

Book Review by James Copestake, Bath University

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At one level this is a book about two "technology transfer" projects: one to help Chadian artisans develop better oxcarts and grain mills; the other to help managers of steel mills and chemical plants in Mexico to turn surplus heat into power by adopting co-generation technology. Neither project was a success, and the book records Grammig's quest (as an engineer turned anthropologist) to explain why. Grammig uses ethnographic methods to explore the social, cultural and political inter-personal relationships within which their encounter took place. His careful empirical observation and analysis leads him firstly to rule out the possibility that failure arose from selection of inappropriate technology, or from the inability of expatriate and local technologists to understand and appreciate each other's expertise. Rather he concludes that the structure of aid management itself ultimately undermined the development impact of the two projects. To put the explanation perhaps rather too simply, the foreign "developers" were required to conform to the role of prime source of knowledge and authority that underpinned their contractual privileges. At the same time, while conforming superficially to the role this implied for them, the local "developees" tacitly resisted such structural subordination to protect their autonomy and identity.

Grammig generalises this argument by suggesting that a similar structural problem undermines most if not all "technical assistance" projects. Differences in the goals of developers and developees often remain tacit, but knowledge of them will not by itself necessarily result in improved impact. Nor will improved planning, training and evaluation make any difference if these activities remain separate from implementation, both over time and politically through division of labour between different actors within a rigid "project cycle management" framework. On the other hand, the precise form of the problem will vary widely according to many factors, including the magnitude of the underlying cultural gap, and the forms of rhetoric that it spawns, including stereotypical images

of the other party to the relationship. This argument leads him to argue strongly for greater involvement of anthropologists in such projects; not just at one remove in aid management hierarchies, but also as participants at the level of implementation. However, the more far-reaching implication of his research is the need for more radical re-negotiation of ownership and flexibility of the aid process itself.

The book is the product of doctoral research. Perhaps as a consequence it is theoretically dense, and the language is at times obscure to the non-anthropologist. This cultural distance may compound the personal/political resistance of other sorts of development professional to his message. But those who persevere with it in their search for insights into why technical assistance so often results in failure, waste and insincerity will be amply rewarded.

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