



Policy Advice in Development Cooperation: A Distinct Type of Policy Advice

While development cooperation (DC) is determined to make more and more use of policy advice to reach its goals, it does not always have a clear conception of what policy advice is actually able and meant to accomplish in the development context. Experts often lack the conceptual knowledge needed to successfully advise political actors and institutions in a partner country. New modalities of policy advice have been slow to gain traction in DC. The available concepts are geared in large measure to scientific policy advice or to the ways in which the role of DC experts has traditionally been understood. However, this conception applies only to one sub-area of policy advice in DC.

In order to engage in policy advice in a meaningful manner, DC should rely increasingly on approaches that combine personal contacts to high-ranking decision-makers with institutional capacity development. Planning cycles in DC should be more closely linked to political cycles in partner countries. Experts should be trained in political analysis and public policy management in a developing country context. Also, there is a need to strengthen monitoring and evaluation with regard to the quality of political processes.

The aim of policy advice in DC is to strengthen the policy-making capabilities and management capacities of political actors in partner countries. Based on jointly agreed goals, policy advice is geared to supporting decision-makers in their efforts to formulate political decisions and implement public policies. Over the past two decades, policy advice has become increasingly relevant in DC. There are three developments that have contributed to this state of affairs:

- First, we find in DC a tendency to form large, integrated programmes that, making combined use of a multiplicity of instruments and partner structures, operate at multiple levels of partner country political systems. This implies a growing need to use policy advice as a means to bolster cooperation and to provide it with a conceptual underpinning.
- Second, new programme-based approaches (budget support, basket funding involving multiple donors, etc.) are leading to a clearly discernible shift in approaches to and levels of intervention in DC, and these need to be strategically coordinated with partners.
- Third, experiences with more advanced or especially successful developing countries indicate that partners tend, in the course of their development, to differentiate, and to independently manage, their demand for advisory services. Capacity development, targeted knowledge transfer and support of flexible change projects are increasingly supplanting traditional consulting by long-term experts.

The view presented in what follows is that policy advice in DC is subject to specific conditions that warrant conceptualising them as a policy advice type *sui generis*. The

analysis proceeds in three steps. It starts out by presenting policy advice as a concept, discussing different types encountered in practice. It then goes on to discuss the specific conditions for policy advice in DC. It concludes by discussing ways in which DC could deal with the challenges presented by policy advice.

What is policy advice?

Today policy advice is generally viewed as politically initiated, dialogue-based, and structured communication of knowledge keyed to values, interests, and institutions. This definition dispenses with the notion that policy advice can be conceptualised as a one-sided transfer of knowledge driven by a “rationality gap” between science and politics. It rests, instead, on the assumption of a multiplicity of learning and interaction processes between politics, expert community, and society.

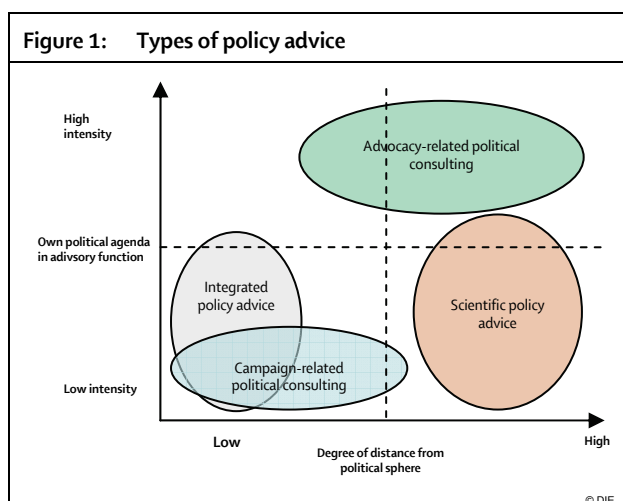
In the social sciences the concept was initially developed with reference to scientific policy advice, starting out with the identification of three patterns on which the relationship between experts and decision-makers may be based: (i) Under the “decisionist approach” science simply makes information available, leaving the decision-making process to politics. (ii) The “technocratic approach” reverses the sequence, with knowledge dominating decision-making. (iii) Under the “two-community approach” science and politics continue to constitute two clearly delineated systems, but systems engaged in a critical exchange; which of the two perspectives gains sway is a matter that depends on the concrete contexts and situations involved.

The assumption of two separate worlds, politics and advice-giving science, was gradually abandoned when it

became clear that the interactions between politics and science were far more complex than what this model was able to depict. The result was the emergence of integrative, dialogic approaches that conceptualise policy advice as a **process** involving the **communication and negotiation** of knowledge and recommendations for action. This process finds its paradigmatic expression in networks of scientists, decision-makers, lobbyists, civil society groups, and other actors and stakeholders.

This implies that there is direct interplay between policy advice and other factors that influence decision-makers: available resources, values, habits and traditions, the influence exerted by organised interests, partisan political considerations, and – not least – the experience and knowledge of the decision-makers themselves. In this context scientific evidence is one source of knowledge among others, though not one that can automatically lay claim to primacy.

Conceptualising policy advice as a process of communication and negotiation enables us to recognise, in the “advisor”-“recipient” relationship, different constellations of actors and interests that can serve as a basis to identify four types of policy advice (see Figure 1):



- **Scientific policy advice** may be regarded as the “classic type” of policy advice. In financial, personnel, and thematic terms, research retains a large measure of independence from politics. Its function is to develop orientations for political decision-making, and it sees itself as a provider of flanking critical support in the implementation of public policy. A typical form of delivery consists in short-term, intermittent inputs, in part on request, in part on the provider’s own initiative, often on an honorary basis. Scientific institutions more and more frequently address a broader public as a means of enhancing the impact of the inputs they provide.
- **Integrated policy advice** is provided by research staffs, policy departments, project groups, and similar institutions directly integrated into the given po-

litical structure. Here the research agenda is set by the principal, and it may extend to all fields involved in the policy cycle. While the degrees of freedom available to develop critical positions are defined on a case-by-case basis, they tend, on the whole, to be small. One mode of provision typical for this type of policy advice may be seen in iterative inputs over a protracted period of time.

- **Advocacy-related political consulting** services are offered by organisations that represent particular interests or specific common interests and provide expertise in “their own” policy fields. As in the case of scientific policy advice, these organisations are focussed on providing short-term inputs, although they may, in certain cases, be integrated into political structures, for instance when staff members of private organisations are delegated to ministries. In larger measure than scientific policy advice, this consulting type engages in political mobilisation. Also, it strives to develop positions with immediate relevance for political action.
- **Campaign-related political consulting** focuses on the communication and implementation of specific policy content. It is provided by specialised experts or consultants on behalf of political organisations or individual actors, with the principal receiving consulting services for a limited period of time. This activity centres less on expert support than on the generation of acceptance, among a target group, for a material position, a concrete policy, or a given person.

Policy advice in development cooperation

The dialogic conception of policy advice outlined above typically applies for DC as well. Here too, the concern is to place public policy on a rational basis and to inject advisory inputs into complex policy processes involving multiple actors. Another aspect typical of today’s conception of policy advice in DC is that the interaction between politics, experts, and society accords due consideration to values, interests, and institutions.

At the same time, though, policy advice in the development context is faced with a number of particular challenges. Some of these result from the political and administrative features (governance) of partner countries. Others result from the specifics of DC itself. Both of these dimensions will be discussed in what follows.

Partner country governance: Far more than in the OECD countries, policy advice and consulting in DC operates under conditions defined by major uncertainty, short-term policy rationales, lack of transparency in political processes, and weak implementation capacities.

- Developing countries are often typified by **weak national systems**; that is to say, the structures and procedures used to formulate and implement public policies allow for little predictability, or expectational stability, when it come to the results of policy

processes. Knowledge of and adherence to legal procedure tend to be weakly developed. As a result, policy-making and public administration tend to take on the form of a sequence of ad hoc decisions and bargaining processes. Lack of adequate infrastructure and human resources serves to further impede the process of policy implementation. For that matter, concrete demands for policy advice may not always be clearly specified, or may be changed at a moment's notice. The result is that it is often difficult for policy advice to identify entry points to follow up on successful (international) approaches and best practices.

- The **policy cycle** itself is configured differently in countries with weak national systems than in countries with strong systems. Put in somewhat simplified terms, it may be said that decision-making is often slow and cumbersome in countries with strong systems, because here interest groups tend to focus their activities precisely on this phase, whereas, once taken, decisions tend to be implemented without much friction, since the process is based on legal procedures and planning instruments and thus offers relatively little room for political interventions. In countries with weak systems, on the other hand, the political actors involved are far less likely to accept the finality of decisions that have been taken, and they are far more likely to attempt to bring their influence to bear when it comes to implementation. In such a setting, the executive bodies tend to be much more susceptible to external interventions. Under these circumstances, policy advice geared to agenda-setting and legislation is faced with the risk of proving relatively ineffectual.

But one thing we need to bear in mind: Even in OECD countries the setting in which policy advice is provided is often marked by uncertainty and intransparency. Therefore, reference to partner country governance alone is no justification for speaking of policy advice in DC as a type of its own.

Specifics of DC: DC itself, with its structures and requirements, constitutes an institutional background that impacts on policy advice in terms of its functions, instruments, and roles. It is *this* circumstance that makes policy advice in DC a type *sui generis*, one that displays elements of all the consulting types outlined above.

Most importantly, policy advice in DC moves within the conflicting limits set by two **principal-agent relationships**. In the favourable case, its area of intervention will be defined jointly by the donor and the partner government. Policy advice seeks, in the framework of the activities agreed upon, to align itself with endogenous partner processes and to provide support for partner projects. Viewed in terms of this perspective, it is integrated policy advice and must be guided by the partner's advisory needs. At the same time, though, it continues to uphold the values and interests of the

government or institution on behalf of which it is provided, and to which it is also accountable. Viewed in terms of this perspective, it more closely resembles advocacy-related political consulting, and it seeks to maintain a certain distance to its partners.

Policy advice in DC extends across the **whole of the policy cycle**: Today, in view of the conditions in partner countries outlined above, policy advice in DC is geared more and more to providing process and institutional advisory services in addition to well-founded expert advice. In this sense, it combines elements of scientific policy advice with the longer-term approach typical of integrated policy advice and the project and impact orientation typical of campaign-related political consulting.

Policy advice in DC is bound up with **complex role expectations**. Unlike science, which tends to act independently of the political process, policy advisers in DC are "committed change managers," and as such they are focussed on development goals. But they are at the same time intermediaries in the political process, and their tasks include shaping political processes and mediating between positions. This gives a certain pre-eminence to soft skills (the skills involved in negotiation, mediation, and moderation) over expert technical knowledge. Both of these functions call for a close, institutionally underpinned, and trust-based relationship with partners.

In addition, policy advice in DC needs to create links between knowledge networks in the partner country and at the international level, in this way doing justice to its expert, "knowledge broker" function. In many sectors there are ongoing global debates that are not tapped sufficiently by the national discourse in a given partner country. The task facing DC here is to provide support for the **contextualisation of knowledge** and to create entry points for local (including traditional) knowledge – one of the means being efforts to promote local research institutions and think tanks. DC in this way contributes to the building of structures for long-term cooperation between the production and utilisation of knowledge as well as to strengthening evidence-based policy formulation and implementation.

Conclusions and recommendations for German DC

We now see clearly that policy advice in DC does not correspond fully with any one of the types outlined above. Rather, it combines elements of all four types. This is a result of the particular (and particularly challenging) demands placed on policy advice in connection with partner country governance and the structures of DC. Alongside transfer of resources, DC, in cooperation with partner governments, other donors, and other ministries and agencies, will need to continue to offer strategic advisory services. To do justice to these tasks, it would appear necessary to concentrate on the following areas:

Institution building and cooperation with change agents: The central addressees of policy advice are the reform-oriented forces in state and society. However, in approaching these actors, DC often adopts a markedly person-oriented perspective, mainly because it lacks the conceptual wherewithal needed to analyse political processes in partner countries (and its own role in these processes). There is a particularly sizable incentive to proceed in this way if experts are closely integrated into partner country institutions and their effectiveness depends on personal, trust-based relationships with individual decision-makers. Therefore, the more DC becomes involved in policy advice, the greater will be the importance of approaches that combine closeness and distance to partners and set the stage for complex partner structures. One approach of this kind may be found e.g. in intermittent policy advice.

Intermittent policy advice

While many international DC projects continue to be centred on the function of the integrated, long-term expert delegated to a given partner institution, German DC is making increasing use of intermittent policy advice, in particular in more advanced partner countries in Latin America. Under this approach, the two sides reach agreement, in a broader programme context, on specific change projects, which then receive iterative, intermittent advice instead of continuous support. This approach is much more demanding in terms of political governance, ownership, and technical capacity on the partner side. DC experts, for their part, assume new functions as network managers and knowledge brokers as well as in process monitoring. The aim is to enhance the flexibility and the efficiency of policy advice. However, the risk remains that reform efforts may, in the individual case, fail, or at least fail to develop any sustainable effects.

While high-ranking ties are an important element of policy advice in DC, such relations need to be accompanied by flanking measures geared to building institutional capacity and strengthening organisations. Policy advice should address change agents in the strategic functions they have in the given institutional context. It must be able to effect coordination between the DC planning cycle and the political cycle and to produce binding agreements. Policy advice needs to be provided across the various levels of increasingly differentiated political systems, including both public and civil society actors. To better meet these requirements, it is necessary to identify and satisfy the **training needs** of policy advisors.

Impact orientation: The debate on policy advice and consulting quite some time ago took leave of the political engineering models current in earlier years, in part in response to the management and control scepticism

prevalent in modern political science. DC, too, would be well advised to dispense with the notion of linear cause-and-effect relationships and direct chains of causality between policy advice and material political outcomes. On the other hand, though, DC also needs to address, at this level too, growing demands for accountability, legitimacy, and learning. It is essential to more systematically identify and communicate what needs to be done if DC is to contribute, sustainably and over the longer term, to strengthening institutions. DC needs to step up monitoring of advisory services across the policy cycle and to dovetail own evaluation efforts with those undertaken by partners and other donors. Agreements with partners and other donors, as well as the definition of programme-related indicators, need to focus more on the quality of policy processes in terms of participation, transparency and legality, and orientation to partner goal systems.



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