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July 16th, 2021

Ghanaian development experts are not driving Ghana's development agenda

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Estimated reading time: 5 minutes



In recent years, Ghana has been viewed as a development success story, for which Ghanaian development professionals have received little credit. At the same time as inequalities in the development aid sector have been found to exclude non-western experts from development processes, global North-based organisations and donors are often perceived as failing to acknowledge crucial contextual knowledge from local professionals.

How do experienced development professionals in Ghana see their roles in national development process? This is the question at the heart of [new research](#) into the experience of [National Development Experts](#) (NDEs) against the broader category of *International* Development Experts (IDEs), which found that Ghanaian (national) development experts feel their roles have been significantly undermined by Western (international) development professionals, when working on their home country. These IDEs are understood to predominantly follow development donors' prescriptions (their terms of references), instead of promoting locally led development processes. Drawing on 25 semi-structured interviews with the local staff of donor agencies and non-governmental organisations, independent consultants, civil servants and academics in

Ghana, we present findings on their motivations and roles within Ghana's development landscape and the implications for development more broadly.

Power inequities in Ghana's development landscape

In recent decades, Ghana has enjoyed the accolade of a 'donor success country' – an example of Africa's 'iconic democratisers'. In 2010, sustained economic growth resulted in **Ghana's graduation to lower-middle income status**. Yet the recognition of the role played by Ghanaian development professionals and NDEs has not been forthcoming alongside political leadership, civil society and aid donors.

These sentiments have been presented in our fieldwork interviews. For instance, a Ghanaian staff member of an embassy remarked: 'we do all the donkey work and they [the donors and international experts] take the glory'. Another NGO staff member shared a similar concern, voicing frustration at international experts taking the credit for their work: 'we always do the biggest chunk of the work ... They [the foreign experts] ask us to submit the report to them for reviewing, and they will submit it as if they did the work, in most cases without even acknowledging us'. The perception of little or no recognition for their work demonstrates a sense of systematic power inequities between NDEs and IDEs in Ghana's development landscape.

For our interviewees, the power imbalance was stark to the extent that, despite widespread knowledge of the disparities, there seemed few if any options to address the issue. For the Ghanaian development professionals, the system was unofficially normalised, and they would continue their work while accepting the inequality.

Contextual understandings of NDEs vs the power of 'whiteness'

Interestingly, our fieldwork observed that Ghanaian development professionals are in no doubt that donors/international experts need them. Some respondents labelled the IDEs as 'experts in distress', deeming them to possess little or no knowledge about local circumstantial issues and, consequently, practical development challenges in the Ghanaian context. While IDEs often have esteemed qualifications from Western universities and excellent technical skills on development project management, and turning social, economic and political issues into developmental objectives, at the same time, our research observed that foreign experts normally relied on the local experts' knowledge to undertake their assignments. The result is nonetheless a tendency for IDEs to offer ubiquitous and generalised recommendations.

Despite a severe lack of contextual local knowledge, the IDEs in virtue of their race, nationality or 'whiteness' enjoy a privileged position. This is widely apparent in status and the salary packages enjoyed compared to Ghanaian NDEs. While employing local Ghanaians as 'experts' is uncommon in international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, when these experts are used they receive significantly less payment than their international counterparts, as an Executive Director of a national NGO explained:

'I have worked here with an organisation that had foreigners, they were paid more than the locals, I have also worked as an expert, I was paid more than the locals so that may be the practice'.

NDEs and decision-making in Ghana's development

Ghanaian NDEs are also limited in their decision-making ability, especially on project design. We found that IDEs prefer to work with people from their own countries rather than use the services of NDEs with similar experience. This is suggested to be the result of aid money from donors ascribing decision-making power in favour of IDEs, mainly due to the resource dependence of NDEs on donors. As an NDE explained:

'[I]t is clear that because the funding comes from them, the positions are preserved for the Europeans. And in terms of decision-making, at the end of the day, they [IDEs] approve and sign all the documents. If I have to go to the field, he/she signs or approve. If I have to change a programme design, he/she signs'.

Moreover, in Ghana, certain positions in the aid sector are reserved for IDEs, even when available NDEs had equal qualifications and experience. According to an INGO staff member:

'decision-making sometimes depends on where you are coming from, how much resources you are bringing to the table. It is like you who pays, calls the piper. If you are not the one resourcing whatever is being done, the level of your influence will not be as strong as the one initiating and bringing resources'.

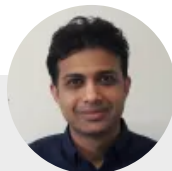
Our research therefore outlines why Ghanaian NDEs have not been the conductor or architect of their own development. The aid sector's in-built inequalities limit NDEs' power and autonomy and ability to play more productive roles for their own countries. Within Ghana's aid architecture, the positions that seemingly have significant influence over national development policy process are often preserved for Europeans or Westerners. For instance, advertised positions explicitly demand experience in European/Western contexts. One interviewee stated:

'I wasn't born in Europe and the point is, the issue you are addressing is not even in Europe, it is in Africa, so why should I have a European background, European understanding and knowledge to run a programme in Africa?'

Our findings highlight the power inequities and the **'colour blind' nature of development** that privileges western expertise rather than the inclusion of local knowledge. We pose this is largely because development itself is racialised. In this regard, western technical expertise tends to be more valued than local expertise, despite a lack of contextual understanding of development issues. This research therefore calls for the need to pay particular attention to the politics of knowledge creation in development research by recognising the perspectives of local development actors. Efforts aimed at incorporating the perspectives of NDEs have the potential to 'open up development', because focusing almost entirely on IDEs presents partial, biased and non-holistic accounts of development which reinforce inequalities in the development aid sector.

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