

Global Issues Network - forum

Power relations in development work in Africa

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Slide #1 Front page



Good afternoon – hi there! I am here to talk to you for the next 40-45 minutes....

I have desperately tried to run away from the promise to talk today – given several months ago, when November seemed far away. But Kasey and Kiara sweet-talked me into coming!

I am not a professional lecturer – I am not an entertainer – I am a nerdy consultant....

So bear with me..... I know it is Friday afternoon and you have had a long day already and a social program in town later....

Slide #2 Who is talking?

The slide is titled 'Who is talking?' and contains a list of biographical details. To the right of the text is a photograph of Bente Topsøe-Jensen standing in front of a blue wall. Below the photo is a blue box with the text 'In Guinea-Bissau 1982'. The website 'www.benteconsulting.dk' is visible at the bottom of the slide.

Who is talking?

Whereabouts:

- Born in Denmark
- 5 years in Guinea-Bissau
- 1 3/4 years in Mozambique
- Now living at a small island in DK

Education:

- M.Sc. Social Anthropology
- Various diplomas - management, leadership, HR

Where did I work?

- Course coordinator - Danida
- M&E adviser - Sida
- Project Coordinator - Ibis (Oxfam)
- Country Director - Ibis (Oxfam)
- Chief Adviser - Danida
- International Director - MS (ActionAid)
- Consultant - COWI
- **Founder, Owner, Director and Chief Consultant - Bente Consulting**

Social life

- 3 adult sons and 7 grandchildren
- 1 husband (and the exs...)
- Volunteering in local development, where I live

In Guinea-Bissau 1982

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But before venturing into stories about power and development work – let me briefly tell you who I am. The short version, at least.

I am Danish, I have lived for approximately 20 years in different countries in Africa – of which two longer periods – in the 1980es in Guinea Bissau, which is a tiny country in West Africa. Squeezed in between Senegal and Guinea-Conakry, hardly visible on a map of the continent. And from the early 1990es and until 2004 in Mozambique in South-Eastern Africa.

I currently **live on a small island** off the coast of Southern Zealand in Denmark – with 175 inhabitants. This has a lot of similarities with life in rural Africa when it comes to power relations and power games! But that is a different story.....

I am a **social anthropologist** – which means that I have a keen focus on structures, relations and interactions in society and among people. Social anthropology is in many ways the science of "common sense", characterized by always asking the question "why?" – to get behind the surface and understand the underlying reasons for why people do what they do.

And what do you do as a social anthropologist? Almost everything – as long as it has to do with understanding social relationships and the dynamics of institutions and society! I have worked with organizational development, training and capacity building; agriculture, water supply and road construction; private sector development and credit schemes; primary health care, traditional birth attendants and SRHR; gender, youth and disability rights; human rights, media, trade unions...and, and....

I have **been employed** as technical adviser, manager and director – in NGOs, government and private sector. And during the last 10+ years, I have worked as a consultant. This involves mixing all these different experiences and putting them all in play in a continuous string of different assignments. And since 2010, I can proudly call myself Director, Owner and Founder of my own, one-woman company ☺

I also **have a family** – 3 adult sons, 7 grandchildren and a husband. Family matters – as the micro-cosmos of understanding power relations. And I am also the chairperson of the local citizens association at the small island, where I live – but again that is a different story – sort of.....

Ok – let's start the real story....

Slide # 3 Power relations in development work in Africa

Power relations in development work in Africa

What am I going to talk about?

- ▶ **Development work** - what kind of development work have I been engaged in?
- ▶ **Africa** - a continent
- ▶ **"Power" as a concept** and phenomenon – how can we understand power?



I have been asked to talk about "Development Work and Power in Africa" – quite a mouthful, I should say!!! So let's see what came out of this challenging title!!

Development work – what does that mean?

You probably all have this image of doctors saving children's life or rescue helicopters lifting people out of flooded areas on your mind, when people refer to "development work"? It is, however, important to stress that there is a difference between development and humanitarian work.

The humanitarian work is the relief work – when a catastrophe hits at country – wars causing refugees, natural disasters in the form of draughts, floods or earth quakes – resulting in thousands of homeless people and long-term famine. The media often favors this image of Africa.

But development work is the long haul – addressing – or trying to address, at least – structural causes to poverty and inequality. Development work often comes with a full package of dialogue with government, capacity building of persons and institutions and financial support. It can be targeted governments, private sector or civil society. It operates at international, regional, national and local level.

A basic feature nowadays is that it is based on a close collaboration with local partners and aims at creating sustainability by building capacity and lasting structures.

It is a basis for negotiations – as those providing the funds (the donors or so-called development partners) often comes with an agenda in terms of promoting good governance, human rights, transparency etc. At least the Western donors.

Africa – Americans like to say "I went to Europe", and we Europeans react a bit – thinking that there is quite a difference between Spain, Bulgaria and Denmark!! Africa is a continent, but often referred to as a homogenous mass of poor countries. Africa is 55 independent nations – all very different, due to history, ethnic groups and colonial influence, geo-political affiliations and natural conditions.

My experience from Africa is based on living in Guinea-Bissau in West Africa for 5 years and 13½ years in Mozambique in South-Eastern Africa – but I have also worked in the Gambia, Togo, Mali, Cameroun, Angola, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt and Morocco.....for shorter periods, though. And visited a number of other countries as a tourist (Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Cabo Verde, Sao Tome & Principe). And I tell you – there are major differences. And also similarities of course – often in administrative systems and less so in tradition, culture and language.

Two examples, which demonstrate differences and apparent similarities:

- When we lived in Guinea-Bissau, the easiest way for visitors from Denmark to come was to buy a charter tour ticket to the Gambia – and we would drive from Guinea-Bissau, through Senegal to Banjul, the capital in the Gambia. The journey took a full day of which a good part was spent at the different border posts. In the early 1980es, the colonial legacy was still very visible when it came to immigration authorities' way of functioning. With the risk of serious stereo-typing, you would start with the messy, but friendly immigration officers at the Guinean boarder to Senegal. Then cross over to the impeccable Senegalese immigration officers who politely stamped your documents. Later, at the Gambian border, you would be met by strict control, a bit of arrogance, and huge registration books. Portuguese, French and British administrative culture had set fingerprints.

- When I moved to Mozambique, I was happy to recognize the similarities from the administrative systems and the bureaucratic structures I knew from Guinea-Bissau. How nice to be able to capitalize on learning about navigating in the bureaucracy! But, careful – the systems were similar, but the persons working in the systems had a totally different approach and background – in terms of culture, ethnicity, history, education..... So after all, the administrative culture is only a thin layer on top of what really matters when it comes to how people interact – and how power manifests itself.

Slide # 4 First....some theory....

First... some theory

Definitions of power

- ▶ The ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way
- ▶ The capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events
- ▶ Enforcement = your power is imposed on others
- ▶ Legitimacy = someone accepts your position



Power – well, this is not a lecture in social science, but I would like to frame my stories a little bit for you to be able to reflect on them – and maybe you can use this when you look at the decision making systems at your school! Who decides what? And why do some people have more power than others?

First of all – **what is power**? It ranges from a lot of things – physical strength, power supply in the form of electricity to lighten and heat up our homes, drive our cars and so on. But again – a different story.....

The Oxford Dictionary definition is: "The ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way" and "The capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events".

See – this is interesting – power is about influence, about deciding things for others! This is what we know from series like House of Cards, Game of Thrones and others – the fight to decide. And the ability to decide. For many people, power is addictive.

What gives us the power over other people? Physical strength – as in the old days – and today! Economic ability – to be able to dominate. Both of these powers can be exercised by mere enforcement. You can in other words enforce your decisions upon others, simple because you are the strongest or the most resourceful. At the personal or institutional level – which means also between nations and globally.

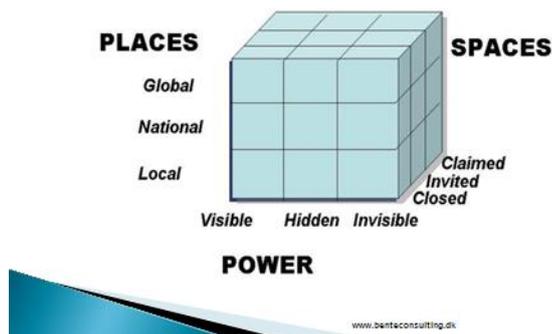
Well, that is not so interesting – at least from a social anthropological point of view. But social power is interesting, because it is subtle and requires legitimacy – "it takes two to tango". Legitimacy is when someone accepts your position and play along. This does not mean that the social power relation is equal or just. By far! Think about a dominant boy- or girlfriend who decides for you – and you accept. Think about religious leaders telling you what to do, and what is right and wrong. Think about your teachers.....

You accept these social relationships, which are not equal, but legitimized by the norm of the society and not least by your acceptance. This may be all right – and there are all kinds of mitigation measures, especially in democratic institutions. But also the social power has the potential for abuse and misuse.

Slide # 5 The Power Cube

The Power Cube

<http://www.powercube.net/analyse-power/what-is-the-powercube/>



<http://www.powercube.net/>

Well what about **the Cube**?

The cube helps us to understand the mechanisms and structures in which power works. It provides us with a framework for analyzing the places or levels, the spaces and forms of power, and their interrelationship.

Places are geographical, physical places – the village, the national or capital level, and finally the international and global level. We all dependent on what happens at these levels – even more so as the world becomes smaller, more inter-dependent and more globalized.

Spaces are more difficult – they are platforms, where we can exercise the power. They can be closed – smaller groups, organizations, the family. They can be invited – public hearings planned by government with the purpose of consulting the population on a specific issue. Or they can be claimed – when an interest group succeeds in creating a platform, where they are actually listened to – Greenpeace and Amnesty International are examples of organizations who have successfully claimed a space.

Power – visible, hidden or invisible. Visible is easy – we can all understand that Trump or Obama exercise visible power. Hidden is exercised behind the screen, often through networking and lobbying – by using the connections. But the invisible power is the tricky one – it may even be invisible to us. We act as we do, because this is what we have always done, we do not question – neither our own position nor that of others. We have tacitly accepted the situation – we have internalized to power mechanisms.

A curious detail – when I moved back to Denmark in 2004, everybody encouraged networking – using your connections – as something very important and definitely positive. When I left Denmark in 1992, such practice was called nepotism!

OK – all this theory is useful in letting us explore various aspects of power and how they interact with each other. It lets us visually map ourselves and our situation, including other actors, relationships and forces, and then look at possibilities for movement, mobilization and change. It allows people to plan advocacy and to find entry points for action. Keep that in mind!

Slide # 6 The female village committee president

Story # 1:
The village association president



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When I first came to Guinea-Bissau in 1982, the country was only recently independent. The independence in the former Portuguese colonies came much later than the rest of Africa, where the British started letting go of their colonies in the 1960es and the French followed shortly after. Portugal – which at the time had a fascist government – did not want to let go of the so-called “oversea provinces”. And the result was bloody liberation wars fought by guerillas in Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique. It took years of struggle and loss of lives and resources, destruction and sabotage of valuable infrastructure and set-back in education, health services and economic development for the three countries.

During the liberation wars and after independence, all three countries had strong ties to the former Soviet Union. In Guinea-Bissau, a specific “African Socialism” developed. This was a softer and less state-controlled – “communist” – model for rebuilding society after the war and in the new era of Independence. The African Socialism respected tradition and religion as fundamental structures in society. This was by far the case in Angola and Mozambique where a strong state apparatus overruled all ethnic, religious or customary tradition and introduced state-run-everything – agricultural farms, collective villages, cooperatives and even family structures! In Mozambique, Christmas was re-named “Dia da Família” – the Family Day – I guess recognizing that depriving people the holiday and event would have been too much.

But back to Guinea-Bissau, where I arrived only some 7 years after the 1975 Independence. At that time – you saw at one of the first slides how young I was – I thought that 1975 was a long time ago, and did maybe not fully understand why the “struggle” – “a luta” as they said in Portuguese – was still such a strong frame of reference for everything.

With this softer socialist model of society, the country was ruled through the one-party system. After independence, the liberation movement (PAIGC) took over and transformed into a political party. And they organized the country down to the village level.

In the village where I lived in the Southern-most part of the country, a so-called village committee was the local government / political structure. And the president of the committee was a woman!!! Wouw, I thought – they actually also practice what they preach in terms of gender equality. Not only was it

mandatory that at least 2 of 5 members in the committee should be women, but in this village – my home for the next 1½ years – they even had a woman president!

She had been elected because of her reputation as a respected village midwife. She was maybe 50 years old, came from a family with a long tradition of midwifery – knowledge handed down through generations from mother to daughter on how to assist child birth. She had a lot of legitimacy – what we call “street credit” today – and people listened to her – not only in issues related to child birth, but also on matters related to development in the village. But she had rarely spoken in public – she was consulted.

And I noticed that – even after becoming the village president, she barely ever spoke at village meetings. She let the vice president take the floor, while she kept quiet. Except for the comments she quite obviously provided him with, and which he willingly presented as his own opinions.

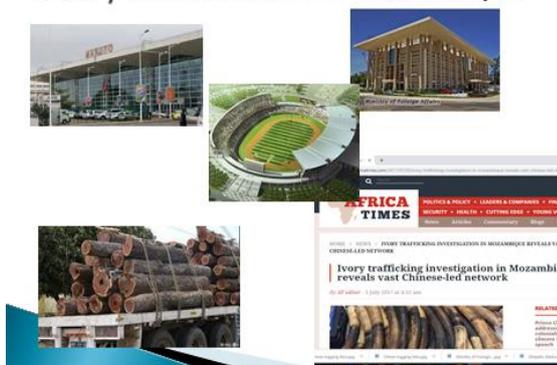
Why was this, I wondered!? And then came the day, where the party officials from the region came to re-organize the village committee. And she stood up for the first time and spoke. She resigned. Because she felt that since she had accepted the official position as president of the village committee, people had started excluding her. Fewer women sought her advice and help in matters of childbirth – her area of expertise. And she felt that she was badmouthed and looked upon as a traitor. And off she went!

What did just happen, I thought!! She had had the opportunity of influencing village development. She had had the legal power, and she did not want it. Because – as she said – “people trusted me much more, before I ventured into this committee”.

If we go back to the **Power Cube** it will help explain some of this. She was used to operate in local, maybe even mainly informal family settings, and was suddenly drawn into a regional, national structure. She was used to operate in closed spaces. And her power was invisible or hidden, but definitely not visible. She was used to “pulling the strings” by influencing others – men mostly – to speak in public. By stepping out of the traditional, comfortable system of power relations and accepting a different role, she felt she had lost her legitimacy and the respect she previously enjoyed – and she preferred not to pursue the power, which operated in a system unknown to her.

Slide # 7 – China in Mozambique

Story #2: China in Mozambique



My second story is from a very different level – we move from the village in Guinea-Bissau in the 1980es where tradition and gender played an important role. We move to geopolitics and present days. And we move to Mozambique.

Development cooperation has undergone a lot of changes over the years – mainly because the global power balance has changed. The name has also changed from aid to assistance to cooperation – and nowadays to trade relations. Trade, not aid is the slogan of today’s development cooperation.

When development aid started, in the 1960es, African countries had recently gained independence, and the first decades were characterized by a host of do-good projects. Many of these were charity – driven by the wish to help the poor, the illiterate, and - bluntly speaking - the ignorant. The help was implemented by all kinds of organizations, always with “expat” (read: white) people in all positions which involved any kind of responsibility.

This gradually changed and in the 1990es, where development assistance started to be reframed. It was increasingly provided as budget support from one government to another, and it went hand in hand with massive capacity building efforts. The philosophy was to respect the African governments – support their own programs and priorities, but still helping with strengthening the capacity. The money and heavy transfer of funds provided the donors with the upper hand – the power balance was still in favour of the Western donors.

An important instrument in this was the concept of “policy dialogue”, i.e. the Western donors used the financial support as a platform to negotiate – or demand – certain issues: good governance, including transparency, accountability, zero-corruption and respect for human rights including gender equality, minority rights etc. All this was part of the policy dialogue. And they had the power to do so, because the development money often represented as much as 80-90 % of the overall government budgets in specific countries.

But after 2000, a **new global player arrived** - China. China provided a lot of development projects and finance to Mozambique. They build the new Stadium, the new Airport, new buildings for several government institutions that had formerly operated in dilapidated colonial buildings. They connected South and North by constructing the national highway no.1 and tomorrow they will open China’s largest construction project in Mozambique - a bridge connecting the capital Maputo with the southern suburbs – and not least the highway to South Africa.

But first and foremost – **China did not, and does not demand** African governments to respect human rights, accept LGBT+ persons, zero-tolerance on corruption and all this, which – after the national economy of most African countries have gradually improved – may seem like unnecessary interference in national affairs. The Chinese support seemed to be with less strings attached. Seemed – it turned out the strings were actually far more solid!

When I **worked for Danida in the Mozambican Ministry of Agriculture** from 2000 to 2004, China started to invest in capacity building of government officials in the agriculture and forestry sector. Lots and lots of people were sent to China for shorter courses – and they all returned with a container – filled with a fridge, a stove, a washing machine, furniture, a laptop.....you name it!

After such a treat – how could they say no, when the Chinese changed their approach and started logging the rain forest, and how can you not turn the blind eye when your Chinese business partner ships out not only timber, but also ivory?

The Chinese may also have studied the **Power Cube!** They moved from international to national level and from there to local government level. They claimed the space by providing infrastructure and capacity building. And they used their power – first visible – through flashy infrastructure, then hidden through coopting government officials. And by now, their power is invisible and based on strong internalized and accepted networks. The results of the power are not invisible – there is focus on the logging and the ivory, the rhino hunting, the land grabbing and all that. But the underlying mechanisms and the structures of power are invisible and unfortunately therefore also very strong and difficult to confront.

Slide # 8 Thank you!

Thank you 😊



That's it!

I hope you enjoyed it – and if any of you would like to ask questions or comment – please do so 😊