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German-African research co-operation: practices, problems and policies

Summary

This paper provides some insights into the policies, practices and problems of German-African co-operation in research projects conducted in Africa. Differences in interests, knowledge domains and competences, in economic, social and political situations, a lack of awareness thereof, power imbalances and a lack of management skills can severely impede a fruitful co-operation. These factors are compounded by institutional constraints in the German academic sector. Germany seems to be conspicuously absent as a participant in international debates and (development) policies of research co-operation between countries of the North and the South. Research funding policies are at great variance with the complex realities particularly in African countries. A critical analysis of policies and practices of research co-operation elsewhere could contribute to a revision of some of the current policies of research funding organisations in Germany.

Keywords

Africa, Germany, higher education, international research co-operation, foreign aid, government policy

Over the past 40 years, German scholars have increasingly received considerable funding to conduct research in developing countries.¹ This process has been fostered by a growing demand for the internationalisation of German academia (cf. e.g. BMBF 2002), by competition both within the international scientific community and for markets in a globalizing world, and by a growing public consciousness regarding the importance of international

1 Above all, in the framework of Collaborative Research Centres (Sonderforschungsbereiche, SFBs) funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). The overview of SFBs in Africa provided by Probst (2005) may be amended by the West African SFB of the University of Hohenheim. The BMBF has funded a range of projects in Africa in the context of its BIOTA (BIOdiversity Monitoring Transect Analysis in Africa), BioTEAM (Biosphere Research - InTEgrative and Application-Oriented Model Projects) and GLOWA (Global Change and the Hydrological Cycle) programmes.

issues in both environmental and security politics. Since the 1990s, major German research funding organisations – the DFG, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF), and the Volkswagen Foundation – have favoured research proposals if they included – albeit rhetorical – evidence of co-operation with scholars and/or academic institutions from the prospective host countries. Programmes supporting communication with scholars from the South² in the pre-project phase were set up³ and university administrations have mobilised funds for travelling and preparatory workshops. From the latter's point of view, international research projects generally constitute an important factor in the evaluation and ranking of scholarly research performance, with a view to the competitive allocation of funds in Germany. Moreover, 'partnerships' have often been indispensable in order to secure support from academics in the host countries in engaging field assistants and/or interviewers, to comply with a growing demand for benefit sharing and intellectual property right claims among actors from the South, as well as to gain the compliance of (demanding) local bureaucracies in issuing research permits.⁴

Actual processes and practices of collaborative research, however, so far constitute a Black Box. German scholars are expected to manage whatever local interactions and problems might arise in the process of planning and completing their research by themselves. In the course of a projects' execution, points of irritation and frustration often crystallise. German researchers have variously complained about African partners not meeting agreements of (apparent) prior consent. Where conflicts were not recognised and resolved, boycotts of co-operation, misuse of funds, loss, sabotage or even theft of research equipment etc. have occurred. This can in fact severely impede the progress of research projects and therefore entail inefficient use or even loss of funding resources. To date, however, participating actors have no institutional guidance on how to structure their working relationships. The funding agencies prefer to concentrate on the scientific output of projects.

This paper constitutes an attempt to explore the practice and problems of research partnerships between scholars in sub-Saharan Africa and Ger-

2 The dichotomy of 'North' and 'South' generally used in international policy discourse is arguably too simple. It is maintained in this paper for heuristic reasons; moreover it happens to fit the geographical relations of the countries being analysed here. For a political-economic definition of these terms cf. Duffield (2001: 3-6).

3 E.g. the International Office of the BMBF and the DFG/BMZ Programme 'Research Co-operation with Developing Countries' (DFG 2004).

4 The partnerships between German and African universities noted to occur in nearly all countries of sub-Saharan Africa focus on agricultural and forestry sciences, medicine, geography, resource management, health sciences, but also linguistics, political science and social anthropology (Müller 2007).

many against the backdrop of the institutional frameworks of research and its promotion in both 'worlds'. It adds a new dimension to the debates on African Studies (in Germany) published in two issues of *Afrika Spectrum*, 38/1 (2003) and 40/1 (2005), the contributions to which have been dominated by the stocktaking of the historical and current situations and programmatic statements concerning the roles of the academic disciplines involved. This analysis centres on the situations, interests and perspectives of individual and collective actors such as universities, research funding institutions, projects, German and African researchers, staff employed in the research area, and (potential) users of research results. Drawing also on an institutionalist approach (cf. also e.g. Braun and Guston 2003), constraints and incentives are highlighted that guide actors' choices in a field charged with contradictions in interests and institutional settings.⁵ In addition I demonstrate that elsewhere in other northern countries problems relating to research co-operation with developing countries have been discussed for a long time, as testified by a range of publications and funding policies. I argue that these experiences represent a great, to date underutilised, potential of learning.

Findings are based on long-term intermittent (occasional) participant observation, informal interviews with key-informants and resource persons, as well as evaluation of international literature.⁶

5 Experiences of cooperative research conducted by the Fraunhofer Society, political foundations, Max Planck Institutes, and Gottfried-Wilhelm-Leibniz Scientific Community are not covered by this study. It is also beyond the scope of this paper to include private, e.g. denominational universities or research involving the private sector. Also the implications of the Franco-, Luso- and Anglophone particulars have to remain unaddressed. Anecdotal evidence suggests that differences between actors at various levels of academic hierarchies (professors, lecturers, assistants, Ph.D. candidates etc.) may also be significant. Further research is needed, too, on the differences between the arts, social and natural sciences and the variations within these 'scientific cultures'.

6 As a member of various German academic institutes and research projects (1998-2004), which comprised both environmental and social research, and as a participant in various expert meetings hosted by the DFG, the Volkswagen Foundation and the BMBF, I had opportunities of observant participation and informal interviews with a range of actors, including key informants from German research funding organisations and reviewers, on the practices of cooperation both in the social and natural sciences. Information gaps on funding policies were reduced by unstructured (telephone) interviews. Structured interviews were conducted with twelve social scientists from nine African countries. In addition I evaluated accessible literature and some contributions and discussions at the 20th conference of the German Association of African Studies ('Knowledge and the Sciences in Africa', Frankfurt/M., July 2006) and at the First Grantees Meeting within the Africa Initiative of the Volkswagen Foundation (November 2007 in Bamako, Mali). I am indebted to the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany, for funding my participation in workshops related to the Volkswagen Foundation initiative in the years 2005, 2006 and 2007.

Unequal partners in unequal settings

In sub-Saharan Africa there exists substantial international, national and local variation with respect to university status, external support,⁷ education systems, and political environments. Notwithstanding this diversity I juxtapose actors and institutions in Germany, in many ways a typical country of the North, with those in sub-Saharan Africa. African countries share similar historical heritages such as the experience of colonialism and the concomitant dominance of foreign curricula in the tertiary education sector, the post-independence impetus in the development of education systems in the 1970s and their decline in the 1980s, the impact of liberalisation policies of the Bretton Woods institutions in the 1990s, the continued economic dependence on countries of the North, the massive brain drain and the declining importance of the tertiary education sector in government agendas as well as in bi- and multilateral development programmes (Masinda 2003; Mkandawire 1998; Okeke 2003). The crisis of the African universities and of scholarly research in general is manifested in 'dilapidated buildings, overcrowded classes, overworked, underpaid and demoralised faculty, empty libraries, etc.' (Mkandawire 1998: 96; see also Bierschenk and Wieschiolek 2002).

The socio-economic situation

In African countries, present academics often have to make a living from a combination of sources. The image of the soldier fighting on several fronts invoked by Bako-Arifari (2006: 12) is derived from a combination of low salaries, delayed payments,⁸ multiple social obligations, and the need to diversify one's activities to ensure social security. This situation makes it imperative to engage in private business, to prioritise research in the green pastures of the NGO sector and/or to pursue several projects of international research collaboration at the same time. In comparison, German universities are well-funded by public sources, and scientific staff are used to regular incomes and social security schemes and do not have to rely on extensive social networks for survival. Ignorance of this discrepancy lies at the root of the frustration

7 'Strong' and well-funded universities are e.g. the Universities of Makerere (Uganda), of Dar-es-Salaam and of Namibia, whereas the universities in Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso must be considered to be among the 'weakest'.

8 So-called 'sitting allowances' for participants of staff meetings have been institutionalised at certain administration levels of some universities e.g. in Sudan, Ghana, Mali, to compensate for low salaries.

expressed by a number of German researchers⁹ about their African partners' failure to contribute (on time and/or with the required quality) to project proposals or reports and/or an observed inclination to focus merely on the financial aspects of their co-operation.

In most African countries, university scholars' opportunities to do research on their own account are severely compromised by the lack of political support, generally poor remuneration, heavy teaching loads, inability to mentor young faculties and inadequate infrastructure. The inadequacy of public funding is a cross-cutting issue (Sawyerr 2004). At the same time, many new universities have been founded, and there has been a dramatic increase in enrolments. As reported from Sudan, Nigeria and Ghana for instance, the reduction (and in part termination) of public funding and the 'liberalisation' of universities has entailed an increasing dependence of departments on commissioned research, over-enrolment (to generate incomes through tuition fees), as well as gross abuses such as 'trading' in grades and degrees. With the opportunities offered by the development business, highly qualified people are better off working elsewhere in the country instead of working at their universities, an imbalance which brings about a decrease in the quality of teaching and research. Academic freedom is hard to find. Under certain political regimes this freedom has been annihilated by outright repression, for example in Liberia. In addition, there may be a lack of support for individual researchers within the institutions. Academic authorities may perceive research as a source of private gain for individuals, as a strategy that may threaten their position in the power games at their universities (Niang 2005).

While the industrialised nations have recognised that the tertiary education sector has been essential to their country's own knowledge production and development, African countries are witnessing major problems in developing their own national higher education and research systems. African academics are affected by a lack of public recognition and a constant crisis of identity and legitimacy. The relevance of curricula, often a (post-) colonial heritage, has been challenged to an increasing extent by both external and internal parties. There is a sense that universities are superfluous and dispensable. Since independence, the issue of alienation has been a matter of debate, also among academics, because obviously the inherited tertiary institutions 'were somehow at odds with the reality surrounding them, not only in terms of material well-being, but also in terms of priorities and preoccupations' (Mkandawire 1998: 99). Indeed, the use of tertiary education as an elite strategy, even as a vehicle to escape from the country, has separated many

9 Because of the sensitive subject matter I preserve anonymity of all my respondents, whether African or German.

academics from the problems of their people. Like elsewhere, African scholars tend to cultivate exclusive identities as members of the social (middle-class) elite, particularly after having graduated from universities of the North, and many are socially detached from the uneducated majority. Academics' efforts are directed at publishing articles in international journals, in languages and jargons, that do not permit easy transfer of knowledge to the public.

Research interests and the issue of relevance

Academic incentive structures in African universities are still generally based on criteria of excellence derived from academic traditions in the North. Many academics are subject to a dilemma; i.e., they are torn between the necessity to conduct lucrative consultancies and the wish to conduct independent research for which there are but few adequately remunerated opportunities (Bako-Arifari 2006; Masinda 2003; Okeke 2003). German social scientists¹⁰ have observed among their African colleagues a peculiar divide between, on the one hand, the epistemic cultures of commissioned research on behalf of development agencies or other private actors, and, on the other hand, those of fundamental social science research. This divide may run through one and the same person. The generation and modes of validation of these types of knowledge are fundamentally different. In the former, knowledge must be produced that is conceived as relevant in the framework of the development paradigm. Consultants operate in a normatively charged context, they have to meet the expectations of their employers and reproduce the discourses of the international agencies.¹¹ Role switching and flexible identities seem to be quite common among African scholars. Especially social scientists may command a range of methodological approaches where the German counterpart is familiar with only one mode of research.

In highly dynamic African academic systems¹² there are also debates concerning needed and preferred types of research. Scholars may strongly favour promoting and facilitating intermediation processes between universities and social environments, of applied research projects, and of directing

¹⁰ For example, at the VAD conference 2006.

¹¹ Cf. also Bako-Arifari 2006 and Kohnert 1995

¹² See Sall (2004) about the growing complexity of the higher education systems in sub-Saharan Africa, involving the development of alternative models, the spreading of networks of knowledge, and the challenges of private sector involvement. According to Prewitt, recent reform strategies for Africa's universities are adjusting to three macro-trends: market pressures, demographic forces and changing donor perspectives involving market-like definitions of accountability that are generating an unprecedented institutional diversification in African higher education (Prewitt 2004).

their universities' research efforts to their regions of origin. Inspired by both state and development discourse, 'most African researchers accepted the view that somehow their research must address the problems of extreme poverty of their continent' and that academic freedom could not be demanded, '... when such elementary freedoms as to eat were denied to so many' (Mkandawire 1998: 101). This 'empty-mind-full-belly thesis' has subjected African academics to considerable ambiguity and soul-searching about the relationship between academic freedom and their social responsibility (Mkandawire 1998: 102). Notwithstanding the importance of elite identities, many African scholars are in touch with the more deprived sections of their society through extended kinship networks and even personal experience of the implications of poverty and abjection. They find it both politically and ethically rather difficult to seclude themselves in the ivory tower and prefer to conceive their roles in research as a means of solving problems (cf. also Foaeng 2003; Janz 2003; Okeke 2003). Also some scholars have become very conscious of their societies' wealth of traditional knowledge. A long-standing debate on endogenous knowledge systems in Africa, involving both European and African intellectuals¹³ has also been contributed to by the discourse of development agencies on the importance of local knowledge, particularly when dealing with natural resources. Diverse research interests and academic ambitions can be located on a continuum ranging from fundamental to participatory research with a user-centered view of applications ('demand-oriented' research), depending on the academics' disciplinary background, academic socialisation and/or on the degree of involvement in development research.

In principle, external funding is highly coveted as it facilitates pure 'independent' research, doing fieldwork, travelling abroad, getting away from the strenuous struggles at home and/or access to literature which is unavailable at the home universities (e.g. sabbaticals in Germany). Opportunities to enhance one's own reputation in both the national (credit points) and international academic systems by means of recognised (co-)publications in international journals are also valued. Increasingly, academics in the more advanced scholarly communities, like in South Africa or Ghana, are forced to honour established international criteria of academic performance such as citation indices. Therefore, African scholars themselves may prioritise fundamental research in co-operation with foreign partners.

Why do Germans want to engage in research in Africa? Personal observations, confirmed in reflective conversations with colleagues, suggest that scientific interest and academic ambition is often matched by the enjoyment of travelling to exotic environments, the adventurous aspects of field re-

13 Cf. e.g. Diawara 2003, Hountondji 1995 and Odora Hoppers 2003.

search, the friendliness and hospitality usually offered to white foreigners in African countries, a vague wish to 'help the poor' and/or the feeling of being more honoured and important than at home in Germany.

The challenge of how to bridge the gap between research and policy seems to be negotiated more fiercely in Africa. Notwithstanding the debates on ethical responsibilities and transdisciplinarity in certain circles of German academia¹⁴, in general German scholars have few incentives to reflect on the social and political implications of their research.¹⁵ In Germany 'excellence' of research still tends to be judged by conventional, however debatable¹⁶, standards. Research topics are selected according to personal interests in the context of 'research fronts' negotiated within the respective disciplines and shaped by priorities and fashions of the international academic system. Many academic disciplines have an ambivalent if not outright dismissive attitude towards applied research; and individual commitment to applied research is often sceptically viewed by – competing – colleagues from the same discipline/academic organisation, notably in the social sciences.¹⁷ The major funding agency, the DFG, traditionally promotes only projects geared to fundamental research. International co-operation is supported by the BMBF to raise the competitiveness of the German system of science and research and to develop new markets. The social relevance of the concrete research in question and the practical applicability of its results are of secondary importance. Rhetorically, the DFG and the BMBF have to an increasing degree welcomed the 'relevance' of fundamental research to present-day problems in the developing countries (see also Müller 2007). Particular proposals directed to the DFG, however, need to avoid the impression that researchers want to engage in 'development research'. 'Relevance' is therefore often defined in the following way: Fundamental research is to be conducted in an African country on topics that are highly topical in current research in the discipline(s) of the applicant(s). The research questions are devised in the ivory tower of our academic institutions; the outcomes are somehow related to the problems of the host country or the region; and it is assumed that they will constitute a 'decision support system' to local policy-makers. The mere transfer of research results – if it takes place at all – to academic or government in-

14 See, for example, Schönhuth et al. (2001), and the special issue of *Futures* (no. 36, 2004).

15 An illustrative round-table discussion addressing the implications of the 'self-referential system' in German academia for development politics is Hofmann et al. (2004).

16 For a comprehensive critique of biases in the peer review system cf. e.g. Hirschauer (2004). In the framework of the government's recent 'Excellence Initiative', however, novel standards of excellence appear to have been developed that also emphasise transdisciplinary processes.

17 Obvious exceptions are engineering, forestry, medicine and agriculture.

stitutions in the country is understood as a contribution to 'development'. This view is naïve and, in fact, far removed from the realities of the flows of information and policy processes in African countries. It seems that German peer-reviewers, too, do not recognise the absence of any reflection on how the purported 'decision support' might be operationalised, e.g. by analyzing the institutional frameworks of knowledge management and communication of scientific results. The apparently fashionable idea of simply delegating the task of scientific communication in the host country to the African partners ignores the possibility of problems of capacity and political will. Also academia is often separated from political institutions and policy-making processes, a state of affairs that has been ascribed, in the case of the African social sciences, to the overbearing presence of expatriates (Mkandawire 1998: 94).

Agenda setting, capacities and knowledge domains

Generally the agendas of research and structures of communication in the project are set by the German side. This is felt to be normal since the German side also carries the burden of financial responsibility vis-à-vis the funding organisation. Little attention, if any at all, is paid to the African partners' interests beyond the allocation of specific funds.¹⁸ Germans tend to deny or ignore the possibility that African partners may be interested in designing a research project based on their own knowledge, often with a view to the applicability of results (cf. also Foaleng 2003). As a rule, the latter are assigned the role of junior partner. Especially in the poorest countries and as members of under-funded universities African scholars tend to be in no position to negotiate for the adaptation of research topics if they disagree with their 'partners' academic priorities.

Sometimes African scholars do not command the skills to write research proposals and reports that meet the donors' criteria of both form and content. There seems to be a dire need for communication about research topics and for support in formulating them together. The German partners, however, have been disinclined or unable to mobilise the necessary resources due to a lack of awareness, interest or to time constraints.

'Strong' African universities and/or scholars in high demand may negotiate but also decline the terms of co-operation if they are frustrated by the Germans' research objectives or manners. More commonly, 'weak' universities or academics have to put up with communication styles and research priorities on the German side because of their dependence on even small

18 In the case of the DFG and the BMBF financial and legal restrictions set by the Ministry of Finance have so far precluded employment of African researchers, in contrast to the Volkswagen Foundation.

transfers of resources. While the terms of collaboration are hardly contested in an open manner, disagreement may find an outlet in the neglect of tasks, the (subversive) refusal to cooperate or to engage in further commitments. The practices in many German-funded projects seem to resonate with the conclusions of a critical analysis of North-South research partnerships conducted at an international workshop in 1996: The North proposes the project, develops the procedure and finds the funds; often partners in the South serve simply to legitimise researchers from elsewhere entering the country; they gather the data while interested parties in the North pay for the services and own the data ('a data-exporting enterprise')¹⁹. The South implements the research, but knowledge and prestige are transferred to the North. And frequently 'the Southern partner is assigned the role of a minor associate and has to endure paternalism and continuous advice' (Maselli and Sottas 1996: 78).²⁰

The 'right' to set the agenda felt on the German side seems to be further justified by differences in academic capacities. German scholars have variously perceived a pertinent lack of interest in field research and/or scientific discovery and of methodological skills on the part of African partners. At most African universities teaching content and methodologies do not reach the standards in Germany. The 'crisis of the African universities' has reduced opportunities for academic learning and diverted energies from academic enterprises both at the personal and institutional levels. Well-qualified staff is rare because of both internal brain drain to the development and/or private sector and external brain drain to the North. In addition, to a greater extent than in Germany, patronage networks have allowed for the nomination of unqualified staff in the universities. Leading positions may have been politically appointed rather than selected on grounds of academic excellence.

However, stereotypes about African scientists based on such observations and perceptions can severely reduce the chances of developing a relationship at eye-level where there is a potential of mutual learning. Comprehensive knowledge and skills on the part of African partners may not even be recognised:

'... you are believed to be incapable. Some people from the North who come to the South have the attitude, 'These people are not capable so we have come to teach them'. Some of us get a bit rebellious when we come up against this mentality' (Gyapong 2001: 21).

¹⁹ Most obvious in cases where data have been analysed only in German.

²⁰ See also RAWOO: 'The strongly academic nature of research activities dominated by the perceptions of Northern researchers means that the value of the work done on site by local counterparts is not acknowledged. Most credit goes to the Northern researchers, and the activities become increasingly detached from the needs which local counterparts perceive as more urgent and immediate' (RAWOO 2001: 18).

Many German actors from funding organisations and universities assume implicitly or explicitly that the transfer of knowledge can be carried out only in a North-to-South direction.²¹ Areas of special expertise on the African side – knowledge of local diversities, experience with demand-oriented or participatory research and a high level of communication and other social skills important for successful teamwork – may go unnoticed or be dismissed as irrelevant by the German partner.

In the same vein there seems to be insufficient consideration of intercultural differences. According to my own observations and anecdotal evidence reported by others, cultural expectations and models may differ concerning, for example, the allocation of time and resources, relations between superiors and inferiors (e.g. supervisors and PhD candidates), obligations and rights related to kinship and patronage networks, e.g. the inclusion of – sometimes quite unsuitable – dependants, status symbols, e.g. means of transport as a non-negotiable marker of identity. Further issues may be divergent ideas about the giving and taking of gifts, mutual visits and hospitality, the sharing of knowledge and information, and the value and means of communication, i.e. the appropriateness of personal encounters vs. telephone calls vs. emails.

Differences in notions of honour and shame may become apparent when, for example, Germans openly debate and disagree on scientific issues in a direct manner that may be perceived as offensive by African colleagues; criticising somebody in the presence of his inferiors may be taken as degrading. Also, renowned African scholars may feel dishonoured by negligent treatment when guests of their German counterparts. The assumption that the guest will be grateful if invited for a stay in Germany and granted access to the Western temples of consumption may even turn out to end a partnership if the visiting scholar is left to himself after his arrival – as has happened, also due to lack of staff, in German institutions and departments. Some German scholars have been irritated by their partners' demonstrations of 'eliteness' *vis-à-vis* the people in their research areas, or their refusal to spend a night in a village – at the expense of the quality of scientific work.

Institutional constraints in Germany

Operational regulations and incentive structures in Germany's academic system aggravate the difficulties in establishing effective partnerships described above. Even before a collaborative project is started, a range of problems may be encountered.

21 This attitude may be more pronounced among natural scientists. One reviewer (DAAD) even remarked that often proposals submitted by natural scientists revealed hidden racist attitudes ('verkappte Rassisten').

As opposed to most other northern donor countries, in Germany funds required for the effective execution of cooperative development research in developing countries are provided by different funding agencies. This entails an enormous administrative effort with parallel proposals to a range of donors in order to obtain the financial means that are furnished by one institution in other countries. For example, the DFG, Volkswagen Foundation and BMBF provide per diems, vehicles and scientific equipment (the DFG even treats research infrastructure as German property that has to be repatriated after the project ends); the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst, DAAD) or the Humboldt Foundation support academic capacity building; the Ministry of Economic Co-operation and Development (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, BMZ) provides funds for travel, consumables, scientific equipment and local labour (BMZ/DFG Programme for research co-operation with developing countries); the BMBF supports infrastructural development before a project commences; and the DFG gives donations (only German-authored books) to libraries. The management of this diversity of funding sources is often considered a waste of human capital in the departments charged with the administration of these projects.

The problem of German dominance in agenda-setting cannot be avoided due to language and time constraints, even where German scholars would like to involve their African counterparts in the design of the projects. Until recently research proposals have had to be submitted in the German language, in particular those applying to the DFG, and German peer-reviewers write their comments in German. In addition, narrow submission deadlines after calls for proposals have to date constituted a practical constraint to sufficiently communicate with the African partners (BMBF, and in some cases Volkswagen Foundation).

The DFG and BMBF require that co-funding is provided by partner institutions from the South. This policy can be implemented only in exceptional cases (e.g. by South African universities) and ignores the socio-economic situation of the tertiary education sector in most African countries. As a result, the poorest of countries and universities are not targeted, and, as some German researchers have observed, strong potential partners focus their attention on more generous international players. Therefore it is not surprising that German partners have occasionally resorted to 'creative accounting', i.e. diverting funds meant for the German side to their African colleagues.

In accordance with the expectations of the funding organisations, German applicants create the impression of 'partnership' by a range of strategies. Contact is established by falling back on the support of loyal former PhD students after their return to their countries, by approaching universities or research institutes suitable for the research goals and topics of the German scholar(s), and/or by persuading (reluctant) African actors to per-

form as 'partners' with promises of subsidiary benefits as mentioned above. Lists of African institutes or scholars are included in the project proposals, partners' names are inserted in the list of authors of the proposed (sub-) projects, letters of intent and/or *Memoranda of Understanding* suggestive of harmony and mutual support between the parties are devised. Typically, rhetorical assurance of institutional support in the host country is accepted as sufficient 'evidence' of partnership. With a view to benefiting African partners, the policy of building local academic capacities in the process of research has become an important factor in cooperative projects. However, it needs to be mentioned that the range of potential beneficiaries is quite reduced since the age limitations for PhD research scholarship applicants set by the DAAD and the Humboldt Foundation have so far disregarded the average biography of academics in Africa.²²

As a remarkable exception to the rule the Volkswagen Foundation has devised an alternative funding programme for research partnerships with sub-Saharan African institutions, which requires the joint design of the research projects (cf. Junghanß 2005, Krull 2005).²³ Applicants are advised explicitly to refer to the 'Guidelines for Research in Partnership with Developing Countries' of the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (Kommission für Forschungspartnerschaften in Entwicklungsländern, KFPE 1998), emphasizing the need for participatory, transparent and inclusive procedures of project planning and implementation. Furthermore, as opposed to the BMBF policy of concentrating activities on areas – both geographically and scientifically – of particular interest to Germany, the programme has the potential of including 'weaker' universities by facilitating (limited) infrastructural investments in the partner universities. However, emerging evidence suggests that it suffers from limitations of the funding instruments²⁴ and a lack of sustainability in view of the huge challenges posed by the African context. The programme design also includes a principal-agent problem: While the Volkswagen Foundation performs as a 'principal' on behalf of the African research sector, it is definitely beyond the means of the Foundation to affect and supervise the (non-)participatory project management through its 'agents', i.e. the German partners, or to have them

22 E.g. the Humboldt Foundation offers research fellowships for foreign scientists and scholars holding doctorates up to the age of 40.

23 An emerging pilot programme of the DFG in the domain of infection biology deserves to be mentioned, too. For the first time research funds are allocated also to the African partners, who are, according to the International Office of the DFG, also included in the research design. See also <http://www.dfg.de/aktuelles_presse/pressemitteilungen/2007/presse_2007_22.html>.

24 For example, the duration of scholarships and insufficient incentives for and support of the African supervisors and German project managers.

trained accordingly. The programme has, however, a laudable potential for learning and flexibility, a potential of foundations in general, as opposed to state bureaucracies such as the DFG and BMBF.

Management and leadership problems in collaborative research projects are due to the high pressure on German professors to serve in many functions in teaching, administration etc.: Time to communicate is chronically lacking. These constraints are compounded by a lack of incentives for and/or competence in 'good governance', participatory planning and transparency among top personnel at German universities. Professors, i.e. project leaders, have rarely undergone any training in management skills, and many are not used to cooperate in general²⁵. Traditional priorities in the selection of university chairs focus on purely scientific qualifications. Particularly in the social sciences, academic 'excellence' is conventionally judged by standards that reward the lone academic warrior.²⁶ The social dimensions of collaborative research projects are practically ignored by the funding agencies. Mismanagement and conflicts, however detrimental to the realisation of research objectives, are treated as internal issues that require no measures of regulation or interference.²⁷

The fact that a blind eye is turned to these issues may also be due to institutional shortcomings in the peer-review system prevalent in Germany. Reviewers are rarely invited to inspect the projects' sites abroad. If they do get invited, a façade of co-operation is easily maintained – and supported by agreeable hospitality and exotic excursions. Reviewers may themselves harbour a paternalistic attitude towards African scholars and/or may not have any experience with applied and/or policy-oriented research, i.e. lack criteria for assessing the practicability of, for example, 'decision support systems'. In

25 My own observations are supported by key informants in universities as well as research funding agencies, see also Preißer (1994).

26 Ironically, German organizations such as the DAAD, GTZ and BMZ have generously funded efforts to train academics from the South in management skills, e.g. in the context of the University Staff Development Programme of the University of Kassel, whereas leading German academic staff are left to do business as usual.

27 Mismanagement and abuses of power in academia, and their consequences for scientific practice – frequent subjects constituting 'corridor talk' in many German departments – have been conspicuously neglected by both German reviewers and sociologists of science. This may be due to a fear of 'biting the hand that feeds you' in a peculiar hierarchical system that traditionally demands rituals of subordination, a feudal-like dependency on chairholders and extensive informal networking by those pursuing academic careers. Significantly the author of a polemic 'companion' entitled 'Research the German Way. The Machiavelli for Researchers ...' has used a pseudonym ('Bär' 1996). In addition to a lack of economic incentives, the social aspect has been identified to be one of the reasons for the brain drain among German academics to other countries. Cf. the workshop report by Spiewak (2006).

Germany, applied research and direct support to universities of the South are, above all, the domain of development agencies such as the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, GTZ). Their epistemic domains are largely perceived as separate from the science sector, and communication between these camps has been notoriously difficult (see also Hofmann et al. 2004).

Policies and discourse in other countries of the North

Industrialised countries other than Germany have paid more attention to the issues discussed so far in this paper. Research partnerships with actors from the South have been analysed and debated, corresponding policies have been devised and special institutional facilities and organisations to deal with research partnerships were established – in some cases decades ago. Already in the 1970s other countries without a colonial past set up central institutions specialised in scientific and technical co-operation with developing countries, e.g. Canada, Sweden, and Australia (Gaillard 1994: 32). The institutions in these countries have shown a pronounced interest in problem-oriented and applied research. Related discourse invariably refers to the issue of relevance of research under the ‘development paradigm’ (e.g. Gaillard 1994; Hovland 2003; KFPE 2002; RAWOO 2001; Shrum 1996; SIDA 2004). Canada, Sweden, Norway, the U.S.A., Great Britain, Switzerland and the Netherlands have promoted the independent research of African scholars and supported programmes to bridge the gaps between research and policy, between civil society, scholars and politicians (see, for example, Hovland 2003; Start and Hovland 2004). Bilateral donors have explicitly prioritised the building of Southern research capacity, particularly the Scandinavian agencies. Strengthened research capacity in the South is assumed to have an effect on ‘user engagement’ and on ‘uptake capacity ...’, thus also facilitating communication of Northern-produced development research’ (Hovland 2003: iv; cf. also Steen and Heen 2005).

The Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (RAWOO) and the Swiss KFPE have organised critical assessments of actual practice in previous research programmes and projects as well as demands for improvement (see e.g. Maselli and Sottas 1996, RAWOO 2001). Related discourse includes normative statements demanding a comprehensive participatory approach²⁸. The KFPE operationalised this approach by designing the above-mentioned ‘Guidelines’, which are accessible online in five languages (KFPE 1998).

28 For example: ‘...a genuine willingness to exchange knowledge on an equal basis is indispensable ... If solving development problems is one of the main reasons for the partnership, the Southern partner absolutely must play an autonomous role in shaping the partnership. ... The

Apart from academic capacity building, German policy makers have so far abstained from supporting such measures. In the face of direct and comprehensive funding of research in Africa by other countries, Germany may lose the international competition for competent research partners, the 'best brains' who have chosen to remain in their countries. The incentives and benefits provided by German partners are weak compared to what organisations based in other countries of the North have to offer: construction and equipment of offices (funded only by the BMBF under certain conditions), donations of 4-wheel-drives to conduct field research (not funded by any German agency), donations of books (funded only by the DFG under strict conditions), more generous per diems, more competitive scholarships etc. Therefore, at the project level, German actors wishing to cooperate with excellent African partners may have to accept the frustration of being partners of second or third rank. And German scholars who have found matching research partners may actually be 'free-riding' on the research capacities previously built by other nations that have put a stronger premium on supporting the academic sector in (certain) African countries.

The apparent 'progress' observable in other Northern countries may be historically rooted in a range of factors including extended (post-)colonial experience, higher budgets for development aid and, concomitantly, an ethical commitment to an anti-imperialist/altruistic kind of lobbyism. However, there is no need to idealise the institutional situation in other Northern countries. A critical assessment of the workings of their research policies, the relation between discourse and practice of research co-operation is needed.²⁹ For example, hierarchies and identity politics within the academic systems both in Africa and Northern countries, overambitious project design and the discontinuity of support may constitute severe constraints to participatory collaborative project planning and implementation.³⁰ Like all development policies, the promotion of the tertiary education sector, however restricted, may in fact also serve hidden agendas of establishing spheres of influence and expanding in the respective markets on the continent.

Yet German funding organisations may draw some inspiration from the experiences collected in these programmes (and avoid their mistakes). Among the donor countries, Germany's participation in international debates on research partnerships has certainly been missing for too long.

Southern partner's autonomy definitely has to include the right to decide which type of expertise it wants from the Northern partner, in which quantity, and at which level: junior or senior" (RAWOO 2001: 25-26).

29 For example, van Gastel (2005) has provided an enlightening analysis of discourse and of the political manipulation in the design of research partnership policies in the Dutch Ministry of Development.

30 An instructive evaluation of research partnerships up to the year 2001 was conducted by Maselli et al. (2004)

Lessons to be learnt

What seems to be needed involves institutional changes concerning cooperative research funding in Germany and a review of the system of quality control. Beyond ethical considerations there is also an instrumental reason: Ignorance, misunderstandings, exclusion from information flows and decision-making have generated conflicts that may consume considerable project resources and even obstruct the implementation of future projects.

Removing practical constraints such as age limits for African applicants and permitting the uses of foreign languages in the application and reviewing process appear to be relatively easy. However, the long-term reorientation of incentive structures in the academic sector would require a range of comprehensive policies, including a revision of the review system and the amendment of traditional standards of excellence.

Funding opportunities, calls for research proposals and conditions for application need to be adapted to meet the higher requirements of communication and mutual learning which also includes a South-to-North direction. A complex approach is needed that includes analyses of the academic systems – including the identification of institutional constraints in academic administrations – on both sides. Differing framework conditions, differing interests, perceptions and hidden agendas among the partners should be considered systematically in planning and funding procedures. German scholars interested in studying (in) developing countries require capacity-building in the spheres of contextual knowledge, applied research, (intercultural) communication and management skills.³¹ Particularly projects involving the natural sciences should consider more extensively and systematically the political and socio-economic environment of research projects. Exploratory studies of institutions and interest groups in the host country or project region may serve the ‘demand-orientation’ and feasibility of research, which also implies a critical view of technology transfer; *in toto* ‘... a broadly-based consultative process, however painstaking and time-consuming it may be, should precede any programme’ (Maselli et al. 2004: 37). All of this would require enhanced investments in preparatory and accompanying measures.

In addition to academic excellence in fundamental research, which allows for ivory tower subjects in the fields of e.g. paleo-geology, archeology, botany or linguistics, incentives for well-conceived, demand-oriented collaborative research *outside* the private sector would have to be put in place both for German and African university scholars. The concept of *formative research* may be a starting point. In this research approach the researcher

31 In fact this is implicit in some of the recommendations of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, cf. BMZ (2001).

adopts the role of mediator between 'objects' of a reform and its 'subjects', i.e. the authorities that are in charge of implementation. The objective is to make use of scientific analysis in formulating advice on how to make necessary changes in policy reforms, thus neither compromising the scientific method nor putting the researcher in the position of decision-maker (Steen and Heen 2005: 11). Formative research would be clearly relevant to many an African research context. The diversity of research experiences on the part of African partners could thus be tapped in a constructive way; their perceived 'weakness', i.e. their involvement in development research, may thus be transformed into 'strength'. More scholars need to be attracted to such endeavours, and encouraged to immerse themselves in methodological and ethical complexities beyond the more comfortable practice of fundamental research. Reflexive methodologies and more humility are indispensable in this context.

This is not to deny that there are also limitations to demand-oriented involvement or participatory research in Africa, such as authoritarian modes of research management, elitist attitudes, lack of communication between 'experts'/professionals and local knowledge holders that need to be overcome (cf. also Hagmann and Almekinders 2003). Like in Germany, quality control by gatekeepers with traditional academic values tends to agree with the conservative criteria of excellence in the North (Odora Hoppers 2003). This relates to the question raised by Lonsdale (2005), how African academic colleagues can be helped to become sources of constructive criticism (a question that may of course also be applied to the German side!). Perhaps these bodies with vested interests in conserving the past in Africa could be seduced to diversify their criteria. For successful incorporation of formative demand or policy-oriented research involves the chance of solving the problem of legitimacy of the science sector, which in turn may entail a future increase in public and external funding.

There is ample scope for learning from the variety of measures implemented by other countries of the North, and also from development agencies engaged in research involving tertiary educational institutions. This article can provide but a glimpse of the range of measures taken by research funding agencies in other countries. A careful comparative evaluation of their scope of activities and comparative studies and evaluations of models and experiences of cooperative research could be helpful in the design of innovative programmes in Germany. In the development business, too, many actors have a range of experiences with co-operation and a higher level of self-reflection concerning methodologies of knowledge transfer compared to Germany's academic institutions. However, their experiences and methodologies have to be critically evaluated considering the particular institutional constraints and political interests that the development business is subject to (see e.g. Mosse 2005).

Conclusion

The thrust of this paper has been a critical exploration of structures directing the choices that German scholars make, which is not to deny that there are individual exceptions in the German research landscape. Cases of fruitful co-operation, especially in social science research, do exist. African scholars often command or mobilise important domains of knowledge of their cultures and countries and become major key informants, advisors and even friends to their German counterparts. The 'game' marked both by dominance relations and opportunism may become truly cooperative, especially if the relationship between the players is a long-term one and if the partners respect one another. It seems however, that the German academic system in general is not well equipped to deal with context in African countries. Apart from knowledge gained from chance experiences, German scholars do not command any methods beyond *ad hoc* or trial-and-error procedures. It is still too early to tell whether current developments in German academia, which stress the linkages between science and society, will solve the problems described above. As compared to other countries of the North, however debatable their policies may be, no clear objectives or procedures have so far been institutionalised to effectively integrate the views and competences of research partners from developing countries, let alone the users of prospective research results. In any design of a research project a forum is required to take into account the – inevitably multiple and competing – normative views and interests of a range of actors within society and academic institutions as to what constitutes 'relevant' research. Invariably this would involve opening one's mental doors to the political and ethical challenges, intricacies and traps of demand- or policy-oriented research.

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel gibt einige Einsichten in die Politiken, die Praxis und Probleme der deutsch-afrikanischen Zusammenarbeit bei Forschungsprojekten in Afrika. Eine fruchtbare Zusammenarbeit kann durch mangelndes Bewusstsein der unterschiedlichen Interessen, Wissensgebiete und Kompetenzen auf ökonomischem, sozialen und politischem Gebiet sowie durch ein Machtungleichgewicht und fehlendes Managementgeschick erheblich behindert werden. Diese Faktoren sind mit institutionellen Einschränkungen des deutschen akademischen Bereiches verbunden. Deutschland hält sich offenbar deutlich als Teilnehmer internationaler Debatten und einer (Entwicklungs)politik der Forschungskooperation zwischen dem Norden und dem Süden zurück. Forschungsförderung variiert angesichts der komplexen Realität vor allem in afrikanischen Staaten sehr stark. Eine kritische Analyse der Politik und Praxis der Forschungszusammenarbeit andernorts könnte zu einem Überdenken der gegenwärtigen Politik der Forschungsförderung in Deutschland führen.

Schlüsselwörter

Afrika, Deutschland, Hochschulbildung, internationale Forschungskooperation, ausländische Förderung, Regierungspolitik

Résumé

Cet exposé fournit un aperçu approfondi des institutions, pratiques et problèmes rattachés à la coopération afro-allemande au niveau des projets de recherche dirigés en Afrique. Différences d'intérêts ainsi qu'au niveau du savoir-faire et des compétences, divergences sur le plan économique, social et politique, manque de perception de ces dernières, déséquilibres des pouvoirs et manque de capacités gestionnaires sont susceptibles de nuire gravement à une coopération fructueuse. A ces aspects s'ajoutent les contraintes institutionnelles inhérentes au secteur académique allemand. L'Allemagne a tendance à être remarquablement absente en tant que collaboratrice aux débats internationaux et au niveau de la conception de lignes directrices dans le domaine de la coopération de recherche entre les pays du Nord et du Sud. Les conceptions en matière de financement de la recherche ne sont nullement en harmonie avec les réalités complexes qui règnent en particulier dans des pays africains. Une analyse critique des lignes directrices et des pratiques de coopération de recherche ailleurs permettrait de revoir quelques dispositions actuelles prises par les organisations allemandes qui travaillent dans le domaine du financement de la recherche.

Mots clés

Éducation tertiaire; coopération de recherche internationale; aide étrangère; politique gouvernementale; Allemagne; Afrique

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