



**SERRC**  
Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

‘Epistemic Injustice’ in Aid Sector and Agenda for Researching National Development Experts

Palash Kamruzzaman, University of South Wales, [palash.kamruzzaman@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:palash.kamruzzaman@southwales.ac.uk)

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Kamruzzaman, Palash. 2021. “‘Epistemic Injustice’ in Aid Sector and Agenda for Researching National Development Experts.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 10 (6): 77-84. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-5YT>.

Susanne Koch, reflecting on her experience of working in the development aid sector, asserts that ‘experts from within the aid-receiving countries are subject to discriminatory credibility judgment based on their identity and that this seems to happen not incidentally but systematically. The credibility deficit ‘local’ experts suffer is inherently linked with the credibility excess ‘international’ experts receive—in aid circles, they are considered more knowledgeable and more competent to deal with the challenges at stake’ (Koch 2020, 483).

While some might question if such reflection can be universal but at the same time this must be recognized that her experience may be representative of largely common practice. It is also important that such reflections receive wider attention particularly at a time when a growing genre namely aid ethnographies are gaining traction in international development scholarship.

### **Historical Race and Nationality-Based Disparity in the Practices of International Development**

While aid ethnographies, broadly speaking, often offer reflexive accounts of Western development practitioners’ longstanding experience of aid sector they rarely touch upon the racial inequality within the sector which is a central feature of Koch’s (2020) article in *Social Epistemology*. At this point, it is vital to emphasize that racial disparity (or White privilege) within the domain of international development can be traced back to a historical past. For example, Sarah White (2002, 408) insists that, in 1980s Bangladesh, as a white person she found herself in a position of marked racial privilege and she benefited significantly from it. She explains that again and again, and without her conscious intention, her whiteness opened her doors, jumped her queues, filled her plates, and she was invited to speak in various forums. People liked her very quickly and she became used to being called ‘Madam’.

While white privilege seems to have a significant currency in international development for a long time, a contrasting example can be found from Kothari’s (2006, 16) experience when she felt devalued through her involvement of working as a consultant in Bangladesh for a bilateral agency with a white colleague. In her experience, as a non-white person, she found that decisions about field visits were based on who would be taken more seriously and would wield more authority rather than on who had more appropriate experience and knowledge. As a result, her white colleague was allocated meetings at Ministries and head offices of international development agencies, while she was allocated meetings with smaller NGOs and lesser government officials.

The examples of White (2002), and Kothari (2006) refer to a largely common trend within the practices of international development where development expertise frequently, if not always, are shaped either by one’s race or ethnic origin. This is because perhaps the idea of ‘development’ is deeply embedded in an apparent sense of superiority (of the aid giving West) over the aid recipient ‘developing’ countries. As Parpart (1995, 221) insists that development has been predicated on the assumption that some people and places are more developed than others, and those who are more developed have the knowledge and expertise

to help those who are not. Such a notion of expertise can often be found at the heart of international development practices where a key role of development experts seems to be exporting a generic model of development that is formulated outside the developing country (Hintjens 1999). This leads some scholars (e.g. Kothari and Minogue 2002; Cohen and Easterly 2009) to argue that development is a process that is primarily financed, designed, and evaluated by the Global North but applied in poor countries, often attached with different conditionalities. In other words, various forms of inequality including race and nationality-based disparities are part and parcel of international aid and development.

### **National Development Experts—An Understudied Social Category in International Development**

Koch's (2020) key argument seems to be that despite having wealth of experience, in-depth knowledge about the local context, and suitable training, qualifications and skills the views, recommendations, proposals of local experts often experience a significant level of credibility concerns. This raises the question who judges whom and how significant is this for the group who is judging or being judged. More importantly, what implications this may have towards the practice and scholarship of international development.

While Koch contends that the practice highlights an epistemic injustice which may resonate with the experience of many development professionals it is also equally significant that she points towards an existing division that often goes unnoticed. Koch (482) describes this as a 'common categorisation' within the aid circles: a distinction between 'international' and 'local'/'national' experts. She further goes on to suggest that such distinction 'obviously has notable consequences for their respective status' where nationality of the experts serves as a label to differentiate in this regard (482).

Internationality (or superiority) of an expert is determined to a foreign national frequently coming from the donor/Western countries whereas the 'local' or 'national' expert is referred to someone who are the citizens of aid receiving countries who are also based in their country of origins. The notions of superiority and inferiority based on one's nationality (what Koch refers to as the key reason for an epistemic injustice) is also visible in some contemporary studies.

For instance, local/national aid workers in Tanzania, whom Sundberg (2019) describes as *desk officers* for their lower rank roles, help foreign aid agencies in manoeuvring and circumventing local bureaucratic regulations while advancing donor conditionality. Yet despite this work, the Tanzanian aid workers often enjoyed less professional authority and were rarely able to attain managerial/high-level positions, because their expertise and roles were often not recognized. Thus, not only were the contributions of local Tanzanian aid workers largely ignored, they also were systematically marginalized. Similarly, Peters (2016) demonstrates that although local Angolan staff play an important role in promoting the 'localisation agenda' in international development organizations, they largely seem 'to occupy a certain field of significance in the international development industry that is akin to the "savage slot"' (497).

Kumi and Kamruzzaman (2021) show that although ‘local’ development professionals were occupying different positions for the donor organizations but when it comes to comparing their roles/positions with the foreign staff in same organization and sector, the Ghanaian development professionals generally found that they occupied the lower rungs of the organizational hierarchy but performed most of the work. This allowed the foreigners (international staff) to claim the glory for the work done, due to their leadership positions and managerial superiority in Ghana’s development landscape leading one Ghanaian development professional working at a European embassy to suggest that ‘we do all the donkey work and they take the glory’ (cited in Kumi and Kamruzzaman, 2021).

This body of emerging literature can be interlinked with what Kamruzzaman (2017) describes as National Development Experts (NDEs) in categorizing ‘local’ ‘national’ aid and development professionals/workers. He proposes a working definition of NDEs for this category of development professionals as:

NDEs are not a homogenous group. Among others, they are comprised of academics, former politicians and bureaucrats, self-appointed civil society leaders, national consultants, former UN staff, think-tanks, and other researchers working in development sector etc. The NDEs are, therefore, provisionally defined as people whose main income is derived by working as self-employed consultants or being employed by government, non-government and external agencies specifically to formulate, implement and assess development policies, programmes and projects in their country of residence. While a great number of them are well integrated into the political elite of the country through family ties, affinity, friendship or business partnership, many of them are not so well connected and often working on to crank-up the loose networks they are part of. Apart from being integrated with the political elites (or their endeavour for that), they can also form alternative (in)formal forums and are visible in many developing countries as part of local intellectual elites and/or policy elites. They have an excellent command of English and, in the presence of foreign visitors, they distinguish themselves by their life-style, which is very Westernised in many respects - so donors feel at home with them, and take this feeling of well-being as a sign of their intelligence, competence and political philosophy. In many ways, they have the similar characteristics of the international aid professionals and development experts except they are citizens of developing countries and working for/in their own countries (generally speaking) (5).

As opposed to ‘international’ development experts (IDEs) the term ‘national’ development experts (NDEs) offer a seemingly fitting categorization in the context of development and expertise within the landscape of international development. While neither the working definition nor the dichotomy of international/national can be applied universally such categorization undoubtedly establish the fact that this represents a new social category that is understudied to date and very little are known about their characteristics, behaviour, agency, role and motivation for their involvement in the aid sector.

## **Moving Forward: Researching Relationships of Aid and Addressing the Power Relations**

Through the existing inequality of development/aid expertise that is based on one's nationality Koch (2020) brings forward an issue of paramount importance which she calls as *epistemic injustice*. In her words, the dominance of 'international' development experts in the aid sector 'is maintained by an imaginary of Northern epistemic superiority which is instituted in donors' employment and procurement practices and manifests in professional roles' (484). Almost inevitably whenever the 'international' and 'national' consultants and other experts are paired together the IDEs always lead the process while the NDEs merely play a supportive role. She goes on to insist that 'irrespective of the professional position and experience, being classified as 'local' in the aid context seems to imply being treated as epistemically lesser' (483). This can be found throughout the aid spectrum as most often the IDEs lead the research reports, journal articles or other publications/research outputs. Along the way, either the NDEs are given less important roles in terms of knowledge production or are frequently excluded from this process as knowledge production does not seem to be a part of the terms of reference for the NDEs.

The Western/white saviour lens used in this process can at best be described as a form of political exclusion or at worst as appalling. The lesser importance or exclusion of NDEs in knowledge production within predominantly existing practices of international development therefore result in a type of knowledge that further cranks up the Western superiority and hegemony. Koch (2020, 484-485) thus describes IDEs' 'ascribed higher-level expertise and competence' as 'one of the root causes of continuing global inequality'. While the claim of disparity and inequality among 'international' and 'national' development experts as one of the root causes of persistent 'global inequality' may be a little oversimplified this nevertheless flags up the fact that the practices of development and aid relationships are essentially power relationships. On the one hand, the landscape of international development allows one group of experts (international development experts) to represent the donors allowing them to often instil, implement and export a technical model of development to the aid receiving countries.

On the other hand, current practices of aid and development treat one group of experts (national development experts) as less capable, less knowledgeable, and less epistemic. From the onset an individual in this way knows which group they belong to that is also reflected on the terms and references of their engagements ensuring there remains no doubt about who is in charge. Apparently, the practices of international development can then be likened to the common saying of *he who pays the piper calls the tune*. The disparity and imbalance of power in this regard allow one group (the donors) to dictate the other (the aid recipient) through various conditionality, promises of further aid, and threats or sanctions on different aspects. Moving forward, this can be dovetailed with the point of epistemic inequality and/or injustice.

To address the inequality/injustice, it is therefore important to research various layers of complex aid relationships (Eyben 2006) where donors can be found ganging up together to

exert greater power over recipient countries (Edgren 2003) or can meet behind closed doors to settle what was going to be agreed before attending official coordination meetings with the client aid receiving countries (Eyben 2007). Among others, the following might be considered as useful introductory agendas for addressing the power imbalances within the aid sector that can help reduce existing epistemic inequality and/or injustice.

### **A Shift in Donors' Outlook Towards Development**

What needs to be done where NDEs and scholars from the global South can obtain much needed support to promote their research and development ideas. The talks or rhetoric of decolonizing, localizing, decentring or de-constructing development are visibly led either by the development scholars and practitioners of the West or by the institutions/research centres based in the West with some largely tokenistic inclusion of scholars and research institutions from the global South. This would have been ideal if the opposite was the case. Presumably, there might be some institutional and bureaucratic barriers to support the ideas generated in the developing countries (Lundsgaarde 2016; Gulrajani 2015).

For example, current practices of development are keener to support a generic universal model of development (often based on Western values and ideologies and promoting the neo-liberal principles) limiting the scope to support bespoke ideas in different country contexts. There are also barriers to fund a scholar/development professional or a research centre from global South as the Principal Investigator or lead organisation for a development research. Should there be a political will to change the existing inequality or epistemic injustice, donors could and should play a key role in altering their outlook towards development and funding policies allowing substantial support for development activities and research based on merit and specific context instead of nationality of an individual or geographic location of an institution.

### **Publishing More Research Outputs from the NDEs And Global South Scholars**

The existing inequality significantly restricts opportunities for development professionals and experts from the global South to publish in high quality international journals or from major international presses. Various issues including credibility concerns, lesser epistemic ability along with marketing reasons might all be at play. The editors and editorial boards of renowned international development journals are predominantly white (with a handful of exceptions) while head offices of major publishing houses are located mainly in the Western donor countries. While this is not ubiquitous, but in tandem with the institutional practices and obstacles in international development (see above) the lack of access to updated publications, research articles can also be detrimental for the NDEs and other scholars from the global South to produce authoritative texts or research outputs and meaningfully contribute to knowledge production to balance the *epistemic injustice*. This is further exacerbated through most publishing houses and journals' policies on open access publications. Once again, money (funding) seems to play the key role and often it is advantageous for the Western international experts since development funds are mainly available to Western research organisations, universities, and scholars.

The cost for open access publications in major international development journals and/or from leading publishing houses is very high which makes the endeavor to fight the epistemic injustice more difficult. Drake, Oronje and Harle (2021) argue that open access is a development issue—and it is therefore, important that major journals and publishing houses take a deep hard look into their open access policy and find ways to promote and support more open access publications from the global South scholars. Journals can even create a dedicated option for free open access publications for authors from the developing countries. Since publishing is often driven by the corporate interest of making profit (Batterbury 2020; Drake, Oronje and Harle 2021) question emerges here as to *who is going to bell the cat* even though addressing an existing inequality may sound very appealing. Along with leading journals and publishing houses, the donors, bilateral and multilateral organizations, governments of the developing countries should also consider creating/expanding conducive policies in this regard.

### **Researching the NDEs and pro-active roles of the NDEs**

As highlighted above, very little is known about the agencies, roles, motivations, characteristics, behaviors, strategies, achievements of the NDEs. Further research on these key actors would enrich the development scholarship and potentially contribute in minimizing/reducing the epistemic inequality. One cognate question could be raised at this point. Would the future research activities on the NDEs be led by the Western scholars/institutions? Ideally, not—but given the practices of international development and power asymmetry between the aid giving donors and aid recipient developing countries, finding a balance or truly collaborative equal partnerships could be a good start.

The main thrust, however, in addressing the *epistemic injustice* in international development must come from the experts and development professionals of the aid recipient countries. The external actors (donors, major journals and publishing houses) can only play a limited role. If the NDEs and other scholars from the global South do not write and publish then all other supporting mechanisms will be destined to fail. Supposedly, in some places, language could be an important barrier in producing high quality research outputs. But that is not to say that NDEs are not capable of producing excellent research publications and making important contributions to the development scholarship. If that is the case, then the current assumption (experts and development professionals from developing countries are less capable and less epistemic) will prove to be true.

Notwithstanding, several studies (Kamruzzaman 2017; Koch 2020, Sundberg 2019) suggest that NDEs are highly capable, often with highest educational degrees from globally renowned universities, of producing knowledge for their own countries and for the development scholarship. Their engagements in various consultancies and technical reports either for the donors or for their own research organizations are clearly symptomatic to this fact. The issue could be more of a cultural one where in most cases academic and epistemic publications do not add much value for their career (e.g. in terms of reputation, more consultancy, higher salary or promotion). This highlights that experts and development

professionals have learned the knack of how to play their cards right. They liaise with foreign donors and researchers that opens doors and opportunities for them.

While there are visible competitions among the NDEs (e.g. based on social background, class, political affiliation, networking, connections with top level officials, gender, religion, urban/rural etc.) it is also evident that some create their internal network by informally setting up a comprador group (Kamruzzaman 2013) in controlling and managing (broadly speaking) aid and other development activities often by setting up a research ‘think-tank’ or an NGO. This further occupies them to complete the bureaucratic paperwork that come with various project management and public relation exercises allowing them to mention limited time and opportunity for not engaging in academic, critical and intellectual development writings.

To conclude, it is imperative to ask can the NDEs become conductors of development at least for their own countries, or will they remain as contractors, door openers, gatekeepers, data collectors for the IDEs? A growing number of studies clearly reveal that the NDEs in different country contexts (e.g. in Bangladesh, Ghana, Tanzania, Angola etc.) are aware that they often inhabit an inferior status in international development (Kamruzzaman 2017; Kumi and Kamruzzaman 2021; Koch 2020; Sundberg 2019; Peters 2016; Siddiqi and Kamruzzaman 2021). Although in various forums and programs international development as a grand scheme purport to promote equality, justice, and empowerment by addressing inequality, discrimination, and various forms of injustices the NDEs find themselves experiencing first-hand the hypocrisy of all those big talks. Often it takes some time for them to realise this and once they experience it first-hand they may lose their passion, dedication, motivation and commitments towards making positive changes for the societies they live in—they become more content of tick boxing the tasks required from them and take a step back to make any meaningful contribution.

It is perhaps time that major players of international development look themselves into the mirror and recognize the potential and opportunity of the national development experts (NDEs) for promoting development at the local levels. This should be worth remembering at this point that ‘Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter’ (Chinua Achebe).

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