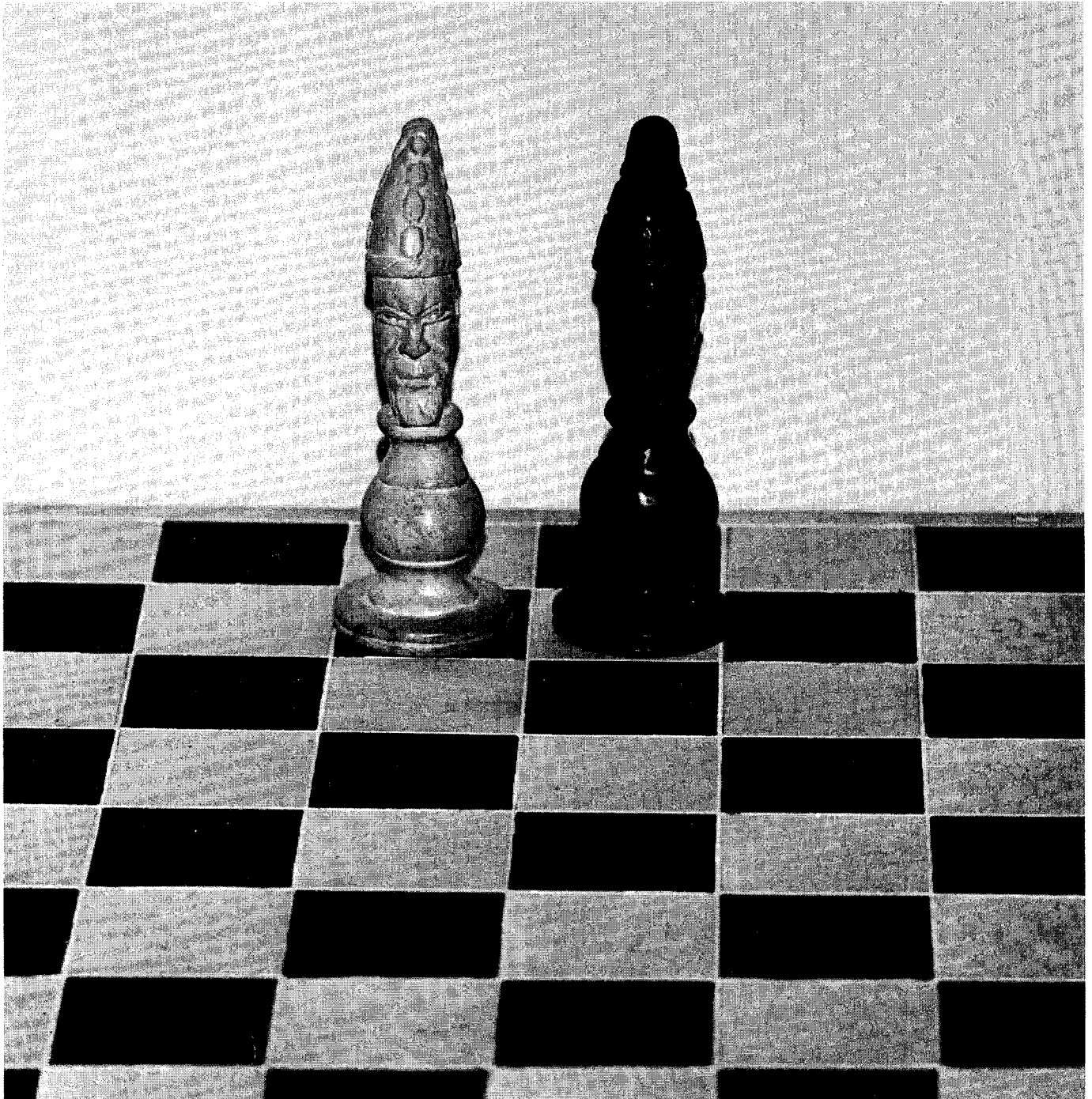


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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS



IJS-38 THE COUNTERPART SYSTEM:
EXPATRIATES AND THE FAILURE OF SKILL TRANSFER IN KENYA

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IJS-38 THE COUNTERPART SYSTEM:
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SKILL TRANSFER IN KENYA

Mr. Richard Nolte
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

One of the most difficult problems facing developing countries is how to create a reservoir of persons with all the diverse skills necessary to modernize an economy and a society. These countries are attempting to train this manpower within a matter of years.

In the absence of an adequate pool of educated citizens, these countries use varying numbers of expatriates to fill immediate needs while waiting for national manpower resources to become available. The provision of foreign experts to fill these jobs is one of the most substantial donations made by the foreign aid programs of the industrialized nations of the world.

The recruitment of personnel to meet immediate national needs is rarely part of a coherent program for improving the skill resources of a country; the expatriate is recruited to solve immediate problems, not to provide for long run training needs (unless he is hired as a teacher, and then rarely *vis-a-vis* other teachers).

However, the foreign aid donors have understood the possible role of expatriate personnel in improving the skill resources of developing countries by usually including as a condition of their aid that each expatriate have a local counterpart to be trained by the expert. In theory at least, most of the longer term advisers from international and national agencies are supposed to have local counterparts to learn their jobs. But this condition is rarely met. To understand why this happens given the critical need for skilled local manpower in the developing countries, it is useful to look at the Kenyan experience.

There seems to be no central source of data about the number and value of foreign aid agreements involving the use of trained expatriate personnel to meet immediate needs that also include a system of counterparts to provide for skill transfer as well. Therefore, one must rely upon anecdotal information.

In the vast majority of instances where expatriates work in the public sector in Kenya, there is no counterpart provided. For example, in the case of an FAO short term consultant in coffee and tea marketing, who had a three month contract to assist the Kenyan Horticultural Marketing Board, there was no counterpart ever assigned to receive help although one was promised. Then there is the A.I.D./University of North Carolina Demographic Studies Unit in the Ministry of Planning and Finance where there are a number of Americans on contracts ranging from thirty days to two years, none of whom has a counterpart; although there is at least one Kenyan working on the project. Also, there is the example of the British O.D.A. educational planner, who is in Kenya for two years in the Ministry of Education but who has no counterpart; although this man does work with one Kenyan colleague, a statistical officer, who, by the way, has been given no brief to learn the techniques of educational planning. And there is the situation of the young Danish architect working for the planning division of the City of Nairobi, who has a number of African colleagues but who, because of his immediate workload and that of his colleagues, has been unable to share his technical knowledge with his Kenyan peers. Finally there is the experience of the consulting engineer from London working on a six month contract with the East African Railways, who has a number of Africans in his office, none of whom is capable by virtue of training or background to cope with difficult technical problems; nor is there any program for giving them the fundamental knowledge necessary to benefit from contact with him. In none of these cases is there a formal counterpart or a program to make use of the skills of the expatriate in training the Africans concerned with similar problems.

I can further illustrate the problems involved in arranging a counterpart scheme, seen from the perspective of both donor and donee, by analyzing current negotiations between US A.I.D. and the Kenyan Government about an A.I.D./World Bank financed beef production and range management project. A few Kenyans will be sent to the US for advanced training in range management and beef production. Presently there is intensive negotiation — one could appropriately say haggling — over the number and character of counterparts which the Kenyan government is in theory to provide to the project. Kenya is hesitant to agree to counterparts, because the usual aid agreement requires that the donee country pay for all counterpart personnel. In this project, the Kenyan government has yet to agree to pay for a single local officer. Then there is the added complication of the Kenyans sent to the US for further training. Their roles are to be filled in the short and medium term by American experts, and the A.I.D. negotiators want the Kenyan Government to provide counterparts for these men in order to train Kenyans who cannot go away for expensive and time consuming formal training. Yet the Kenyans are unwilling to pay the salaries of such counterparts, because they are already supporting the men training in the US. In response, A.I.D. has said that Kenya must finance the American experts in the short and medium term if they are unwilling to provide counterparts. At this writing the negotiations are at an impasse.

This account of the A.I.D./World Bank beef production project problems is not meant to cast either the Americans or the Kenyans in the role of villains. The Americans can justifiably say that they are providing the experts and the training opportunities and that the Kenyans therefore should provide the counterparts. The Kenyans can just as reasonably say that their financial resources are severely limited, and that the local citizens would be more productive in other jobs in the short run, because the Americans are meeting immediate needs. Kenya would have to find Kenyan citizens who have already reached a certain level of skill; and these people are in short supply.

A senior Kenyan official, who has experience both in the field and in the central government, offered a more important objection to the provision of counterparts: "Most counterparts waste their time. They sit at the knee of their master and comprehend very little of what he is doing; and most masters don't know the first thing about explaining what they are doing to a non-expert, which, by definition, a counterpart, who is supposed to be trained, must be." This objection carries a great deal of force. Most expatriate experts are hired on the basis of their expert qualification and with absolutely no reference made to ability or training for teaching. The counterpart system, in so far as it pretends to provide anything more than a paper-clip counter for the expert, assumes a process of apprenticeship with which most experts have had no experience whatsoever. Most of them have been trained in American and European graduate schools, not on the job. The system also assumes a potential for communication which rarely exists between an untutored European and the African who wants to learn the European's skills. No attempt is ever made to assist the European expert in his role as teacher; rarely is any attempt made to ascertain exactly what needs to be taught. And even where some effort is made to find a counterpart, too many expatriate experts come to Kenya for a time much too short for effective counterpart training: little can be accomplished in thirty, sixty, or ninety days; even in a year only the rudiments will rub off on a counterpart.

A Canadian team working in the Ministry of Finance and Planning has made an attempt to overcome some of these shortcomings. The Kenyans have provided counterparts for the professionals on the team. And the team has analyzed its jobs in order to identify the skills and information which the counterparts will need. Also, they have attempted to assess the backgrounds of the Kenyans involved. Where necessary, the Canadians have sent the counterparts for short courses in Canada to gain new skills in a formal setting. Most importantly, the Canadians have attempted to delegate active responsibility to the counterparts in the overall work of the team, with the expatriates providing personal and technical support to the counterparts as they learn by doing. This report comes from only one source — a Canadian; so it is difficult to assess the actual practice. But the approach seems to be a good start toward solving some of the problems in the counterpart system.

The atypicality of the Canadian experience in Kenya, given the pattern of the other reports, highlights the problem of arranging and then providing suitable learning experiences for counterparts. In the present circumstances, Kenya is missing an opportunity to provide for skill transfer and in the process wasting much of the foreign aid invested in expatriate services. This waste

is especially great because most expatriates find themselves under-utilized in the work required to meet the day to day assignments given them; this results from the slower African time frame when compared with the pace and demands of life in industrialized countries. There certainly is time for training activities.

The extent of the problems with the counterpart system in Kenya is further illustrated by a brief comparison with the system in Tanzania, Kenya's next door neighbour to the South. During a recent visit to the Institute of Adult Education at the University of Dar es Salaam, which is as much an important government agency as a part of the University, I was struck by the fact that each and every expatriate had a counterpart. And some of the expatriates who had been working in Tanzania for a number of years were working under African Department Heads, who had originally been their counterparts. And when I asked one of the expatriates about the great time demands made on his section by a particularly innovative educational program, he replied that indeed the particular program was quite time-consuming and had a great social and educational cost — it kept him from working as closely with his counterpart as he wished. This expatriate had budgeted a number of months at the end of that program to be spent almost full time with the counterpart helping him to learn the various skills which operation of the whole department required. So the possibilities of the counterpart system are taken quite seriously in Tanzania, if my limited sample is at all representative. However, it should be noted that Tanzania, like Kenya, has no formal programs to help the expatriates and the counterparts make the most of the opportunities for learning.

The policy question which the account of the operation of the system in Kenya and the brief report on Tanzania raises deserves serious attention: what program and institutional changes can encourage the assignment of counterparts and the development of an effective learning experience for them and their tutors?

The problem of actually getting counterparts assigned must be dealt with in two ways: a) by donors insisting that the Kenyan Government honour agreements to provide counterparts when such agreement has been reached; b) by more often putting foreign aid money into the payments of counterparts in the country rather than spending it on sending the local nationals to foreign countries for training. The insistence upon honouring agreements in itself would probably increase the number of counterparts assigned by one hundred percent. The second suggestion is also important because of the money problems of developing countries. The added cost of a local counterpart would be very small in the budget of most foreign aid donations but the total would be collectively rather large in the budget for Kenya and other poorer countries.

Once one actually has counterparts, in order to make the system effective, dramatic changes are necessary in the way it operates. The problem of skill transfer through an apprenticeship system, which is the definitive characteristic of the expert/counterpart relationship, must be seen as one of education for adults, with all of the difficulties that entails. This analysis means

that both teacher and student must understand what is required of them and adequate support must be given to both. At present the problem is not even understood, much less solved.

Training for the expert as teacher must include some rudimentary information about the problems of teaching on a one/one, tutorial basis; the information will not be very sophisticated, because sophisticated knowledge about the problems of adult learning does not exist. But at least the expert must be forced to ask questions about the nature of the teacher/student relationship in the context of work. Most importantly, the expert must be provided with knowledge about the very different cultural milieu of his counterpart and specific learning difficulties this difference might create. Again, sophisticated knowledge is not at hand, but the broad outlines of the social, tribal, and educational background of the counterpart can be clearly identified and related to his educational needs. No one ever provides this information to expatriates; rarely does the expatriate ask for it; never is it really in hand. In order to provide meaningful training for the expatriate, a great deal of hard research must be done about these problems. But the actual fact of training for the expatriates cannot await this research.

The counterparts must also be given additional training and assistance. A common complaint of expatriates is that even when the Government assigns a counterpart he is not up to the work required of him. This is not a matter (necessarily) of personal shortcoming but rather often a result of inadequate prior education. There must be a system for providing short, concentrated courses and other learning opportunities for counterparts. For example, a counterpart to a planner in the Ministry of Finance and Planning need not know all of the theory and techniques of mathematical statistics, but for the particular job he is doing he may need to know and have a select portion of the skills and knowledge in the field, which he could adequately master in a series of short courses or tutorials. The Government should provide a tutorial or short course tailored to his specific requirements and offered in a flexible fashion. Without too much difficulty the Kenyan Government could tap the existing stock of trained Kenyan and expatriate manpower resident in the country to establish a bank of tutors and courses from which particular people could draw as necessary. But no such provision is presently made.

It is important that Kenya itself create an institution for providing this support for expatriates and their Kenyan counterparts. The Kenyans themselves are most likely to be able to develop a set of programs appropriate for their needs. Such a counterpart support system could be founded within the University of Nairobi, the Kenya Institute of Administration (a center which offers formal courses for bureaucrats in a traditional manner), or perhaps as part of an adult education program serving larger constituencies. The important point is to provide this support in a very flexible fashion so that the provision is in the form of a resource bank of people and courses which are available to the expatriates and to their counterparts whenever they need them.

With a relatively small investment in such a support system for expatriates and counterparts, a great contribution could be made to the transfer of skills from expatriates to Kenyans. And in a future much nearer than one could presently expect, such a system could dramatically improve the skill base of Kenyan society.

Sincerely,


Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

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