Social Anthropology and (newer) trends in development politics
A concept for project 1 of the commission interface
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Problem

In recent years, questions concerning applied social anthropology have come more frequently to the fore, mainly in respect to development politics. Under the heading „cultural cooperation" for instance, the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation strives for a closer collaboration with social anthropologists. Typically however, the focus rests only on those cultural aspects which are located *outside* of development agencies and thus hamper or enable a social change in the recipient countries. Yet culture is of course not only „something" that is located outside of these agencies and thus only in the good hands where one discusses the existing links between culture and „social development". Culture is also a typical mark of these agencies themselves, which invent the corresponding rules in order to design and manage development projects. With the growing globalisation such aspects gain importance, the more so as (private and public) development bureaucracies exert a growing pressure on the social and economic relations of local communities in non-western contexts. This process is accentuated by the (not so new) discourse order on topics like good governance, the rule of law, the recognition of the human rights or the promotion of justice and democracy - topics, which are explicitly declared as new fields of action of private and public development agencies.

However, if one turns the scope to the social anthropological debates on development cooperation, which actually are largely influenced by exponents of development anthropology, one gets an ambivalent impression. While such an initial point would require substantial anthropological research on the socio-cultural impact of development aid, many anthropologists prefer emphasizing the so-called „anthropological scepticism" and add that development aid is „of no use". Herewith, the debate is steered towards a direction which is rather due to a value orientation than to the upcoming cultural conflicts. Vis-à-vis the development practitioners one insists on the one hand resolutely on the boosted consideration of social anthropological viewpoints during the planning and implementation phase of those projects which are located at the interface between national and local notions of law. And on the basis of de-constructive approaches one identifies the ethnocentricity of bureaucratic patterns of decision-making. Those anthropologists however, who are engaged in such disputed territories are on the other hand accused of being „traitors" of the „common cause", since they would „sell" their local knowledge to bureaucrats and thus only help them to cover their own deficit of social legitimacy (see Escobar, 1991; Ferguson, 1994; Hobart, 1993: Mosse, 2003 and many others). But when the discussion shifts to possible alternatives, the contributions are usually not very helpful. In most cases only commonplace points are stressed such as the postulation for more self-reflection (Rottenburg, 2002), the promotion of actor-centred approaches or the „empowerment" of discriminated minorities (Gardner and Lewis, 1997; Grillot, 1997).

Goal

In collaboration with the Institutes of Social Anthropology/Ethnology, the „Commission Interface" opens spaces for a new and deeper discussion on the cultural conflict at the interface between the practice of development cooperation[1] and social anthropology. I propose thus the forming of a working group, which will be able to initiate courses, lectures or workshops on distinct topics. At the beginning it would probably be helpful to agree on a topic related orientation, which of course can be renegotiated at any time. In a first phase I would propose legal anthropological subjects such as the promotion of good governance, justice, the rule of law, crisis prevention and human rights. All these topics are starting to dominate the discourses within the various development agencies. And development programmes emanating from such topics compete with the various normative orders at the different levels of society in the recipient countries and thus promote the fragmentation of their political and normative orders and new forms of „quasi-state status".

References

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(Footnotes)
[1] I am thinking about persons from various dev elopment agencies such as Swiss Peace, the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), Helvetas or consulting offices.