



Development Alternatives, Inc.

**Technical Assistance
for Integrated Rural
Development:
A Counterpart's
Perspective**

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PREFACE

This paper is one of three working papers sponsored by the "Organization and Administration of Integrated Rural Development" project on differing perspectives on the management of technical assistance in developing countries. Forthcoming, are papers which approach the problem from the perspective of the home office management and the expatriate field team leader. This paper examines the subject from the perspective of the host-country project staff.

Very few examples exist of papers written by host-government personnel on the subject of foreign technical assistance needs and advisory behavior. This paper is an attempt--at least in part--to fill that gap. Although the author is now a professional staff member of Development Alternatives, Inc. (DAI), he served for 36 years as a civil servant in progressively more important executive positions within the Indonesian government at subdistrict, district, and provincial levels. His last assignment was as chairman of the Provincial Development Planning Board (Bappeda) and project manager of the AID-funded Provincial Area Development Program (PDP-I) in Central Java.

While the particular incidents and observations in this paper are based on the experience of the author and other Indonesian officials who responded to a questionnaire, the insights and recommendations have wider applicability. It should

should also be noted that the focus here is on long-term technical assistance, not on short-term consultancies which rely far less on a counterpart relationship.

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SECTION ONE

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE REQUIREMENTS

DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS

Technical assistance requirements are viewed differently by those who hold senior executive positions as the result of political appointment and those who are members of the career civil service. In addition, local rural beneficiaries also view the presence of foreign advisers differently. The differences are due, to a significant extent, to differences in the hierarchy of responsibility and frequency of contact with the substance of the project and with members of the technical assistance team.

Contact between political appointees¹ and consultants is usually limited to a common courtesy call preceeding an actual visit to the administrative area for which they are responsible, occasional formal meetings, and a final courtesy call before the consultants leave the area. Thus, it is usually subordinate members of the civil service who are held responsible for the actual management of project implementation and who have the most contact with foreign advisers.²

Unfortunately, these host government officials at the local implementation level usually consider the type of

technical assistance they receive as a given. They are seldom consulted by those who design projects or by those in senior positions of authority within their own government prior to the time when decisions in that regard are made. Technical assistance is, for better or for worse, something provided from above for the purpose of achieving the objectives of a national development plan.

The politically appointed senior executive most often views foreign technical assistance as something which is inherent in a foreign loan or grant program. Since local government must operate within the limits of very limited funds as measured against its total responsibilities, considered strategically--foreign financing is welcomed and--to the extent it is viewed as an essential part of a loan or grant program--so is the technical assistance. Foreign financing of IRD activities at the local level results in additional funds being made available to local government. In addition to increased development activities, such funds also provide additional multipurpose facilities for the use of local people or agencies, or both. The success of projects financed by foreign aid can mean an increase in popularity and status for political appointees who are viewed as being involved. However, the reverse is also true.

With regard to specific needs for technical assistance, politically appointed senior executives consider trade-offs between specific development needs as compared with the political risks of having foreigners involved. Thus, functions which in their judgment can be performed to a minimally adequate degree by available indigenous staff will not usually be viewed as requiring expatriate consultants; even if an argument can be made that expatriates have significantly better skills. Thus, a positive attitude towards acceptance of foreign advisers depends on recognition that a serious gap in skills required for project implementation exists.

Expatriate consultants are welcome only on the understanding that they are much more qualified than local government staff. The skills most often required from that point of view are usually narrow and highly technical in nature, in such fields as agriculture, livestock, fishery, irrigation, small and home industries, small trade in rural areas, and public infrastructure and public utilities development in urban areas. In addition, training is generally considered essential, not only to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for the planning, implementation, monitoring, and follow-up of the development projects themselves, but also to achieve sustainability after the termination of technical assistance.

The view of the career civil servant at the implementation level is somewhat different. He or she is, after all, directly involved in the day-to-day operation of the project and is the most likely, at one time or another, to be assigned as a counterpart to a foreign adviser. It is ironic that as the person most likely to work directly with a foreign adviser, the civil servant is the least likely to be involved in determining the adviser's scope of work. By the time that a civil servant at the operational level is truly aware that foreign advisers are to be assigned to a project, it is most often a fait accompli.

Faced with the arrival of a technical assistance team mandated from elsewhere, it is the civil servant's obligation to utilize the team as effectively as possible. Initially at least, the adviser is seen as someone who will lighten or simplify a complex development task. It is often a shock to discover that working with an adviser, at least at the beginning, complicates rather than simplifies the work.

If a positive and frank relationship eventually develops between counterpart and adviser, the former might rely on the latter to "sell" his new ideas to political superiors. This happens because, in some cases, the counterpart would be considered too junior to "sell" innovative proposals; the result of which cannot be estimated on the basis of past

experience. An expatriate consultant with considerable experience in various developing countries and whose intelligence and skill is considered high because of his origin from a developed country will often be considered more acceptable and convincing when proposing new ideas for improved systems and procedures. The acceptance and implementation of an expatriate consultant's proposal is a form of showing respect for an honorable foreign guest. However, accepting and implementing a proposal initiated by a subordinate within the civil service who is considered less qualified is sometimes viewed as embarrassing and damaging to the superior official's prestige. Thus, an expatriate consultant serving as mediator or agent between the civil servant and his political superior can be a considerable help if significantly new innovations are to be proposed, accepted, implemented, and followed-up.

The beneficiaries' attitude toward foreign advisers is often simple indifference. They focus not so much on who provides benefits, but rather on the tangible results of what their government promised. Although they probably prefer their own leaders, they place more emphasis on the "delivery of the goods" and, if effective, foreign consultants are usually welcome. From the beneficiaries' point of view, "goods" equal such things as money, capital goods, new seed varieties, livestock, fingerlings, physical infrastructure,

and so forth. Services, such as training and advisory help, are seldom viewed as "benefits." As foreign consultants occasionally visit subdistricts and villages, their contact with the common people, especially in remote rural areas, has a more casual and coincidental character.

THE EXPECTATIONS OF INDIGENOUS PROJECT MANAGERS

Generally speaking, host-country senior executives and civil servants responsible for project implementation have high expectations concerning the services to be rendered by expatriate consultants.

Most indigenous managers have not been abroad. However, they have learned much about the state of progress in developed countries; partly from classroom courses and partly from lectures, reading, and television. These secondary sources of information provide them with an image that most, if not all, expatriate consultants coming from developed countries are very specialized experts in their respective fields. There is often a strong belief that their own country does not have people with equivalent levels of skill or sophistication. It is often a rude shock to learn after the passage of some time that this is not always the case.

However, it should also be noted that, whatever the case, the leadership and managerial qualities expected of foreign consultants by host government project managers are: a zest for work; seriousness in job performance; toughness; systematized and planned work habits; follow-through after plan formulation and implementation; pragmatism; propensity to continuously search for improvement; self-discipline; timeliness; open-mindedness; the tendency towards democratic or participatory leadership; and last, but not least, continuous efforts to be both effective and efficient at the same time. If these characteristics of good leadership and management are exhibited by foreign consultants, they will provide an example of how a good development manager should behave. This method of teaching or training by showing and demonstrating is especially effective and efficient in developing countries where indigenous leaders and managers are already aware of the need for new managerial and administrative values appropriate to development.

Beside leadership and managerial characteristics, indigenous managers expect that expatriate consultants will be able to adapt their normal behavior to their new living environment within the host country. Indeed, they are guests of the host country. While they are owed a respectful reception, they must also understand that, as advisers, they

are required to provide assistance to the managers of the host country in their efforts to increase the standard of living, skills, and welfare of the people in a manner relevant to the people's values. In order to achieve that objective, consultants should study the host country's social and cultural history and contemporary values; the national language; and the administrative organization and procedures of the national and regional government.

Thus, a good consultant should have, at a minimum, the following characteristics:

- Proficiency in the local language;
- A willingness and ability to adjust to the natural and social environment within which he or she must work;
- Technologically more advanced skills than are available locally;
- Prior professional experience in at least one country other than his or her own; and, if with family,
- A spouse and children who are also willing and able to adjust to the local environment.

With reference to the type of adjustments required, the following are worth noting:

- Traditional customs (cultural laws);
- Locally defined manners (etiquette);
- Religious injunctions; and
- The fundamentals of maintaining good relationships (rapport).

Examples of some requirements drawn from Indonesia illustrate the point to be made:

- Before beginning a visit to a specific project site, consultants should make a courtesy call on the executive officer with the highest rank in the region within which the project is located. Such a visit should not be considered a waste of time. It is essential.
- When making such visits, drinks and food might be served. It is commonly considered as extremely impolite if such food and drinks are refused. The insult is magnified if the visiting guests have brought their own lunch or drinks or both.
- During breakfast, lunch, or dinner with Islamic people, it is regarded as insulting to eat pork or to drink alcoholic beverages.
- During fasting hours in the fasting month (Ramadan), even foreigners should not drink or eat in public in a region with an Islamic population.
- Before beginning to eat from one's lunchbox, drink from one's bottle, or smoke one's own cigarette, an offer to share should be made to other persons present. If a person's food, drink, or cigarettes are too limited to share, apologies should be explicitly offered instead.

With regard to more narrowly technical matters, host country managers expect that expatriate consultants will bring with them technologically more advanced, but at the same time applicable and appropriate, procedures and methods from their own countries. What is expected is that such methods have already been tested in various other countries in which they worked before and are not just theoretical ideas with which the consultant will be experimenting.

As regards preferences concerning the length of time for consultant assignments, most local managers interviewed considered a period of one year to be the minimum. Alternatively, an indefinite period corresponding to the "time necessary" for the preparations of a proposal for some aspect of implementation; getting it approved; and seeing it through to completion is acceptable. That minimum amount of time permits the consultant to carry through with their responsibility for projects they recommend. It likewise will give the project manager the opportunity to monitor the progress of the project and to request the consultant's advice whenever anything goes wrong and needs improvement. The maximum length of time suggested is five years; especially for multi-year projects.

Another important factor to be considered is the character of a consultant's family. There are various views as to whether or not an adviser is more effective with or without a family (whether with or without children). Some prefer to have a consultant with a spouse so as to secure a calm and stable family life in support of a consultant's work. Others prefer that consultants be unmarried so that they can dedicate their time and energy completely to the project. Yet others prefer foreign consultants with a spouse who is originally from the host country. In the latter case, it is believed that the spouse is more likely to facilitate adaptation to the local work environment.

Finally, views on the appropriate age of consultant vary. However, the minimum age mentioned in interviews was 30 years. With regard to the maximum age, there is no common opinion. Some consider a stipulation of 65 years as a maximum. Yet others do not consider a stipulated maximum to be necessary; physical and mental health are regarded as more important.

FOREIGN TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IN PRACTICE

Unfortunately, the desires and expectations of indigenous project managers are seldom fully realized. This is partly due to the exaggerated expectations themselves; expectations that practically no person can fulfill. However, it is also due to inadequate adjustment by many expatriate consultants to the specific conditions of the country and region in which they work. They should recognize that meeting social and cultural requirements is often considered more important than fulfilling technical expectations.

In that context, performing or fitting into management functions is often more useful than achieving technologically good results. This is especially true at the lower levels of government. The more local the level of government, the more emphasis is placed on social and cultural adaptability. Conversely, higher levels of government place greater emphasis

on technical specialization and, consequently, more stress is placed on the technical requirements to be met by consultants.

Some examples of actual situations are provided below:

- An expatriate consultant did not speak nor understand the local or national language. His assignment was to collect data and information in order to prepare a preimplementation report prior to the finalization of a project paper. Because he could not speak or understand the local language, he had to depend on a translator. Some interpreters do not know the precise meaning of conceptual or technical terms. Feeling embarrassed to admit their ignorance, their translations tend towards the "educated guess." It stands to reason that the consultant could not always get completely valid data and information. When and if he did, the process was time and energy consuming; two languages for each question and each answer. Moreover, the managers whom the consultant had to work with were disappointed or at least unsatisfied because they could not easily communicate directly with the consultant. It is also true, human psyches being what they are, that the inability to communicate causes personal embarrassment and withdrawal. In those IRD projects requiring primary participation by government officials at the lower levels of government, it is worth noting that most do not speak or understand English.
- A group of foreign consultants once visited a project. The local officials had made arrangements to receive those consultants, and to provide lunch. When the consultants reached one of the project sites, it was about lunchtime. They were offered lunch. One of the consultants, the one highest in rank, refused to even step out of his vehicle. Instead, he brought out his own lunchbox and a soft drink bottle; when upon he started to eat and drink alone. Of course, this attitude and behavior insulted the host managers and at the same time embarrassed the other foreign and indigenous members of his group.

- Some consultants make visits to project sites along with their assigned counterparts. One of those advisers always had a thermos flask with him. Upon arrival at the homes of various village heads, if the group was offered some food and beverages, the consultant would invariably refuse to accept them. Instead, he would drink from his own thermos without apologizing. Some of the local people who did not know much about Western habits were offended. The point here is not that a valid and locally acceptable reason might exist for the consultant's refusal of the food and drink offered. Rather the point is that the consultant should have given some excuse--such as being sick and requiring a special beverage carried in the thermos--and apologized for the "necessity" of acting with what would normally be considered "poor manners."
- While speaking to a local project manager, one consultant took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He took one cigarette and started to smoke without offering one to the man with whom he was speaking. His negligence, which was due to his ignorance of the habits and etiquette of the host country, resulted in the project manager's erroneous conclusions that the consultant was stingy or egotistic.
- To some consultants assigned to a certain government agency, a room and office furniture was provided by the agency. One consultant, however, rarely used the office provided. He gave as his reason that working at home was more convenient. This behavior disappointed the consultant's counterparts and other government officials. They had always believed that advisers from developed countries maintained self-discipline and as such could set a good example for the staff of the agency concerned.
- A consultant recommended to his counterpart that a meeting should be arranged with potential rural poor beneficiaries in order to discuss openly their problems, needs, and alternative courses of action. However, the counterpart objected; giving as his reason that such a meeting would lead to expectations beyond what the project, with its limited resources, could meet. The result, in

the judgment of the counterpart, would be disappointment and frustration on the part of the rural people. Based on western democratic standards, that objection might seem ridiculous. However, local conditions should be taken into account. Fortunately, the foreign consultant was wise enough to withdraw his suggestion.

- The terms of a technical assistance contract required that the travel expenses of expatriate consultants be paid or reimbursed by the agencies to which they were assigned. This sometimes led to undesirable situations; for example, a consultant had to travel as soon as possible, but the financial procedure of the government required that an official travel order should be prepared which, in turn, had to be signed by a specified government official who happened not to be in his office. The consultant, not being used to such requirements, complained even though there was nothing that could be done under existing regulations.
- One consultant was not considered by his local counterpart to be particularly capable in a technical sense. However, he could understand and speak the language of the host country quite well and had at least some technical knowledge to contribute. Moreover, he could get along very well with the people around him. He also set a good example by regularly coming to the office. Another consultant possessed much better technical skills. However, he rarely showed up at the office because he preferred visiting the project sites and, when not in the field, worked at home. It stands to reason that no one missed him when he was absent or when the time came for him to leave the country. The point here is not that the level of technical proficiency is unimportant. Rather, it is that a consultant who is somewhat less proficient in a technical sense will still have more positive impact on his counterparts if he behaves according to local norms and values than will a more technically proficient consultant who does not develop the necessary rapport.

These examples simply illustrate some of the problems which both foreign consultants and host-country counterparts must face in establishing a positive and mutually supportive relationship.

SECTION TWO

PROBLEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As described in the previous section, there are different perceptions of the need for technical assistance between three main groups: politically appointed senior executives, civil servants at the implementation level, and beneficiaries. Differences between these groups are cross-cut by yet another factor--level of government. These two cross-cutting factors complicate attempts to assess the need for technical assistance. Should the currently predominating policy of simply mandating technical assistance--from above--as an inherent part of a loan or grant be continued? Who should be consulted in the process of decision making on the need for technical assistance? Who should make the final decision? In what detail should the terms of reference for each consultant be specified? To what extent and under what conditions should consultants be indigenous or foreign or a combination of both? To which agencies, at what level, should technical assistance be provided?

Expatriate consultants come from developed countries with modern technology and most often individualistic societies. In contrast, the countries to which they are assigned are only just developing. The governments of these countries are still looking for appropriate technology in the context of an

overwhelmingly agriculturally based economy within which people still live in a traditional and collectivist society. This difference in the social, economic, and political environment often creates misunderstandings on both sides; resulting in the deterioration of interpersonal relations. That, in turn, has a negative impact on attempts to achieve the objectives of a project. The potential gap between consultant and counterpart becomes wider if the consultant does not speak or understand the language of the public officials with whom he has to communicate and cooperate. Such problems are multiplied if consultants have rigid personalities which cannot adapt to the social and cultural values of the local environment.

It is also worth noting that disparities of income between counterparts and foreign consultants create jealousies which, although almost never raised by host country personnel, are an underlying cause of tension which is often manifested in another form. It is important that foreigners understand that the highest civil servant salary at the provincial level results in a take-home salary of approximately 10 percent of the salary of an expatriate consultant. In this context, it is understandable that civil servants expect additional income from development projects. Projects which allow the payment of honorariums or other fringe benefits will be more attractive

- Most consultants are totally ignorant of the high expectations their counterparts have of them. Often there is a difference between their respective interpretations of the consultant's scope of work; although often that difference is not explicit and neither knows that a difference of opinion exists.
- Some foreign consultants are not able to adequately adjust to the working and living environment in the host-country.

Local governments often have their own very limited income. In that respect, they exercise some of the development policy options available to national governments. However, in the case of local governments, their responsibility for the implementation of specific national development projects within their jurisdiction overwhelm the discretionary sphere. With only limited discretionary funds available, any additional source of funding is normally welcomed with sincere appreciation. This applies equally to foreign grants, loans, and technical assistance. The question is not whether the funds are welcome, but how they are to be used in the context of externally determined restrictions. In that regard, the specific needs of the local government and population should be assessed in terms of local perceptions of need and appropriate implementation mechanisms. Thus, local officials should be involved in the selection process of both projects and the consultants.

Since communication, and thus, language, is one of the key factors in achieving maximum positive impact from technical assistance, intensive language training should be provided to

than projects which do not. Indeed, dedication is often tempered by the need to subsist and survive. In this connection, a luxurious way of life by a consultant or an apparent lack of concern for the problems that every public servant faces in developing countries can easily provoke resentment and negative attitudes towards cooperation.

Any summary of problems associated with technical assistance should include the following:

- Technical assistance is often required for reasons other than a real or felt need by host government officials. This is especially the case among operational level counterparts. Instead, technical assistance is simply included as a standard part of any loan or grant from a foreign donor agency. If the financial aspect of a loan or grant is badly needed, it is normally impossible to refuse the inclusion of technical assistance by foreign advisers.
- Host-country officials, especially those at the operational level, seldom have an opportunity to participate effectively in the selection of individual expatriate consultants. It is most often considered to be too expensive to have a candidate for an advisory position come to the host country for an interview by either senior government officials or counterparts. Thus, a consultant is usually selected mainly on the basis of a curriculum vitae and references.
- Given the emphasis on prior comparative experience and technical skills in the recruitment and assignment of consultants, most do not speak or understand the language of the host country.
- Most consultants arrive without any prior knowledge or understanding of the social, cultural, political, or administrative values of the host country.

foreign consultants prior to the initiation of the consultants' work. This, of course, does not apply to those who have adequate proficiency in the language already.

Moreover, prior to any attempt to establish effective relations with local officials and people, a newly arrived foreign consultant should follow an orientation course covering the social, cultural, political, and administrative values of the host country. The orientation should cover such issues as the religious principles and social habits the consultant is most likely to encounter, local definitions of "good" and "bad" manners, the structure of government, and a description of relevant administrative procedures affecting operations in those agencies involved in project implementation. The last of these subject areas is very important. Counterparts are usually amazed to find that the foreign adviser has no idea whatsoever what can and cannot be done under the terms of existing administrative regulations.

The following remarks summarize the main conclusions of this paper:

Taking into account the scarcity of qualified local administrators and technical specialists with modern skills--especially in terms of broad comparative experience in other developing countries with similar conditions--technical assistance is often necessary and beneficial.

- The need for technical assistance should be assessed carefully in order to harmonize with the existence and availability of qualified local professionals.
- Views concerning the specific requirements for technical assistance will differ in accordance with the specific values or problems faced by different groups within the structure. In these terms, three main groups have been identified:
 - Politically appointed senior executives who emphasize popularity, acceptability, and status;
 - Career civil servants who strive for "complete staff work," simplification, and efficiency in serving the public; and
 - Potential beneficiaries who long for better food, clothes, housing, health, education and other basic human needs.

These differences can lead to different and sometimes contradictory criteria for judging the performance of foreign advisers.

- The expectations of local project managers are usually too high initially, as compared with the actual capabilities of expatriate consultants. This can lead to a level of disappointment from which recovery is difficult; maximization of what can realistically be achieved is thwarted.
- The social and cultural acceptability of consultant performance is often considered to be more important than technical skills. Interestingly, given a trade-off between managerial and technical skills, the ability to function and perform according to managerial criteria is the most important.
- Problems related to technical assistance are primarily those resulting from poor communication, social relations, personalities and insensitivity to local problems; rather than inappropriate skills.
- An orientation course is extremely important and should be required of all advisers prior to the commencement of their work.

- Personality factors like social sensitivity, flexibility, emotional stability, sense of responsibility, self-discipline and friendliness, should be given much more emphasis as criteria in the selection of consultants. Of course, professionalism and technical competence are also important.
- Monitoring the activities and achievements of consultants is necessary in order to discover as early as possible anything in an advisor's performance which is unacceptable or damaging to his or her effectiveness. This can be very difficult to accomplish, since few local government officials are willing to openly criticize the performance of their advisers.

NOTES

- ¹ Political appointees to executive position are those holding such positions as governor, provincial secretary, district head, district secretary, subdistrict head, and village chief. Such people are considered political appointees even though they might also be members of the civil service because they are held responsible for political conditions under their jurisdiction.
- ² Civil servants hold such positions a chairman of the provincial planning agency and heads of line agencies and their section and subsection heads at province, district, and subdistrict levels.