

BRIGITTE ERLER: Tödliche Hilfe - Bericht von meiner letzten Dienstreise in Sachen Entwicklungshilfe. Freiburg: Dreisam-Verlag, 1985. 106 pages, DM 13.80

This book caused a rather heated debate immediately after its publication not only within the German development and aid establishment but also in the general public.

Its basic tenet is contained in the title 'Lethal Aid' which is as short as it is provocative. According to the author, all governmental aid to the so-called Third World - whether financial or technical - is not only inefficient and ineffective, but has extremely damaging consequences for the poor of the LDCs.

This fundamental criticism culminates in the call for an end to all aid programs for these countries since they are constantly abused by an unholy alliance of corrupt national elites, ruthless profit-seekers and countless middlemen that populate the grey zones and sometimes the front desks of an ever-increasing international aid-bureaucracy.

In order to understand why such a short book gained so much attention in such a brief period of time, and this despite the fact that its very personal style by no means fulfills the rigid criteria which are usually applied to socio-economic analysis and interpretation, it is helpful to know some biographical background information about the author.

For more than a decade Brigitte Erler was involved in the formulation, execution and supervision of German aid-policy. After working with non- and semi-governmental aid agencies she joined the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation where she was responsible for contacts and cooperation with Botswana, Zambia, Pakistan and finally Bangladesh.

As a member of the German Parliament in 1976-80 and again in 1982/83 she served on the committee supervising the allocation of aid, thereby experiencing the legislative side of the aid-related decision-making process.

She returned to her executive position following the change of government in 1983, and it was a disillusioning trip to Bangladesh which eventually caused her to leave the ministry and to formulate a final report about her increasingly frustrating experience.

The book has been attacked as being too emotional and biased. One of its qualities, however, lies in the very fact that someone dared to break the silence reigning where everybody seems to know that many things are faulty or wrong and at the same time nobody feels able to criticise openly.

The author bases her conclusions on observations made in the day to day field work while visiting Bangladesh plus her experience as a development bureaucrat. She deals with the subject under eleven subtitles of different length.

Whether it is in describing projects in the agricultural sector, in the health and social services field, in the promotion of large or small scale industries or import-programs such as 'Food For Work', Erler always points out three factors which in her eyes seem to form the core of the

problem. Firstly, there is the far too long chain of communication and command between the governmental institutions of the donor country and the aid-experts with their local counterparts.

A second major obstacle for which the author gives a number of hair-raising examples is the phenomenon of competition among aid agencies. In the case of Bangladesh this had led to a situation where potential receivers are corrupted, played off against each other or simply not asked what they think is the most appropriate form of aid for them.

The third and strongest argument backing up the author's demand to stop all aid to countries like Bangladesh is based on the recognition that the numerous contributors and resident-experts from abroad obviously have no influence whatsoever on existing power-structures.

Every single example of aid programs given in this book illustrates how representatives of aid-organisations sooner or later align themselves with national or local elites, thus not only giving them the chance to perpetuate their power-base, but also to extend it at the expense of the impoverished masses.

In a situation where small peasants lose their land or where agents of agrobusiness firms encourage an irresponsible use of pesticides or poison against fish of prey, causing diseases especially among children, the title 'Lethal Aid' indeed no longer seems so far-fetched.

The list of project failures and project abuse given in this book is as long as it is depressing. Whether it mentions the problems of over-emphasis on technology (e.g. too large pumps or too many tractors), or the shortcoming of so-called first-class crops or first-class cattle farming, whether it points out the petty corruption of foreign experts and their local counterparts or the ambitions of presumably unbiased project evaluators, the fact that this publication deals only with one country and the experiences of one person does not at all weaken the urgency of its message.

One could instead argue the other way round. What would happen if more of those involved in the politics of development aid would report about even more countries in a similar manner as Brigitte Erler?

Looking at it from this angle, this book can be understood as only the beginning of a debate which will hopefully lead to a fundamental reorientation among theoreticians as well as practitioners.

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