The Development World: Conflicts of Interest at All Levels

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ABSTRACT

We analyze the multitude of conflicts of interest to which all actors in the development chain are subject. Our aim is to reflect on how the findings of research and evaluations conducted on development interventions of all kinds can be biased as a result. This analysis rests on an inclusive definition of conflict of interest, which exists whenever an actor's public stance is constrained by interests that put pressure on him or her to either express statements that contradict his or her own perceptions or knowledge, or to withhold criticism that he or she would otherwise be prepared to express. We illustrate the analysis with many cases based on our long experience in the field. Identifying problems encountered by a development intervention must be understood as a key step in formulating solutions adapted to local contexts.

KEYWORDS

conflict of interest, development, Non Governmental Organizations, research, evaluation, donors

Introduction

Addressing the issue of conflicts of interest in the South brings to mind the pharmaceutical industry[1] or mining companies in Africa. There is extensive scientific literature on how these companies elicit favourable evaluations (Campbell & Dufort, 2016; Lachenal, 2014; Ouvrier *et al.*, 2015).

Social engineering for development (Olivier de Sardan, 2021) is also subject to countless conflicts of interest, often of a different nature. While existing literature mentions some aspects of conflicts of interest, such as consultancy (Olivier de Sardan, 2011), development experts (Jampy, 2012; Laporte, 2015), per-diems, or Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) (Pérouse de Montclos, 2012; Ridde, 2016), these remain the exceptions. Conflicts of interest seem to fall under what Geissler (2013) called, concerning public health, "public secrets."

To address this issue, we need to define what we mean by "conflict of interest." Conflicts of interest are commonly associated with the links that experts, who are supposed to independently evaluate an object (a public policy, an intervention, a research or a product), have with private for-profit firms involved in the issue.

In this paper, we intend to broaden this understanding in two dimensions. On the one hand, it is not mainly private for-profit firms that are at the origin of conflicts of interest in the development world, but international institutions, public agencies, states, and NGOs, most of which are not-for-profit and all of which intend to work to improve the living conditions of vulnerable populations (Li, 2007). On the other hand, we want to go beyond the world of experts: development aid, which in many ways functions as a special kind of "rent," generates conflicts of interest from the top to the bottom of the development chain, including among the final beneficiaries.

Our approach, therefore, requires an original and inclusive definition. Conflict of interest happens when an actor involved at any level in social

1 Financial interests in the medical field would increase the positive evaluation of outcomes by a factor of 3 to 5; some authors have proposed an instrument to measure conflicts of interest in criminological research and intervention (Eisner & Humphreys, 2012).

engineering for development and humanitarian aid feels it necessary to express views that contradict his or her perceptions or knowledge, to withhold the criticism that he or she would be willing to express, or to ignore the problems that an intervention faces.

When actors or organisations do not make criticisms or reject without debate those that are made, when they systematically justify their practices, and do not accept that they are questioned, this is a conflict of interest – whether the motives are financial, symbolic, or institutional. A conflict of interest, in this broad meaning, implies deafness to the criticisms of others, as well as self-censorship towards one's own criticisms, because any public expression of criticism is perceived as a threat to one's position in the development business.

The professional world of development (the "developmentist configuration"[2]) is an arena in which everyone's voice is strongly constrained by the interests of all the actors involved in keeping their reticence, their doubts, their reservations, and their criticisms quiet. It is a world where self-congratulation, self-regulation, laudatory discourse, the promotion of interventions, and the use of stereotypical language is prevalent. The World Bank is a great producer of wonderful success stories (Gautier & Ridde, 2018; Olivier de Sardan, 2021).

There are many actors involved in a conflict of interest. They come from very disparate institutions or social backgrounds, are subject to very different constraints, and are at very different levels of power. The conflicts of interest that dissuade them from raising issues or expressing criticism are therefore not all of the same nature. Nevertheless, they all follow a common logic: if development projects are to be extended, it is better to demonstrate their benefits and communicate their successes than to point out their weaknesses and draw attention to their failures. Conflicts of interests are not only individual, although they sometimes are (e.g. career management, seeking a promotion, search for consultancy, etc.), but also institutional

2 The developmentist configuration (Olivier de Sardan, 2005) includes all the actors involved in development social engineering or significantly concerned by development funds (international actors of course, but also national actors, such as local governments, state agents, or so called "civil society").

(e.g. to maintain the image of a development agency, to obtain funding for an NGO, to communicate on the successes of an administration, to show donors that their money is being well used, etc.).

To analyse the reluctance to criticism, which is typical of the development world, we will consider three different levels. Firstly, we will look at evaluations of interventions, which pose specific problems, insofar as conflicts of interest result in evaluators minimising or ignoring difficulties and problems in their reports. In this article, we take a broad view of the evaluation of interventions which, in addition to a value judgement on an intervention, as proposed by Patton (1997), also include monitoring. We will then look at the actors who have an operational role in the implementation process of interventions: NGO agents, on the one hand, and civil servants in the South, on the other. Faced with the daily *implementation gaps* between the intervention "on the paper" and "on the ground," they often act as if these gaps do not exist and focus solely on achieving the expected objectives while ignoring the unexpected effects. We conclude by analysing why the populations targeted by the programmes do not express their disagreements and frustrations either.

In conclusion, we will reflect on some possible options for opening up the world of development to more criticism, which seems indispensable. Researchers and stakeholders have numerous criticisms (Hutchinson, 2019), but public debates on conflicts of interest are rare. Accepting criticism and taking it into account is indeed a necessary step if we want to improve the quality of the services offered to populations, promote intervention mechanisms that are better adapted to local contexts and get out of the uninterrupted flow of standardised "travelling models" (Gautier *et al.*, 2018; Olivier de Sardan, 2021). How can we access a reality that is very different from the official stories? And how can we make this reality heard by the development institutions' leaders and their donors? Our aim is not to condemn development institutions, but to enable them to improve their actions towards local populations by considering the biases and deviations that their interventions encounter on the ground.

A final clarification is in order. The empirical material we will mobilise comes from our own experience of some twenty years of involvement and research concerning interventions promoted by development institutions. The cases on which we will draw are not exceptional but, on the contrary, are typical of situations encountered in the development world. Of course, there are also exceptions, and we have observed organisations or actors who are open to criticism. In the future, it would be essential to organise (and fund) a program of conceptual and empirical research to analyse in depth, and with a multiple case study approach, situations that we will only explore briefly here. Our article should be understood more as a reflexive analysis based on our professional experiences (Tremblay & Parent, 2014) in order to draw attention to a relatively underestimated problem rather than the product of a systematic comparative research.

1. The evaluators

In the general field of programme evaluation, conflicts of interest were addressed a long time ago by Scheirer (1978), who mentioned the cognitive mechanisms that can lead evaluators to favour the positive effects of interventions. She cited a review of the literature from 1969-1973 showing that "evaluators who were organizationally affiliated with the program being evaluated were much more likely to report program success (58%) than were non-affiliated researchers (14%)." These phenomena were first largely ignored when it comes to evaluations of development programmes in Africa. Subsequently, while it is true that most development organisations have long outsourced evaluation to avoid (in principle) these biases, the fact that they pay consultants to evaluate the interventions they fund poses particular challenges. In the field of evaluation, and in particular in the development field, there is a dichotomy between internal and external evaluation. Internally, the monitoring and evaluation of interventions by employees of the organisation is common practice to monitor activities and draw lessons (capitalisation), and sometimes to produce reports on the effectiveness of these interventions, even if the methods used do not always allow it. The links of interest are obvious and clear, since the evaluation is carried out by employees of the organisation being evaluated. Nevertheless, this is not in itself a "bad practice" and this is sometimes recommended by action research, participatory evaluation, or developmental evaluation approaches (Patton, 2010).

As for external evaluations, which are supposed to be independent and therefore more "objective", they are very generally carried out by consultants (individually or on behalf of consultancy firms) who are constantly looking for contracts. It is in their interest to be gentle with their mandating institutions, especially when they are a major development agency. The implicit pressure to stop using consultants who are too critical hangs over their shoulders.

A consultant's long-term privileged relationship with the same donor or development operator, to whom he or she becomes de facto indebted, is almost never declared. Everyone acts as if this were not a problem, as if this connivance could not bias the results:

> Burundi is often highlighted in international health systems research conferences as one of the few countries that have been able to combine a free health care policy with a performance-based financing (PBF) process. Both types of reforms have been the subject of much empirically-based criticism (Olivier de Sardan & Ridde, 2018; Paul *et al.*, 2018). In contrast, evaluations of the PBF by organisations promoting this "travelling model" are generally very positive, or when they are not, they are not published (case of Benin). They are carried out by a range of consultants and consultancies, who are also heavily involved in promoting PBF and praising its benefits, particularly through the facilitation of a community of practice. For example, the Burundi Ministry of Health awarded a large contract in 2019 to evaluate its national PBF policy to a European consulting firm whose members had taken public positions in favour of PBF, notably through its numerous evaluations but also as implementor of the PBF in Africa funded by development banks.

Beyond the connivance that can exist between consultants and donors, the structural framework of the consultation does not allow for an in-depth and therefore critical investigation. The consultants have very little time to carry out their evaluations. Although they may use secondary databases, they have a tight budget that does not allow them to stay in the field for long. They work on the basis of terms of reference and specifications imposed by the sponsors, who dictate what should be studied and how. There is little room for manoeuvre on these terms. They must follow these instructions or risk not being selected or paid:

> For thirty million [dollar] programmes of a development agency, the selected consultancy firm had, in addition to the time previously spent on desk review

> and interviews with programme managers at central level, only 10 days per country to understand the complexity of setting up a project spanning several years and several countries. It could not, of course, study unintended effects, either positive or negative, nor conduct in-depth interviews with all the actors involved. (HERA, 2018)

Finally, it sometimes happens that the sponsors of evaluations censor passages in consultants' reports that are not to their liking. The practice of restitution of evaluations to those responsible for the intervention (feedback), which is in itself positive, often becomes an opportunity to question the inconvenient results or critical formulations, sometimes with the explicit threat of the report not being "validated" (which implies no payment). These forms of censorship are almost systematically accepted by the consultants, who themselves often come to anticipate them and practice self-censorship. These issues have long been known to evaluation researchers (Hutchinson, 2019). Although there are attempts to avoid these consultancy-specific biases with utilization-focused and real world evaluation (Patton, 1997; Bamberger *et al.*, 2006), putting these principles into practice is more difficult than formulating them in academic books. Evaluation practice in Africa, for example, is often far from these principles (Ridde *et al.*, 2016).

The opposition between internal and external evaluation is relative. External evaluations are far from independent. In extreme cases, conflicts of interest in evaluation can be directly financial:

> For example, in the case of the Burundi PBF evaluation mentioned above, one of the experts (which has carried out numerous evaluations for donors on the subject) recently disclosed, after a long period of concealment, that he was a shareholder in a firm selling technology platforms to countries engaging in the PBF. (Korachais *et al.*, 2020)

Sometimes forms of direct bribery can occur. In some countries, and with some institutions, kickbacks from consultants to the person commissioning a study are the norm (10-20% of the contract). Anyone who does not play along is excluded from the contract. Such practices have often been reported to us, including in some UN organisations and African governments. They are not the exclusive preserve of African consultants and consultancy firms; some European or North American consultancy firms are known for participating in them. Another frequent practice is to entrust highly profitable studies to protégés or political friends, resulting in rushed investigations and botched reports, which often are not disseminated or accessible:

> A consultancy firm set up by a former health minister of a European country who became a special adviser to a Central African Country President was commissioned by the latter to carry out a study on the reform of his health insurance system. The firm's report was billed at 1 million euros for some 15 pages unsupported by evidence. In the field, the consultant visited the most remote hospitals for one hour each, and after a helicopter trip! Faced with the paucity of the report, the country had to launch a new series of consultations conducted by dozens of European and African experts… and paid for by the inhabitants of this country in the form of the reimbursement by the state of the loan granted by the African Development Bank for these studies. (Ridde & Ekwa-Ngui, 2005)

Finally, we should mention the case of researchers who do consultancy work. Researchers have statutory and financial independence that consultants do not have, because their salary does not depend on the donors or implementers even if they are dependent on external funding for developing research programmes, which is becoming more the norm than the exception and deserves to be analysed in greater depth. Certain disciplines (medicine, public health, economics, for example) frequently engage in consultancy activities. In Africa, whatever the discipline, academics widely practice consultancy, which hinders the development of quality independent research by blurring the boundaries (Olivier de Sardan, 2011). Researchers in the South, lacking the resources of their colleagues in the North, are often more vulnerable to pressure from sponsors:

> At a seminar to launch a research programme funded by a Canadian agency in three African countries, several African researchers were shocked by the very directive and authoritarian attitude of the agency's representative, who wanted to impose her own hypotheses and vision of research on the researchers. To one of our colleagues who had publicly opposed this attitude, a researcher confided in an aside after the meeting: "I agree with you, it is not acceptable, but what do you want? They have the money, we can't say anything" (personal observation).

There are indeed cases where development agencies turn to research laboratories, and not to consultants, to conduct studies on intervention contexts and even on their programmes. However, these agencies often try to deal with research institutions as they do with consultants, and to retain direct control over the results, particularly concerning the publication of the latter, which is subject to drastic conditions, even though the research will have been paid, like the intervention, by public funds. For example, UK Department for International Development (DFID) has a clause in its contracts stating that,

> In the performance of its obligations under this Contract, neither the Supplier, nor any of its affiliates, shall embarrass or bring discredit to DFID by committing any act or omission reasonably likely to diminish public confidence in DFID, whether or not such act or omission relates to the Supplier's obligations under this Contract. (Storeng *et al.*, 2019)

In other words, research based on funding granted by development institutions and investigating social engineering interventions of the latter is more often than not subjected by these institutions to the same subjugating rules as consultancy, with no regard for the specificity of research. Researchers are often subject, like consultants, to attempts at censorship if their results are not acceptable (Olivier de Sardan, 2011; Storeng *et al.*, 2019):

> A team of African researchers' analysis and diagnosis of a social safety net project funded by two development banks revealed many problems. The implementing social workers are hostile to the project because they do not have any of the benefits that the project team enjoys. Local committees representing the population complain that they have no real say. The targeting of beneficiaries is fraught with errors due to multiple frauds and cheating. The project manager for one of the two banks refused to meet with the researchers who had requested an interview, and tried to prevent the report from being published. However, the researchers published their report on their own initiative, as an open access policy brief.

> The head of a development bank announces in an interview text that research results have been useful for improving and changing an intervention: "As a result [of the evaluation], the next phase of the project underwent a complete change of paradigm" (Bédécarrats *et al.*, 2020). However, the researchers concerned were not involved in the reflections about changes and actions, they were not given any details on the use of their results, and their work was questioned, without discussion or justification, by private consultants paid by this bank to monitor this intervention in parallel with the work carried out by

> the researchers (paid by public funds). The researchers' policy briefs intended for decision-makers to share the results of this evaluation in an appropriate and action-oriented language were the object of attempts to rewrite them by bank employees, relating to formulations that cast doubt on certain dimensions of the intervention: it was absolutely necessary to give a positive impression (Dagenais & Ridde, 2018). The researcher responsible for this evaluation did not have the courage to confront this development bank.

2. The Non Governmental Organizations

NGOs generally do not have their own funds. They depend on donor funding, which subcontracts the implementation of intervention programmes and imposes various budget and content constraints. Therefore, NGOs, both in the North and the South, are vulnerable to donor funding and influences. They need to have "good results" in order to be awarded new contracts.

It is not easy to talk about NGOs in general terms (Siméant & Dauvin, 2004). Their profiles and modes of operation range from genuine civil society organisations driven by a desire for social change and carried by socially committed actors; to empty shells taking the name of NGO to capture resources and benefit from tax preferences; to powerful multinational NGOs operating in many countries. Sometimes an NGO is even a front for a *de facto* consultancy firm, carrying out consultations and evaluations.

NGOs have a lot to lose if their failures are revealed publicly (Pérouse de Montclos, 2012; Ridde, 2016). Thus, the "success cartel," based on the self-celebration of programmes, is not limited to donors alone (Rajkotia, 2018) but extends to NGOs as well:

> The local representative of an international emergency NGO had asked an African laboratory to conduct a study on strategies for combating child malnutrition during a severe food crisis. The results showed that standards for access to nutritional recovery centres were regularly "bypassed" by mothers, and that child malnutrition had multiple causes. Indeed, these results challenged the messages of the NGO (for instance that it was essentially famine that was causing child malnutrition). The leader of the NGO even went so far as to accuse the researchers of harming malnourished children… (Bradol, 2007; Olivier de Sardan, 2007)

NGOs in the North are increasingly becoming operators funded by official development assistance. We also see more and more NGO members becoming employees of their former donors. Southern NGOs are increasingly being created to capture the "development rent" (they often feel they only get the crumbs compared to Northern NGOs). The Southern NGO, to which a Northern NGO has subcontracted the fieldwork, must show that they are effective and achieve the expected objectives. The Northern NGO, which has received funding from a development agency, must show its donors that the implementation is a success.

As for the field workers of Southern NGOs, who are often aware of the "bypasses" used by the populations in the face of the programmes intended for them, they rarely mention them to their superiors. It is as if, in the professional context of the NGO, only a smooth and positive discourse was acceptable and that it was necessary to look away from aspects of reality that did not conform to the official language of the NGO:

> In qualitative surveys conducted by an African research laboratory on "cash transfers" (distribution of money to the poorest families in times of hunger or food crisis), it quickly became apparent that the women, the official recipients of the transfers, handed the money over to their husbands as soon as the NGO agents turned their backs (the social norm being that the purchase of food is the responsibility of the husbands). The NGO workers knew this but they did not report it, either because they could have been reproached for this "deviation" or because this type of knowledge did not seem relevant to their relationship with their employer. (Olivier de Sardan & Hamani, 2018)

3. Public services

For most ministries in most African countries, development aid funds are a precious and sought-after source of income necessary for the functioning of the services. They also provide many personal benefits (formal or informal) to staff. They must show that aid funds are well used and produce the expected results, whatever the reality.

The public services, both at the level of the ministries in the capital and at the level of the decentralised services in the interior of the country, are in a deep and constant state of shortage. Civil servants do not have the means to carry out their missions normally. There is a shortage of infrastructure and equipment, a shortage of means of operation and travel, and low salaries. This situation contrasts with the luxury of donor-funded "projects" with their 4x4 vehicles, air-conditioned offices, and high salaries. The best civil servants have left the civil service to work in development institutions, leaving their colleagues in the ministries destitute and bitter. The high level of corruption in many countries has one of its roots in this situation (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan, 2006). When aid resources arrive, not only does the state service that benefits from them finally have some means at its disposal, but everyone wants to have "their share": allowances, "topping-ups," access to vehicles, petrol vouchers, and per-diems on the formal level; and hidden commissions on markets, false missions, and embezzlement on the informal level. The recent Ebola and COVID-19 pandemics and their associated international aid packages have only confirmed these processes, which have led to conflicts of interest at two levels.

On the one hand, there is an almost systematic upstream approval of all programmes proposed by donors, regardless of their real relevance, and even when they seem unrealistic or doomed to failure. "On a given horse you don't look at the teeth": this proverb, often quoted by Niger actors working in development institutions, was used as the title of a study on their perceptions of aid (Lavigne Delville & Abdelkader, 2010):

> In all African countries, WHO has promoted the focused antenatal consultation (FANC), to compensate for the inadequacies of routine antenatal consultations. This protocol aims to better identify and monitor high-risk pregnancies. But it implies a minimum of 40 minutes for each consultation, whereas in health facilities, prenatal consultations are subject to long queues and last less than 5 minutes. The Ministries of Health have all accepted the introduction of FANCs without saying a word, and without reorganising the functioning of the services, even though every health executive knows that this protocol is inapplicable in the current context. It is therefore not applied in the field, but everyone "acts as if" it were. (Olivier de Sardan *et al.*, 2017)

You have to show that you are a "good student," and hide the problems, difficulties, and failures. The objective is to obtain a renewal of the programme or new aid and to benefit from a favourable opinion among donors. The figures produced systematically show that the beneficiary populations are satisfied (even when discontent prevails on the ground) and that the planned activities have been carried out (even if in a summary manner or with a deplorable quality). Planned quantitative indicators must be achieved, and implementation or disbursement rates must be respected:

> The field visits organised by the Ministries for the representatives of the donors are often parodies. Every year, a "donor caravan" travels through the Sahelian countries alongside local health authorities, visiting sites where everything has been prepared to please them. Carefully designed stagings present them with deserving health facilities, rigorously performed FANCs, and well-presented HIV-AIDS pre-test counselling. These are "model showcases," "Potemkin villages," far removed from the daily reality of the services. (personal observations)

This type of visit is so widely used by donors that the World Bank and the International Labour Office have even written guides for organising such *study tours* (Kumar & Watkins, 2017).

One must constantly please the donors, show them that their money is well spent and their programmes are effective, provide good statistics, and tell nice success stories. Reservations, objections, and criticisms are unwelcome, even if they are well-founded. This often applies to all types of supervision. Anything that threatens this laudatory narrative must be kept quiet. When researchers make realistic diagnoses, without the usual complacency and self-censorship, ministries perceive them as threats, and consider the truths they uncover as attacks or slander (Paul *et al.*, 2018):

> When our teams were working on the functioning of free health care policies in three Sahelian countries (Olivier de Sardan & Ridde, 2015) we revealed a number of problems raised by the implementation of these policies, all designed by national governments and only partly funded by donors (unreliability of the state to reimburse health facilities, stock-outs for some important drugs and laboratory products, lack of information, etc.). Several important actors in the Ministries of Health of two countries accused us of torpedoing their action in the eyes of donors and of being responsible for the latter's probable disengagement or mistrust.

4. Beneficiary populations

The "good student" behaviour is also widespread among the beneficiary populations. The "aid rent" reaches every village, and the word "project" is applied in all local and national languages to any type of development or humanitarian intervention funded by Northern institutions. Trying to get donors to take an interest in a village, a canton, or a region is now a common strategy of local elites, to which many "development brokers" contribute (Bierschenk *et al.*, 2000):

> A UNICEF programme in Niger, which is replicated in many African countries, promotes exclusive breastfeeding as an "essential family practice." LASDEL conducted qualitative research (in-depth interviews, observations) in villages where rapid questionnaire surveys conducted by UNICEF-commissioned consultants showed exclusive breastfeeding compliance rates of over 90%. Research has shown the opposite to be true (Hamani, 2013): very few mothers practised exclusive breastfeeding, which is very problematic in the local climatic and cultural conditions. However, during the rapid surveys of the consultants, all the mothers said they practised it. The "right answer" had to be given in order for UNICEF to continue its activities in the village. The chief had gathered the villagers to give the instruction. The LASDEL report was also completely buried by UNICEF Niger, which even refused to organise a feedback and debate on it. The programme went ahead.

In order to obtain and renew funding, it is essential to present a good image of the community and to put on a good show. Potential beneficiaries must therefore hide the conflicts, rivalries, accusations, suspicions, nuisances, delinquency or incivilities that punctuate daily life in the countryside and urban neighbourhoods in Africa (as elsewhere). A positive, sometimes idyllic, narrative must be produced for foreign partners. This narrative is constantly being transferred, sometimes insidiously, sometimes cynically, sometimes naively, into the data of numerous studies and research projects. The "good answers" must be given to interviewers passing questionnaires on the run (with their famous Likert scales, whose validity is questionable in this context; cf. Scott *et al.*, 2019).

It is not surprising that aid recipients thank donors profusely, singing about the benefits they have received while keeping their reservations and criticisms to themselves. Sometimes even those who have been excluded, wrongly according to them, do not dare to publicly express their frustration and contradict the praise:

> In the case of cash transfers intended for the most vulnerable populations (such as the World Bank's social safety nets), several anthropological studies have shown that families excluded because they were "not poor enough" did not publicly express the strong sense of injustice they felt, either because they hoped to be beneficiaries in their turn soon, or so as not to be accused by the beneficiaries of risking upsetting the donor (Olivier de Sardan & Hamani, 2018).

Many surveys, statistics, evaluations, reports, and publications incorporate significant biases from the voices of local communities or elites, who tend to provide a "skewed" picture of reality, and hold opinions or make statements designed to appeal to development institutions:

> A Niger consulting firm recently submitted a report to the Ministry of Health, which had commissioned the study, which found that users were predominantly satisfied with health services (Cabinet Bozari, 2014). This is totally at odds with the work carried out by LASDEL over the past 20 years in this field (Diarra, 2018; Souley Issoufou, 2015). In thousands of interviews conducted using rigorous methods, we have never met a user who was satisfied with the health system; in hundreds of systematic observations, user-friendly and good quality medical services have been rare exceptions!

5. Positive exceptions

Of course, not all organisations systematically succumb to conflicts of interest. There are development actors who accept criticism and the highlighting of difficulties, knowing that this is the only way to improve and reform interventions:

> In research commissioned by the World Health Organisation (WHO) into a large EU-funded programme in over 50 countries, at no point did they try to influence the process. They participated actively and positively, heard and understood criticism, opened all doors and files and allowed interviews. They then agreed to co-author the published results, even if they were not all positive, as they revealed many organisational challenges (Robert *et al.*, 2019).

> In two West African countries, a German NGO funded by the European Union opened its doors, its records (including financial records) and access

> to the health services it supported to allow rigorous intervention researches. When hard-to-hear results were presented (including the perverse effects of the intervention), no attempt was made, either by this NGO or its funder, to curb or direct the research report. However, when the German NGO's staff was changed, the culture of uncompromising evaluation established by the previous management disappeared (D'Ostie-Racine *et al.*, 2019).

These two examples show that it is possible to conduct intervention research transparently, without censorship or self-censorship. Nevertheless, to our knowledge and experience, these positive attitudes remain exceptions. Moreover, they are dependent on individuals, and are never sufficiently institutionalised in the form of a deliberate and explicit policy as they should be. Burkina Faso offers a recent example of the latter analysis: the creation of a department directly linked to the Ministry of Health dedicated to the use of research never worked and did not survive the departure of the Ministry (Dagenais, 2021).

Conclusion

We do not have a magic solution, but we nevertheless propose some ways to address conflicts of interest in the development world. We also suggest that research should be organised to better understand these processes, their determinants, and their impacts, as well as to document exceptions (i.e cases where critics are seen as positively helping to improve interventions).

The first level is advocacy, training, and argumentation. It is a matter of convincing all the actors in the developmental configuration of the need to look difficulties in the face, take unexpected effects into account, and accept empirically-based criticism as indispensable conditions for improving social engineering interventions. There must be an attempt to counteract the self-congratulation and culture of celebrating success that dominates among development professionals (Rajkotia, 2018). The obsession with positive results based on quantitative indicators and celebrated by uplifting stories must be balanced by a culture of truthfulness among both donors and development practitioners. More specifically, a "culture of rigorous diagnosis" must be put in place.

A second level focuses on the mechanisms that can help to put this culture of rigorous diagnosis into practice.

First of all, donors, who are the masters of the rules of the game, should give themselves and the development operators instructions to be open to criticism. Any intervention should be subject to independent diagnosis during its implementation to correct its shortcomings and better adapt to local realities (Storeng *et al.*, 2019). The adaptation of projects to local contexts and especially pragmatic contexts (Olivier de Sardan, 2021), their responsiveness to implementation gaps, and their ability to take into account the strategies of stakeholders on the ground are more important for the success of an intervention than the mechanical following of a roadmap or the formal respect of indicators planned in offices in Washington, Geneva or Dakar (Morell, 2010; Olivier de Sardan *et al.*, 2017; Ridde *et al.*, 2007). It requires the use of mixed methods (Bujold *et al.*, 2018) and, therefore, a greater emphasis on qualitative methods, which can better identify field actors' perceptions and reactions and document the unexpected effects of any intervention.

There is also a need to ensure transparency of the results of evaluations and research. The publication of all reports, or their free access on the Internet, must become the rule. Of course, actors of the institutions which have been the subject of these evaluations and research must also have a right of reply, and debates based on rigorous and transparent arguments should be encouraged. All development organisations, not just academic ones, should have charters specifying what a relationship of interest is, how to declare and account for it, and how to ensure the independence of intervention research.

Finally, one avenue to explore would be for countries (and international agencies) providing official development assistance to systematically set aside a fund for intervention research (i.e. 10% of all funded interventions). This sum would not be managed by the institutions financing the interventions (and their appointed evaluators) but by international committees of experts (chosen on their competence) who would select the research proposals submitted by international research teams (including, of course, from the beneficiary country).

The purpose of our proposals is to stimulate a debate, which is currently lacking, on the role that independent, rigorous, and non-complacent analyses of the interventions of development institutions should have. The conflicts of interest (in the broadest sense of the term) that we have described in our selected case studies, regardless of the actors involved, mask the limitations, difficulties, bypasses, errors, dissatisfactions, and misunderstandings that are part of any development programme. This blindness is a major cause of the repeated failures of the development world.

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