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Beyond Cultural Differences

'Intercultural' Co-operation in a German/Sri Lankan Development Project

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1. Introduction

Development co-operation is usually 'intercultural' co-operation. In this article I argue that drawing on cultural differences as criterion for its quality, will more likely deepen misunderstanding than resolve it. I suggest that differentiating collaborators into culturally different groups and ascribing items like 'individualism' and 'collectivism' to explain misunderstanding, deepens the existing dichotomy of 'modern' and 'backward' knowledge systems in development co-operation and above all prevents the shedding of light on the underlying structures and reasons for such behaviour, which could be most important for a development project's progression. Yet, misunderstanding in intercultural working situations is often explained by cultural differences (Hofstede 1980 and Waisfisz 1992 for the case of Sri Lankan/ German co-operation). The present article takes a different approach. First, I argue that culture is a reciprocal process of identity creation and a powerful and persuasive discourse in development co-operation. The mutual ascriptions of 'Eastern' and 'Western' behavioural patterns provide orientation in a complex situation of collaboration. This is not to say that cultural differences do not exist at all, rather, I suggest that these are a plausible mode to explain concrete situations of misunderstanding, tense and unclear situations and conflicts. Second, I assume that explaining behaviour by culture ignores individual dependencies and integration in formal and informal organizational structures. With Swidler (1986) one could argue that actors are able to flexibly use cultural modes of behaviour to handle (tense) situations. I use the actor-oriented approach to analyse different modes of behaviour as particular strategies for coping with tense situations, rather than explaining them as culturally determined patterns of behaviour. I state that project-relevant local realities are likely to be hidden in behavioural patterns and that those patterns reflect individual dependencies in a conglomerate of affiliations and to formal and informal relationships.

The empirical data of this article were obtained in a two-month field stay in Sri Lanka in summer 2002. I combined participatory observation and semi-structured interviews with most collaborators of two German/Sri Lankan development projects. To be able to make valid statements about culture in project co-operation, I chose to do a theoretical sampling of two different projects according to their intercultural set-up. I concentrated on two projects, the one with a large and culturally diverse crew, the other with an exclusively Sri Lankan staff. The theoretical sampling of two differently staffed projects gave me the opportunity to test the impact of cultural differences on the working situation. Both projects focused on altering the organizational structures of state-owned enterprises.[1] Accordingly, the observed co-operation in the two German/Sri Lankan development projects involved an urban working situation. The interviewed persons were local experts, locally contracted staff, consultants and expatriates. I participated in field trips, staff meetings and daily working situations. Thus, the observed co-operation represents the day-to-day working situations in an urban organizational counterpart set-up.

2. Orientalism and Occidentalism

Cultural arguments are a self-evident way to explain misunderstanding in intercultural co-operation. The unfamiliarity with different and foreign behavioural patterns provokes cultural arguments and it is interesting to see that they often emerge to explain misunderstanding.[2] The division into 'Eastern' and 'Western' behavioural modes provides orientation by offering plausible explanations in a complex working situation. The following comments of a Sri Lankan consultant reflect the widely accepted mutual perceptions and ascriptions of behavioural patterns of the 'Orient' and the 'Occident':

> "Sri Lanka, in the Eastern culture, we are systemic. In the sense, if I have to make a decision, I have to consult my people there, then I have to consult my family, sometimes, in important decisions, well I have to meet with some people and make the decision. It's slow, but steady. Western culture is not that. If you want to make a decision, just make the decision. If Mr. Bush wants to attack the Iraq, just say, "I am going to attack!" Then afterwards only he is going to consult. The culture is that." (Sri Lankan consultant)

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[1] This goes together with the change from project to programme in development co-operation, where the project's designs and counterpart set-ups increasingly address organizational reforms of state-owned enterprises, rather than direct influence on the beneficiaries. This is especially the case in bilateral and multilateral development co-operation.

[2] Hinnenkamp, for example, observed that 'intercultural communication' is mostly analysed in respect of interferences and misunderstanding (Hinnenkamp 1992:125).

This corresponds to Hofstede's notion of cultural differences. He divides 53 national/ regional cultures of the world by means of four dimensions: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, femininity vs. masculinity and insecurity avoidance, and thus, provides orientation in multicultural working contexts by specifying the distances between the various cultures of the world (Hofstede 1980). Waisfisz has adopted these categories to study the cultural differences between Germans and Sri Lankans. In the document "Intercultural Co-operation between Germans and Sri Lankans" he gives expatriates an insight into the main cultural differences and the most probable misunderstandings between Germans and Sri Lankans. The analysis concludes that Sri Lanka is a collectivist society with feminine values, like caring for one another, rather than accomplishing individual goals. Subordinates accept power and hierarchy and superiors are seen as 'good fathers'. Deviances from principles are more likely to be tolerated in Sri Lanka than in Germany, which relates to the degree of 'insecurity avoidance' (Waisfisz 1992:5-6). I found this view widely reproduced by expatriate and Sri Lankan experts.

The Sri Lankan consultant cited above, as well as Hofstede and Waisfisz reflect the self-evident and widespread drawing on cultural differences inherent in development co-operation. Antonyms like North-South, developed-underdeveloped and modern-traditional are conducive to reciprocal identity creation. "When you know what everybody else is, then you know what you are not. Identity is always (...) a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative" (Hall 1991:21). Just as Western expatriates explain the backwardness of local economies by the lack of "output-orientation" – a view I often met in conversations with German expatriates – the Sri Lankan (Singhalese) politics of identity appropriates Occidentalism to construe itself in opposition to the colonial legacies and to modernity (see the quotation above). The mutual cultural essentialism is part of a language of persuasion and is less empirical; yet, it is inherent in North-South history and the discourse of development co-operation (Spencer 1995:253).[3] The following two quotations express the ambivalent relationship of Sri Lanka with the West:

> "I have to tell you, Lisa, the white skin, your skin, people still respect. Because we had the Dutch, Portuguese and the British. In our culture, people see that, we call you *suddha wadde*, means 'white man'. If somebody says 'He is a *suddha*.' It means something good, means he is like a *suddha*. Which means,

[3] Discourse is understood in Foucault's sense, implying a continuous practice of distinction. Hence, power is a process inherent in discourses (Foucault 1972,1980). Furthermore, development co-operation is a particular context for identity creation. Culture as such is an anthropological and thus Western invention (Hobsbawm/Ranger 1983). Since the emergence of cultural discourse, it has been possible to put culture on the global political agenda.

there is a respect. But they should be able to earn this respect also. They must take this as an advantage, and take the opportunity." (Sri Lankan consultant)

"Because of our national past, we haven't learned, we still have this mindset that we are not as good as white, Western or European people that we can't be as clever as them, or we have not the skill, or they know better than us. I think we still have that. It's just something how we operate. I mean if you take Sri Lanka, we are so dependent on foreign people. We need their money, we need the tourists to come, we need them. So, when we always need them, so they knew always to take yourself as being second to them. Because they don't need us. That's how they think. They don't realize that they need us as much as we need them. We always have this thing, the other ones are coming and giving to us." (Sri Lankan development expert 1)

The quotations show the ambivalent attitudes towards foreigners and especially towards Western donors and the concurrence of appreciation and demarcation. They underline the strong dynamic of identity creation.

With this mindset I too went to Sri Lanka in order to examine intercultural collaboration and its difficulties and chances. But in the field I noticed that cultural differences are not the main source of misunderstanding but rather the main pattern to explain it. One reason might be that problems could be addressed in a general way without directly blaming a concrete person. Such a strategy is especially useful in an interview set-up, where a problematic situation is to be explained to a foreigner. Another reason might be that misunderstanding and failure could be explained by an external factor – culture – which avoids discussion of actual problems with planning and implementation. I thus argue that cultural forms of explanation are more part of a reciprocal process of demarcation than real causes for action. This topic of actor-orientation is treated in the third part of the article. In the following section I will present opposing cultural patterns ('hide-and-seek' and 'discussing openly') mutually ascribed to Sri Lankan and German collaborators to empirically underline the argument of a powerful and persuasive discourse dividing collaborators according to their cultural origin.

'Hide-and-Seek' versus 'Discussing Openly' – Opposing Behavioural Patterns

'Hide-and-seek' is often stated to be a typical Sri Lankan behavioural pattern by German and Sri Lankan development experts. It could be paraphrased by terms like 'hidden agenda' or 'double-faced action'.[4] The term

[4] 'Hide-and-seek' is a term ascribed rather to "up-country people" than to "low-country people" in Sri Lanka. The frequent and general explanation is that "low-country people" have had contact with bargainers, sailors and the colonial power for hundreds of years, which made them more open towards foreigners and foreign modes of communication.

probably evolved in contrast to behavioural patterns ascribed to the West. It has a rather negative connotation of 'backwardness' and 'lacking output-orientation', especially from Western and highly educated Sri Lankan development experts:

> "The Sri Lankans, what they think they don't say. They think something, say something and doing can be another thing. But I don't know why. (...) Normally they do that they hide. (...) They say something and do another thing. There is no link, or match between the think, the say, and the do." (Sri Lankan development expert 2)
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> - "Sri Lankans would rather not tell me the whole story, because I am white?"
>
> "Yeah, it has partly to do with the fact that you are white. But you will also find it even within Sri Lankans also. I mean I asked so many times: 'I am your coordinator, tell me when I do something wrong. Let me know, when there is a problem!' All I can do is assume that there isn't a problem, because nobody has ever told me that there was a problem. But then sometimes you suddenly find out from somewhere else that there has been a problem, since nobody ever told it to me, or let me know. And I am a total dumb one, because I don't realize. Cause I am thinking you are telling me that you are happy, if I am asking 'are you OK?' and you are saying 'yes', I will not go to.... I am not good in seeing what it is. (...) I am person I take what I see. I don't think that you are hiding something. I think that is there a lot." (Sri Lankan development expert 1)

'Hide-and-seek' is not a phenomenon occurring only in intercultural co-operation, but in an intercultural working context it is likely to deepen misunderstanding and conflict:

> "The Sri Lankan people, they are always to welcome foreigners, even if it's not from developed countries. Even if they are from India, they welcome them! So they don't like to tell anything bad to them. So they welcome, they laugh, they welcome them very well. So sometimes they know it is not suitable for us, but they are not telling anything. (...) This is in Sri Lankan culture, it's a very complicated thing." (Sri Lankan counterpart associate 1)

Hence, 'hide-and-seek' is a behavioural pattern, where collaborators hold back information or pursue their own goals, without communicating all they know.[5] To discover the local forms of knowledge and to adjust the technology to be implemented, expatriates rely on the co-operation of local experts and counterpart associates. To expatriates, giving one's opinion is thus a valued period of behaviour and open discussion an appreciated form of collaboration. On the other hand, Sri Lankan collaborators have ambivalent feelings towards 'Western' output-orientation. So-called typically Western/German behavioural patterns like voicing one's opinion openly and taking matters into one's own hands are sometimes appreciated:

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[5] Of course, such behavioural patterns are part of Western/ German organizational reality, too.

> "I have listened to the German experts. Very practical way of doing things. They want to get things done soon and these are good things, where we can learn." (Sri Lankan consultant)

And sometimes they are criticized:

> "The typical German culture that I face it's a little bit of aggressiveness from the staff. But I must say it's not from my adviser. He is the opposite, I am more aggressive than him (*laughter*)." (Sri Lankan project coordinator)

The dichotomy of 'Western' and 'Eastern' behavioural modes was always present in the intercultural co-operation observed. The point is that 'hide-and-seek' and personal expression of opinion are opposing behavioural patterns and their ascription is part of the reciprocal processes of identity creation of "Westerners" (Germans) and "Easterners" (Sri Lankans). It is possible to value one behavioural pattern in either a positive or a negative way, always depending on one's viewpoint. In the same way behavioural patterns like 'hide-and-seek' could be paraphrased with 'systemic society'[6], 'aggressiveness' could be associated with 'output-orientation'. The ascertainment of 'hide-and-seek' in a situation of co-operation could be understood as a process of demarcation and identity creation.

The German experts developed strategies to cope with behavioural patterns like 'hide-and-seek'. Compared to the appreciated Western forms of collaboration, 'hide-and-seek' appears to be an obstacle to development and opposed to modernity, because it stifles open discussions. As an appropriate management tool, Western management and leadership packages suggest motivating the staff and partners to openly express their opinions, e.g. through 'management by objectives' (Waisfisz 1992:51). It draws on the communication of a 'good cause' and the creation of a joint goal setting. In workshops and staff meetings the associates are to be convinced of the common objective and the project's contribution to national development. It stands for an egalitarian and modern strategy of guiding and monitoring co-operation. 'Management by objectives' was applied in the project observed. For the German expatriates it was a plausible strategy for reacting to the behavioural patterns mentioned above. Yet, in the following section I will clarify that the reasons for acting in a 'hide-and-seek'-manner are not cultural origin, but rather informal and formal dependencies in a counterpart set-up. 'Management by objectives' may thus be less instrumental in solving the existing misunderstandings and conflicts.

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[6] See quotation on p. 296

3. Culture or Action?

I focus on the emergence of behavioural patterns. Actually, the field showed concrete situations that the actors involved dealt with by using 'hide-and-seek'. Yet, it could be interesting to look at the reasons for such behavioural patterns. Swidler has developed an alternative understanding of culture for explaining social action. According to her, culture does not generate action in a linear way, it is rather a "tool kit" that actors can use to handle situations flexibly. "A culture is not a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction. Rather, it is more like a tool kit (...) from which actors select differing pieces for construing lines for action" (Swidler 1986:277). Bierschenk/de Sardan lay stress on the actor's perspective. "A conflict between individuals or groups is in part the expression of opposing objective interests, linked to different social positions; however, it is also the effect of personal strategies, more or less linked to networks and organized in the forms of alliances. Structural analysis should therefore be rounded off by strategic analysis" (Bierschenk/de Sardan 1997:239). Analysing development projects in terms of intercultural differences only, might conceal explanations that hint at the dynamic process of negotiation of interests and resource distribution. "That which seems in the eyes of the experts and planners to be a single project is, in reality, many different ones, each group pursuing its own project" (Bierschenk 1988:158). Hence, the project is a complex grouping of different actors like counterpart, project staff, expatriates, visitors, researchers and target group, who all pursue their own interests. Furthermore it is a dynamic workplace and source of resource distribution like salary, job security, career, recognition, contact for further employment and further funding, which makes an inquiry emphasising action, situation and strategy necessary. Behavioural patterns reflect individual dependencies in a grown social structure. They could be indicative of an underlying and relevant local reality (to use the term of Chambers 1997). By local reality I mean local affiliations, informal and formal organizational integration and local dependencies in a counterpart set-up.[7] The project and counterpart's channels of resource distribution offer a scope for social action and decision making to every collaborator and are thus the main impetus for action. The cultural argument explaining misunderstanding is one strategy to deal with tense situations. Broadening the focus towards a situational perspective, the East-West contradictions in working reality could

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[7] This is a topic tackled by e. g. Nicholson 1994, Diawara 2000 and Lewis 2002. The authors make the point that the particularity of local management systems and organizational cultures have to be considered in development co-operation practice and research.

take a back seat and the hints concealed in the mode of action (be they provoked by cultural stimulation or just ascribed to cultural affiliation) are more likely to be discovered. The argument is confirmed empirically in the following section.

'Hide-and-Seek' – a Cultural Pattern or a Hint?

I will illustrate the argument by describing a conflictive situation, observed in a German/Sri Lankan development project. The project's objective is to reform and privatise a state-owned enterprise with countrywide branches. Therefore the project develops modules for the organization's computerization, later to be implemented countrywide. Conflicts emerge partly because the project is seen as the main drive for privatisation, which means job insecurity for lots of employees. On the other hand the reforms mean an increased workload for the employees in the branches without an increase in wages or other incentives. A consultant expresses the expectations of branch-level staff towards the project:

> "This partner organization has a big hierarchy, it has a big overhead component, Lisa, up there. They enjoy everything. In the head office, they are promoted, promoted, promoted. Big salaries, vehicles, this and that, big loans. Now, there are people who get these opportunities. At the branch level, they work, work, they see... there is a jealousy. The project could break it." (Sri Lankan consultant)

The project is the promoter of change and is thus made responsible for both justice and injustice. Questions like job security, workload and wage distribution get negotiated on the project's platform. The conclusion is that the project associates employed by the partner organization sit on the fence. They have to fulfil the expectations of the German expatriates (who have an influence on the counterpart organization's employment politics) as well as the expectations of their colleagues in the partner organization, be it on the headquarter or branch level. A project associate describes the competition between the IT department of the project and IT department of the counterpart organization. It is to be assumed that job security is a main trigger for the described jealousy:

> "So we prepared a program, it's also a computer-based program. Then after that they can do it automatically by their computer. Now, it is working only in two regions. Because the IT department of our organization they not allowed us to... because they have some monopolies. Because there are people who prepared another program. There are people who have some type of jealousy. One branch they requested this program, so the project team-leader promised, if it's not allowed he will go to the hierarchies." (Counterpart associate 1)

This is one of the conflicts stifling the project's future. The associates have to handle such situations, and position and reposition themselves according to their standing in a conglomerate of dependencies, affiliations and involvements. 'Hide-and-seek' is thus a strategy to cope with insecurity. Not all information could be given and several loyalties have to be considered:

> "Because sometimes it's pretty difficult to work with that type of situation. But I think from time to time we can gain a lot of experience from foreigners. Most suitable thing in my way: don't push, don't struggle with them. As a mediator I think, I am also this part and this part. If they are going away, at the end of this things, we have something of value." (Project associate)

In this case, the development project is primarily seen as a source of income generation and assurance of further employment and secondarily as a contribution to the country's development ('management by objectives'). Getting involved in a conflict might jeopardize job security in the long run. The project's short duration means that it is more secure to await its end than openly give an opinion. A counterpart associate puts it more directly:

> "They (expatriates) don't know that this bottlenecks are there. Everything we can't tell them, no? That is not nice from us. We are the employees of the counterpart, so we can't tell every weakness. If the people have a special request we have to inform them. It's not nice. When the project is over, we have to go back to the counterpart again, no?" (Counterpart associate 1)

This associate is indicating that criticism or proposals towards the German expatriates might be understood as a betrayal by his own colleagues at the counterpart organisation.

The counterpart set-up of the project is a bold venture, because existing social structures are threatened by the promoted reforms, which again are a threat to existing positions and jobs. Reforms take place in an evolved corporate culture, in established hierarchies and power structures and 'hide-and-seek' could point to the project-relevant linkages and involvements. Somehow, 'hide-and-seek' could be seen as an alarm bell, reflecting the complexity and integration of a person's position in a counterpart set-up. Cultural differences may well exist, but using them to explain misunderstanding conceals the local reality of a complex formal and informal organizational integration. Cultural differences are a strong and persuasive discourse and thus provide orientation in a complex co-operation situation, but they are less enlightening when reasons for misunderstandings and conflicts have to be found. The interesting question is not "what are the cultural patterns like?", but rather "what's behind all this?"

4. Conclusion

Cultural arguments are frequently adduced to explain failure and misunderstanding in development co-operation practice. I suggest going beyond the cultural ascription of behavioural patterns to analyse (intercultural) co-operation. Cultural ascriptions are seen as a process of reciprocal identity creation, construing the other as a negative of the self (Hall 1991). Furthermore, cultural differences are mutual and plausible forms of explanation in development co-operation practice and literature (Hofstede 1980, Waisfisz 1992, Blunt 1995). The dichotomy is part of development co-operation's colonial history, which brought about a discourse ascribing either 'tradition' and 'backwardness' or 'modernity' and 'progressiveness'. The connotations of tradition and modernity are also inherent in the behavioural patterns described in this article. 'Hide-and-seek', also known as 'double faced action', is a behavioural pattern alleged to be typically Sri Lankan. It is thus construed in opposition to typical 'Western' behavioural patterns like 'discussing openly', which is associated with 'output-orientation'. Such ascriptions and demarcations are widespread and mutual in German/Sri Lankan project reality. I argue that the emergence of cultural arguments (e. g. in interview situations) is most probable in tense situations. Stressing the cultural argument is a strategy for the actors involved to explain conflicts without referring to their structural reasons. I thus argue that behavioural patterns are better explained and analysed in terms of action than of culture. With Swidler (1986) one could argue that culture is an underlying repertoire containing forms of action, which can be used flexibly to cope with situations. Thus, behavioural modes and their explanations by reference to culture hint at local realities which could be important for understanding the implementation process of a project. In the empirical case described, formal and informal channels of resource distribution are the most probable reasons for social action, rather than cultural affiliation. 'Hide-and-seek' is often a strategy to overcome the short duration of a project, to secure further employment in another development project, or to secure a position in a state-owned institution after the project's termination. The project is more likely to be seen as a source of income generation than as a good cause in itself. By drawing on cultural arguments to explain social action, dependencies and alliances within an organizational counterpart set-up are easily overlooked. I argue that by drawing on cultural modes of explanation one is liable to deepen conflicts, because misunderstandings are not analysed as "what is going on and what can we learn from the local realities in order to adapt our project accordingly?" but rather as "how can we overcome tradition and backwardness in the name of 'Western' modernity?"

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