by national and international development agencies/organisations, the same does not apply to beneficiaries where the challenge is often conceived as bringing them on board into a particular discourse and development process. Thus, there is already an unequal power relation by the time both actors come into contact. This is exacerbated when they each have different backgrounds and diverse perceptions and assumptions (lifeworlds).

Finally, consultants, through the very nature of their work, are gaining experiential and codified knowledge from the beneficiaries they work with and, potentially, so are the clients. It is not so clear to what extent beneficiaries gain or produce new (or relevant) knowledge for themselves. Changing this dynamic may come under the 'responsibilities' outlined by Bevan (2000). However it may be that the ongoing process of struggle around hegemonic thinking and practice (McKinnon, 2008) is a better characterisation of the reality facing beneficiaries, and potentially consultants and clients.

In conclusion, the field data analysed in this article have shown that there are structural features to the client, consultant, beneficiary relationship which present considerable challenges to southern consultants in terms of a potentially catalytic role in changing the dynamics of development discourse and practice. The assignments researched highlight the need for reflexive behaviour by all actors and the acknowledgement of consultancy as political engagement in development. A question then is whether the structural issues are definitive in preventing a new role for consultants. Can consultants help answer the question 'development on whose terms?' - for example, by requiring that terms of reference are defined by beneficiaries rather than clients? Could turning the relationship

on its head lead to a practice of shared learning across different lifeworlds and a new mutuality which might in turn serve to challenge and change the current discourse of development assistance, and to enable new discourses to emerge and be heard? Such a process cannot rely solely on individual idealism or voluntarism. There is a need for collective action and purposive design to renegotiate the terms of engagement, as well as the terms of reference.

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