

## The rational choice between different truth: a dilemma of international project managers

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## **WORKING PAPER N° 245**

**The Rational Choice Between Different Truths: A Dilemma of International Project Managers**

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# **The Rational Choice Between Different Truths: A Dilemma of International Project Managers<sup>1</sup>**

Peter L. Fedon

## **Introduction**

According to Western orthodoxy, developing countries have to adopt the modernization concept if they are to develop to a similar degree as the industrialized nation states. This genuinely European/North American conception insists on the universal validity of Western thinking and values, regards technical progress as the motor of any development, and maintains the belief in a successful historical evolution towards modernity, entailing economic development by industrialization and promoting civilization by democratization and law. It is based ‘on the genuine conviction that what was good for Western states would also be good for the rest of the world’ (Hartmann, 1995: 122). The collapse of the Second World has been taken as a confirmation that Western capitalist modernization is not only morally superior but represents also the ‘best practice’ approach. Globalization will spread this approach all over the world which will finally lead to prosperity and civilization everywhere. ‘Today, migration of capital, experts, technology and lifestyles from the Northern hemisphere to the Southern hemisphere goes on unabated and is christened as globalization: breaking the boundaries between the remaining two worlds’ (Oommen, 1995: 254).

Oommen’s dispassionate statement alludes to what has been regarded as the second success story of modern market economies after the fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe, namely the emergence of Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) in Asia. South Korea, Singapore and others have shown sustained growth rates over years which Western countries, plagued by economic recession and unemployment, could only dream of. In addition, these NICs and, above all, Japan are obviously able to maintain both growing prosperity and distinct cultural identities. Thus, not only do we find Western consumer products all over the world, but a less superficial observation will at the same time discover non-western features in these countries which cannot be denoted ‘traditional’ in a sense of ‘not yet developed’ or backward.

In fact, empirical research in Southeast Asian cities has unearthed that ‘globalization is not the global extension of one particular culture or society, which then is as closely integrated as a national culture, but the selective transnationalization of diverse parts of cultures... . Most of what we regard as ‘traditional’ or ‘grown’ cultures today are the very result of the coexistence and interaction of several different cultures in the past’ (Berner/Korff, 1995: 208). When in 1994 the USAID was put in charge of development work in America’s inner cities for the first time, development experts came to acknowledge that the periphery has penetrated even the heartland of modernization. At the same point in time and within the same region, we find prosperity and technology as well as marginality and backwardness.

There is a broad consensus about what determines the common interests of East and West: ever expanding markets which guarantee a flow of goods, capital, and information. That this does not include the ‘whole concept’ of the West, e.g., Westminster democracy, human rights as stipulated by the Enlightenment, but also free mobility of labour, is the cause of continuous political quarrelling: ‘Some have argued that democratic political systems are less capable than their authoritarian counterparts of setting a clear economic agenda, whereas others have

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argued that democracies not only are good for growth but also are inherently egalitarian in nature and hence help reduce the domestic gap between rich and poor' (Seligson, 1993: 5).

Thus we are confronted with selected, reinvigorated elements of what used to be a comprehensive modernization approach, mixed with distinct, differing social perceptions defined by local culture and historical experience. In the post-modernism debate, social science discourse has criticized and rejected the notions of Western civilization and modernization concepts, as represented by Norbert Elias' 'Civilising Process' and Max Weber's belief in the development of modern societies as a process of increasing rationalization in which the world loses its mystery. If globalization announces a world without boundaries, post-modernism and new regional associations (NAFTA, APEC, EU) indicate the emergence of fresh boundaries (Schrader 1996). Oomen shows 'how new boundaries do not replace the old ones but rather they tend to coexist. This coexistence is sometimes harmonious but often tension-prone' (Oommen, 1995: 251). But the contestedness and new formation of boundaries is not only a macro-phenomenon. It also has a micro-dimension represented by diverse life patterns, cultural values, and work attitudes. Again, a coexistence can be harmonious but will more often create tensions or even clashes along cultural fault lines.

In organizational theory rather than in management literature a post-modern debate echoes current organizational problems (for an overview: Hassard/Parker, 1993). Whether the new drive for anti-hierarchical decentralization, professional autonomy and management of culture really defines a new post-modern, post-industrial paradigm needs to be investigated. It seems doubtful that we can get these insights from a management literature with its focus on today's 'leading edge' companies which by routine turn out to be the losers of the next 'management revolution' a few years later. In management literature, the universalism of dominating North American best-practice approaches has hardly been questioned by the mainstream discussion. They advocate solutions to business problems which, sometimes heroic but always confident, suggest that the 'problems of our time' can be solved.

What is missing is a discourse linking social theory and practice which could give managers confidence to deal with perplexing situations in a productive way. Lamenting about uncertainty, fragmentation and other 'post-modern' social conditions does not offer viable solutions. What if the environment has been even more turbulent some decades ago, and today's turbulent feelings are only a reflection that something happened which was not anticipated by our prevailing inflexible systems (Mintzberg, 1989: 341)? Oommen has stated that 'the rise and fall, the construction and deconstruction of various types of boundaries – biological, psychological, geographical, cultural, social, political, economic – is the very story of human civilisation and of contemporary social transformation' (Oommen, 1995: 251).

If we look at official development assistance and technical cooperation in particular, academic discourse and non-academic practice still seem to be worlds apart even though they share common concepts of development and globalization and their practical consequences. For a long time, the post-modern discourse hardly influenced the philosophy, outlook, or structure of organizations dealing professionally with development. The reason may be that the radical 'fatalism and resignation it produced' (Alexander, 1994: 180) was conflicting with the basic assumptions and *raison d'être* of organizations charged with bringing about 'progress' in developing countries.

As a response to the criticism of modernization a 'culturist' approach to development cooperation has emerged since about 1980 which tries to consider socio-cultural factors for project planning and implementation. However, the fundamentals of the modernist concept have not come under full scrutiny but were merely amended, leaving the well-oiled machine of technology transfer intact. Thus, in his 'Critical Self-Reflection of Social Science Involvement in GTZ Over the last 10 Years', Uwe Kievelitz comes to the rather disillusioned conclusion that

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'regarding the comprehension of the relation between culture and development, it seems that even after 10 years of discussion, many people understand the "socio-cultural dimension" as a black box, or a residual category' (Kievelitz, 1991: 12). This statement should not obscure the fact that development agencies do reflect the difficulties confronting the implementation of the modernization approach. They are increasingly concerned about the emerging consequences of Western-style modernization, and are trying to deal with evidence conflicting with Western management procedures: 'In the running debate on modernization, the tide is gradually turning against our long-standing conviction that Westernization or in fact Americanization is the inevitable companion of modernization' (Hartmann, 1995: 123).

Since more than a decade, German technical cooperation has introduced and continuously improved methods and procedures of participatory project planning, institutional development, and socio-economic project appraisal involving more and more local expertise. 'Project management decisions, which have long since ceased to be of a purely 'technical' nature, will be taken on site through agreement between seconded "experts" – who will become fewer and fewer in number – and ever better qualified local specialists' (GTZ, 1992: 10). Only recently, with the publication of its new guidelines for project implementation (GTZ, 1995), GTZ has explicitly acknowledged that differing concepts and views in partner countries, increasingly dynamic project environments, but also negative experiences with the rigid application of GTZ's own planning tools necessitate an entirely new management approach. It is yet too early to predict the consequences of this new approach in terms of project design and personnel policies. It is the objective of this presentation to anticipate some possible new answers in this field by illuminating both, conventional and newly emerging project designs, corresponding organizational patterns, and eventually the roles and the dilemma of expatriate managers.

## **Objectives in the Air ... – and Machine Bureaucracy on Earth**

The conventional project design in technical cooperation 'consists of a set of prescribed steps ideally beginning with problem specification and concluding with post-project evaluation' (van Reenen/Waisfisz, 1988: 28). It consists of 'technical' inputs within the framework of a blueprint approach. Inevitably, the specific management task is 'to reach the planned targets and achieve the objectives using the resources allocated within the prescribed time frame' (van Reenen/Waisfisz, 1988: 28), relying 'on methods and procedures (...) that assume a high degree of certainty in a world in which "the correct solutions" are not always clear – in which the only certainty is that there will be a large degree of uncertainty surrounding the most effective way of promoting economic and social change in developing countries' (1988: 61).

Uncertainty about goals and methods is reflected in new approaches to project design. The engineering project has lost some of its charms since more 'soft' components like participation, institutional and organizational development are required to be included in the menu – at least during the initial phase of a project. Turner and Cochrane (1993) describe four types of projects which differ in the degree of definition of their goals and their methods to achieve these goals.

A majority of projects, though basically of the engineering type, nowadays carry traits of the Type 4 project because they are dealing with a high degree of uncertainty, e.g. with organizational change which is deemed necessary to embed ‘technical’ inputs in an appropriate environment. In most cases this kind of ‘soft underbelly’ of projects is merely regarded as one ‘component’ of the technically dominated overall design. But this component has a tendency to dominate the course of implementation at critical points of the projects, and most certainly at the beginning. Turner and Cochrane (1993: 95) associate this type with the element ‘Air’, because ‘they are difficult to take hold of, and deliver “blue-sky” research objectives’. It requires a lot of creativity to define appropriate methods and to negotiate goals at all levels during an iterative communication process with all stakeholders. The project manager’s role is that of an eagle because ‘he must be able to soar above the project, and to see in its context (purpose), but be able to move down into the project to solve problems as they occur’ (Turner and Cochrane 1993: 97).

An ‘airy’ project design would correspond well with an organizational structure which Henry Mintzberg (1992) calls ‘adhocracy’. In adhocracies, multidisciplinary expert teams are formed for specific projects on a case-by-case basis, e.g. in progressive consulting firms, creative advertising agencies, or innovative engineering consultants. Their members are professional employees who have acquired their high calibre qualifications and knowledge through formal degree programmes, concentrating on innovations in a complex and dynamic environment. In order to guarantee maximum flexibility (NASA’s Manned Space Flight Center changed its structure seventeen times during their first eight years of existence) the predominant mechanism of coordination is consensus-based mutual consultation. This implies many ‘contact positions’, i.e. persons who coordinate between different functional units and project teams within a flat hierarchy. Unlike in the bureaucracy, conflicts between these highly individualistic experts or ‘knowledge workers’ are not to be subdued, but need to be transformed into productive work processes. This requires excellent social and leadership skills of project leaders. Adhocracies are expensive and are not suitable to implement simple tasks and duties. High communication costs are related to the continuous necessity of consensus building.

Mintzberg (1989: 339) criticizes the fact that even under conditions of accelerated change and uncertainty, the predominant organizational structure remains what he calls the ‘machine bureaucracy’, which is ‘characterized by specialized and standardized work, formalized procedure, close control through rules and regulations, clear hierarchy of authority, formalized

planning to formulate strategies before implementation'. The machine as the ideal type of human organization has both a constructive and a destructive side. It can provide unmatched reliability of service – Mintzberg cites McDonald's and the Swiss railroad as examples. To a certain degree it resembles Max Weber's concept of bureaucracy, emphasizing the impersonal, legitimate use of power according to rational rules. In fact, machine bureaucracy must be regarded not merely as one form of structure; it is the structure commonly found – in the West. 'Asian and African foreign students, migrants, and refugees often have great practical and emotional problems in understanding the impersonal, machine-like bureaucracies of Western countries (...) A considerable part of the failure of development assistance projects carried out by engineers from developed countries in the Third World is because of unrecognized organizational model differences' (Hofstede, 1991: 144).

According to Mintzberg, some of the factors turning organizations into machine bureaucracies are the following:

- 'Obsession with control. Control is the driving force in these structures – control of workers, control of markets, control of the future, control of whatever might control them. (...) Bringing things under control is exactly what their planning systems are designed to' (1989: 341).
- 'An irrational form of 'rationality'... meaning to emphasize a strictly logical, explicit, and analytical – basically linear – form of reasoning. Everything must be worked out in advance, ideally based on numerical calculation ... and above all, have it down on paper' (1989: 342). Organograms showing how people are connected to a boss, plans which record everything that must happen, are the symbols of a narrow form of rationality which excludes 'intuition' and 'judgement'.
- Domination by technocrats and administrators: 'The rules, the standards, the data, the rationales, these come from the administrators – line managers, ... planners, systems people, accountants' (1989: 348). The strength of the machine bureaucracy, 'to seal itself off from environmental forces in order to rationalize its operations', has concentrated all power in the hands of the people who run the systems. Following Mintzberg, this kind of 'professional management' 'produced gains in organizational efficiency so great that it eventually destroyed organizational effectiveness' (349).

As Platje/Seidel (1993: 210) indicate, 'concepts used in organizational sociology show that managing a portfolio of projects using centralized planning and control (general management) and formalized procedures can set up a vicious circle, resulting in (...) a downwards spiral of demotivation, rigidness and increasing planning and control'. The saga about big donor organizations is that they are 'successful failures', becoming bigger and bigger and at the same time lose sight of what have been the reasons for their founding. Instead of serving their members and clients, projects are increasingly instrumentalized to maintain big turnover and big headquarters. Such organizational structures also reduce commitment, as the overwhelming concern is about figures, plans, and regulations – not about people.

Starting in 1996, GTZ is going to undertake a transformation into a new type of decentralized organizational structure which bears some similarities with an adhocracy organization. It is based on the assumption of many project-oriented companies that 'neither dominating national headquarters nor extensive regional decentralisation can solve the problems competently alone' (Schneider, 1995: 247). Corresponding project designs, however, are emerging very slowly in the framework of development cooperation. Apart from a lack of explicit demand by 'clients' in developing countries, e.g. for assistance in promoting organizational change, there are considerable uncertainties, and success is difficult to quantify. It is, consequently, easier to follow the basic pattern of the Type 1 engineering project. The designed-in-advance solution fits the 'engineers' and economists' normal preoccupation with infrastructure,

budgets, targets and schedules' (Chambers, 1993: X). No doubt, we are still talking about 'technical' cooperation with a capital T.

Thus we also learn about the most probable parameters of an expatriate's loyalty towards his/her employer, the donor agency. It is the machine bureaucracy 'at home' which will finally make the decision whether the project and its staff have been successful. It will count on quantifiable indicators which are 'visible' at headquarters in Europe or in the United States thus exercising an enormous pressure on project staff based abroad to deliver the right balance sheets, 'hard facts', and 'objective' data (no opinion, please!). The blueprint approach of the engineering project serves this purpose best. It produces disastrous results, however, if 'local' commitment is needed, goals and methods are in flux, and culturally biased behaviour becomes a problem in multicultural teams.

### **The Expatriate Virtuoso – a Manager of 'Mission Impossible' ?**

As stated by the OECD, 'the success of Technical Cooperation depends largely on the expert's competence and ability to transmit knowledge and experience and help create effective institutions' (OECD, 1991: 13). Thus the basic assumption which determines the role of expatriates in developing countries can be described as follows: A given organization and/or country lacks a certain expertise, consisting of knowledge and skill and necessary to solve a problem or a multitude of difficult tasks. The encountered problems and difficulties are perceived as 'objective' facts which can only be tackled by employing expatriate manpower. Based on their superior knowledge of the subject matter, the expatriates have to find the causes behind the problems to know what needs to be done. They have to collect data and elaborate the 'right' diagnosis in order to prescribe a solution for the given problem from their expert point of view.

This view characterizes the expatriate primarily as a specialist on certain subject matters or an 'expert'. In contrast, the so-called 'local counterpart' is automatically defined as having not (yet) the required expertise or being (still) a layman. Thus the local becomes ignorant regarding his or his organization's/country's own problems whereas the expert's knowledge is assumed to be applicable in any specific context. More or less all large consulting companies are based on this idea of standardized solutions, selling their advisory services like trademark products (e.g. Arthur D. Little's 'Management of the High Achieving Organization', Gemini's 'Transformation by Re-engineering', or McKinsey's cost accounting methods).

In technical cooperation, there is traditionally a second role for expatriates, namely that of managers within a local context for a limited period of time, mostly as project managers. In this position expatriates obviously depend on local resources in order to be successful. Without the support of local staff, business or project partners, they are not able to achieve their goals and objectives. Without adjusting to the rules and 'logic' of the local environment they will meet insurmountable obstacles. In fact, language and cultural problems encountered by such managers have contributed to a lasting debate about the usefulness and efficiency of long-term assignments for expatriates. The latest in a series of well publicized critiques came from Edward Jaycox, Vice-President Africa of the World Bank. He argues in favour of local capacity building instead of using 'expatriate resident technical assistance to solve all kinds of problems. (...) This is in fact an endemic problem in the donor community – expatriate management substituting for domestic management' (Jaycox, 1993: 2). According to World Bank project implementation rules, the former tasks of resident expatriates are now done by headquarters staff in Washington: Analyzing the local situation and prescribing expert solutions for local deficiencies with a lesser degree of expatriate management input.

In response to this criticism, the ideal-type expatriate in technical cooperation has been the 'advisor' to the local client system for more than a decade, confining the management role to

the handling of the external contributions of the respective donor (which, as a general rule, amount to some 80% of the total project input). It has somehow been overlooked, however, that an advisory role based on impartiality and know-how can by no means be combined with the position of a ‘CEO’ of the major shareholder in the project. The budgetary power of the donor country’s seconded managers makes them insiders and entails decisions not only about the number of stars of the seminar hotel but also about daily allowances of participating project partners – the same persons they should advise in their ‘other’ role as external advisors.

This upgraded version of the old expert is requested to develop a challenging profile, combining subject matter related know-how with analytical and diagnostic capabilities. Trained in methods of consultancy, such advisors are advocating, mediating, managing and innovating at the same time. Common sense is enough to tell us that even a ‘virtuoso’ of development co-operation cannot survive in the midst of conflicting requirements of donor administration, political agendas and local expectations. Consequently, training courses for technical cooperation staff aiming to strengthen such a combination of skills and knowledge are not very much in demand. Those who idealistically ‘try to cope with the economic, ecological, institutional, cultural, and social conditions of a specific situation without neglecting their technical expert know-how or ignoring their management tasks will soon show the well-known symptoms of professional burn-out’ (Fedon, 1995: 4).

Arthur and Bennet (1995) have investigated the relative importance of social and psychological factors perceived to contribute to success of expatriate staff. Of the five groups of success factors ‘family situation’ came first, followed by ‘flexibility/adaptability’, ‘job knowledge and motivation’, ‘relational skills’, and eventually ‘extra-cultural openness’ (1995: 99).

The arguments provided so far have shown that ‘technology transfer by Western experts’ hardly translates into the practice of project implementation by multicultural teams. Much about this gap between ‘grand global designs’ of technical cooperation and daily local project implementation still remains to be investigated. Simple, conventional explanations denouncing deviant behaviour of counterparts who do not share the same concepts and values, can be rejected at this point. ‘The degree of compliance of counterparts can vary. The most superficial level of compliance is saying “yes”, but doing “no”. A deeper level of compliance is saying yes, more or less behaving accordingly, but thinking no. The deepest level of compliance is saying yes, doing yes, and thinking yes only during the time the experts are around’ (van Reenen/Waisfisz, 1988: 26). Polemic and bleak as it may be, this statement reveals how illusory it is to assume that cooperation is about people from one culture trying to help people within another culture to do things better.

Role confusion seems inevitable if the seconded expatriate has to be the technical expert, the advisor, and the manager representing the majority shareholder in the project at the same time. If we add the ‘corset’ of project design (according to the Oxford Dictionary, a corset is ‘a close-fitting undergarment worn to shape or support the body’) and the pressures of the donor’s agency’s organizational structure, the expatriate ends up with difficult choices to make.

## The Expatriate’s Dilemma

A dilemma is a situation in which an actor has to take a choice between alternatives that are equally undesirable. In the following I will summarize some of the predicaments of project managers seconded to Technical Assistance projects in developing countries.

In its ‘Draft Principles for New Orientations in Technical Cooperation’, the OECD stipulates that ‘every effort should be made, at both the institutional and inter-personal levels, to eliminate any relation of inferiority which the traditional TC approach may engender and

achieve a true partnership' (OECD, 1991: 5). However, the unbalanced expert/layman relationship of the traditional approach is not merely a matter of psychological concern but represents the logic of an approach deeply rooted in Western beliefs about knowledge, technology, and rationality prevailing in any given context. The unfulfilled promise is that the structurally defined gap is only temporary and will disappear over time. If this is common knowledge, how then can an expatriate justify his role, tasks and length of assignment?

It is assumed that values like 'punctuality, hard work, achievement, and other "industrial" values are the keys to unlocking the economic potential of poor countries' (Seligson, 1993: 5) – values of modernization which, from this perspective, counterparts have not (yet) adapted to. According to Geert Hofstede (1991: 236), 'the main cultural differences among nations lie in values' which constitute the 'mental software' and dominate 'patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting'. We have every reason to believe that diverse values, but also variables like gender, social class and generation differences do indeed play a major part in making cross-cultural cooperation difficult and confusing for the managers involved. 'Only 22 per cent of Swedes feel there is problem with "bypassing the hierarchical line in order to have efficient work relationships", compared to 46 per cent of Germans and 75 per cent of Italians. Again only 10 per cent of Swedes feel a manager should "have at hand precise answers to most of the questions that his subordinates may raise about their work", by contrast with 53 per cent of the French and 78 per cent of the Japanese managers' (Goffee/Jones, 1995: 245).

What, then, is 'the truth'? Which rational decision regarding his own behaviour and the modes of cooperation should the manager of a multinational team make? When 'correct' technical solutions are to be harmonized with human conditions which are diverse and in a continuous flux, the latter have a tendency to prevail, jeopardizing 'technical progress' due to lack of discipline, commitment, follow-up, and an overall neglect of human relations. 'As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. What is soft can be strong' (Low, 1995: 301). Given the mission statement of seconded expatriates, the common machine-type headquarters and their own cultural bias, how can development managers integrate diverse cultural life and work patterns? How can they still be successful in the conventional blueprint, 'hard facts' way?

Expatriate managers often feel like being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. They experience a geographical and cognitive distance towards their native country, and at the same time there is a cultural and emotional distance in relation to their host country. Post-modern arguments of ambivalence, relativism, and fragmentation therefore have a lot of attraction for those who are daily confronted with 'different truths' because they live and work in parts of the world other than where they have been brought up, educated and started their professional career. Still bonded by cultural preferences – and in most cases by their headquarters' ethnocentric, machine bureaucratic mechanisms –, they have to cope with views and facts often diametrically opposed to their own truths and beliefs: 'One-sided nationally controlled orders from company headquarters block cooperation and emphasize cultural differences, and thus render the assumption of joint responsibility difficult' (Schneider, 1995: 250).

Although responsibilities and duties of local partners are formally set down in project documents and government agreements, the expatriate project manager will in most cases be finally held responsible for the results of the project – not only by his superiors but also by visiting journalists, politicians, or worst: social scientists. He is held 'accountable'. From a headquarters' point of view this literally means 'keep your figures straight', give priority to your accounting system, neatly collect all used airline tickets and record every cookie consumed in your office – by guests only, of course (the rule forbids consumption of project-paid food by staff). Expertise and efforts of all kind become second priority if the accounting is not done in time and properly, which means according to the rules of the head office – whatever may be pressing needs of project implementation. 'From a cultural point of view accounting

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systems in organizations are best understood as uncertainty-reducing rituals, fulfilling a cultural need for certainty, simplicity, and truth in a confusing world, regardless of whether this truth has any objective base. Trevor Gambling ... has written that much of accounting information is after-the-fact justification of decisions that were taken for non-logical reasons in the first place' (Hofstede, 1991: 155).

Modifying Mintzberg's words on management and money, we may ask: 'How in the world did the idea spread in technical cooperation that you are successful by managing technical inputs, instead of dealing with people and diverse cultural patterns?' Do we overlook the wood for the trees? And still, project managers are selected above all according to their technical expertise and formal degrees. Recipient countries themselves continue to ask for the 'super technician' only to be disappointed if he cannot deal with the human side of project management. Above I have already indicated how the job description of the 'expatriate virtuoso' leads to the burn-out syndrome because the 'enriched' modernization concept hopelessly over-burdens recruitment policies.

Under the heading 'U.S. Envoy to Ireland: A Controversial 'Catalyst'', the International Herald Tribune recently portrayed Jean Kennedy Smith as the person who has masterminded an abrupt change in U.S. foreign policy on Northern Ireland, brokering serious attempts to end a cruel conflict of 25 years. However, 'some in her own government accuse Kennedy Smith of 'going native''. In State Department jargon, diplomats who over-identify with a host country are said to suffer from 'clientitis'. Being unconventional, innovative, and deeply involved with the host country can be as wrong as being detached, neutral or even critical. In the latter case the narrow form of bureaucratic rationality could prevent the envoy or expatriate manager from 'getting to terms with local culture' which is usually a devastating verdict.

Whatever deep and emphatic relationship may exist between the local and the foreign expert, it will always be entangled with these sometimes hidden, sometimes openly visible, but always conflicting agendas, which are deeply rooted in Western orthodox thinking on development and modes of cooperation with developing countries.

## **0Perspectives of 'Dialogue and Learning Oriented' Project Management**

Successful expatriate managers have learned to accommodate differing 'realities' in order to be successful. They become 'knowledge workers who (...) are not amenable to the command-and control methods of the past' (Drucker, 1992: 329). They learn the hard way that reality is a product of perception and that modes of perceptions are depending on a particular consensus within a specific group, company, country, or culture. Thus, fundamental terms like truth, reality, development, even personal success and achievement become accepted as relative terms which are 'represented' differently, depending on the (cultural) context. This may sound indifferent or even insensitive. Experience shows, however, that there are two important principles which determine successful intercultural encounters: First of all, expatriates need to accept that 'there is no normal view in cultural matters' (Hofstede, 1991: 235). Second, it is only by maintaining our own cultural identity that we can meet other cultures with an open mind and cooperate successfully.

More recently, 'empowering value concepts' enabling managers to increase their awareness of themselves and of others have been propagated by management books. They emphasize context, synthesis, synergy, 'information rich in detail and color, far beyond what can be quantified and aggregated' (Mintzberg, 1989: 354). The approach deals with wisdom – 'a word that seems to have been lost in English language. It suggests deep knowledge, based on substantial experience – intimate experience' (1989: 357). Low Sui Pheng's ambition to merge Western and Eastern management philosophies and beliefs aims to benefit managers who have

been ‘trained in the West but have found it necessary to practise in the East at present as well as in the future’ (1995: 297). It does not have to be East Asian wisdom: Laurie Beth Jones demonstrates how Christian wisdom based on the bible can be used for ‘visionary leadership’ (Jones, 1995). Digging for ancient wisdom can apparently create better acceptance of diversity and, thus, provide a foundation for more competent and ‘knowledgeable’ management styles. Whatever helps expatriates to start and maintain a dialogue, avoiding one-way communication, will help them to free themselves ‘from the mental prison of the normal view’ (Chambers) which is a precondition to concentrate on learning, lateral thinking, and wisdom instead on conventional ‘quick fix’, best practice, top-down, ethnocentric recipes.

Collective learning, people-centred participatory approaches to project planning and implementation, and leadership styles which are based on wise judgement and personal cultural awareness represent major characteristics of a management approach which I call ‘learning and dialogue oriented’. Its design is based on diverse field experiences in multinational projects and comprising multicultural feedback. It is people-centred, and its focus is on problem-solving, continuous adaptation, and exploiting opportunities as they emerge. The approach aims at changing behaviour and attitudes by continuous and experiential learning. Flexible choice, adaptation and improvisation of methods are the indicators of successful performance.

The role of the expatriate manager is the ‘eagle’ of the ‘air’-project, reflecting internal conditions and external environments in a holistic way, being concerned with empowerment of team members, and acting as a facilitator and provider of choice. It is worthwhile to elaborate more details of such a ‘learning and dialogue oriented’ project management approach at another occasion, keeping in mind the following motto: ‘The first step to learning is to challenge those ways of thinking that worked so well in the past’ (McGill and Slocum, 1993: 67).

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