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**“Relying on your own strengths”  
Faced with aid dependency, promoting contextual experts in public policy in Africa**

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Usually, the term expert connotes a professional specialisation and, more particularly in the field of development, a recognised competence in technical or social engineering. Here we propose to extend it to a completely different form of competence.

In Africa, the lack of knowledge of the local contexts in which standardised development projects and programmes (“traveller models”) are implemented and the failure to take into account the unexpected effects of local actors’ reactions are structural facts of the development institutional world. We believe they are to be blamed for its recurrent failures. These institutions do not lack international (or sometimes national) experts in the classical sense of the term, but never resort to the skills of those who know these local contexts best, who are able to “test” external interventions. In other words, they ignore the existence of “contextual expertise”, which would be indispensable if we are to develop and implement interventions and public policies that are at last relevant to the “real world”. Namely, African neighbourhoods and villages, currently ignored by the bureaucrats in Washington, Geneva or Paris offices (and often also by the agencies in Dakar, Bamako or Cotonou).

Although not recognised as such, contextual experts do exist. They are found among actors on the ground, working in contact with users in government services or in the many projects or NGOs: they are familiar (and above all from the inside) with civil servants’ practical norms and with populations’ social customs; but, in addition, they also reflect critically on daily routines and have a great supply of initiatives and innovations anchored in the realities on the ground (they are reformers from the inside, and we met some of them in our surveys).

Giving them a place in the elaboration and implementation of national public policies may be one of the possible ways to reintroduce initiative and innovation within public services, to start a process of gradual exit from dependence on aid (of which there are many perverse effects) and to enter into a renewed strategy of “relying on one’s own strengths”.

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## “Relying on one’s own strengths” Faced with aid dependency, promoting contextual experts in public policy in Africa

“We encourage aid that helps us to do without aid. But in general the policy of assistance and aid only results in disorganizing us, subjugating us and disempowering us.”

–Thomas Sankara, speech to the UN General Assembly on October 4, 1984, quoted in Borrel *et al.* 2021, p. 757.

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### Introduction

It is perilous to speak of Africa in general, and precautions, such as “Les Afriques” (Darbon, 2001), are necessary.<sup>1</sup> Each country has its own specificities, and within each country many disparities can be observed. Nevertheless, if we broaden the perspective to a global comparative level, some common trends emerge, which concern most of the continent. Dependence on aid (both development aid and humanitarian aid) is a widely shared characteristic of the African continent. Of course, it is not the only one at play: for example, a painful colonial past has left various legacies; or then again there is post-colonial elites’ predatory culture, which many social science studies have analysed in detail. We believe that aid dependency, although often highlighted—see for example Bayart (1999), who puts extraversion in historical perspective—has been little explored in one particular, yet central area, namely the process of state-building. Among the rare exceptions, we can mention Bierschenk (2009), who shows how the transition from a despotic to a democratic regime in Benin in 1989 did not mitigate the country’s dependence on aid rents: beyond the changes in the political system and forms of power, we find the same negative consequences in terms of governance (corruption, clientelism, favouritism, authoritarianism, regionalism, to name a few). His analysis is basically just as valid for Africa’s other French-speaking countries (and no doubt a number of English-speaking countries), despite their different political histories since independence. More fundamentally, beyond the regimes that succeed one another between elections and coups d’état, the functioning of public services as well as the elaboration and implementation of public policies are deeply and durably affected by aid dependency.

We will describe how external aid weighs heavily on public policies, and how it generates many unexpected effects, due to these “external reformers” profound ignorance of “local contexts”. These unintended effects include many unwanted consequences, particularly the one we will focus on here: a generalised loss of initiative within the civil service, which is a direct result of aid

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dependency. There are exceptions, however, among government officials, and here and there we sometimes meet “reformers from within” who know local contexts and are eager to change them in a realistic way. We will attempt to define “contextual expertise” and analyse the role it can play, from a perspective that aims to propose new research avenues for the social sciences in Africa, and to renew the old and almost forgotten strategy of “relying on one’s own strengths” (self-reliance).

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## The Omnipresence of Aid

A large part of the public policies implemented in Africa is dependent on external aid. Education, the health system, the justice system, the police and the armed forces rely heavily on the resources provided by foreign aid to function as best they can. When it comes to fighting an epidemic, dealing with a food crisis or responding to terrorism, donors and their institutions’ support is indispensable. Veritable humanitarian or medical armadas thus arrived during the 2005 “famine” in Niger (Olivier de Sardan, 2008a) or the recent Ebola epidemic in Guinea (Gomez-Temesio and Le Marcis, 2017). In addition to the countless European or North American (and now also Arab-Islamic) NGOs that criss-cross the cities and villages of the entire continent on a daily basis, besides the various bilateral cooperation agencies that showcase their geopolitics of aid (from the former colonial powers to newcomers such as China, Russia, India or Turkey, not to mention the inevitable American presence), the World Bank, WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP and UNDP are behind a large proportion of the administrative reforms, health protocols, educational programmes and hydro-agricultural developments in each African country. Moreover, they steer the fight against poverty and child labour, as well as campaigns for the promotion of women and the spread of contraception. An institution as central as the World Bank does not only play a role as a donor, it is also an agency of international expertise based on “development knowledge”, i.e. on professional knowledge in social engineering (see below), relating to the “manufacture” of standardised interventions that can be exported to low-income countries, particularly in Africa.

This is a specific feature of the African continent compared to Europe or America, where public policies are essentially developed at national level, and where the United Nations system and NGOs have little day-to-day influence on states. This dependence is one of contemporary Africa’s major historical features. It is sometimes found in Latin America or Asia, but not to the same extent.

In other words, development aid and humanitarian aid function in Africa as specific public policies, designed, promoted and financed by international outsiders, while being implemented by national actors who are largely dependent on this aid. Granted, some public policies are indeed developed at national level, but not only do they have few resources compared to aid-driven public policies, but their implementation often proves incoherent (Olivier de Sardan and Ridde, 2014), and often strapped for donor support.

It is known that the forms of aid emanating from the North are multiple. Aid flows through international organisations (in particular the UN system), development agencies and banks, as well as NGOs, large and small. The resources that aid provides are poured into Africa in the form of loans, grants, budget support, physical donations, infrastructure construction and technical support, all with varying degrees of conditionality. The aid architecture also varies, but “projects” and “programmes” clearly get the lion’s share, and are negotiated with African states (for the most part) or with local organisations and associations (the hackneyed “civil society”). These projects and programmes are of limited duration. They are regulated by specific procedures, which derogate from national procedures. They look like privileged enclaves (in terms of salaries, resources, operations and management) compared to national public services’ ordinary operation, marked as they are by destitution and corruption.

All these interventions aim to improve African populations’ living conditions: what Tania Li calls “the will to improve” (Li, 2007) constitutes their legitimacy. They present themselves as desirable “reforms” of a current situation that is highly unsatisfactory in the opinion of all (local populations and donors alike, though not for the same reasons). The paradox of this situation is that “reformers from outside” are driving the developmental and humanitarian social engineering that is taking place across Africa. Developmental and humanitarian policies are in fact social engineering<sup>2</sup>, i.e. “planned intervention mechanisms, developed by experts, aimed at implementing or modifying institutions and/or behaviour in various contexts” (Olivier de Sardan, 2021, p. 7). Whereas technical (and biological) engineering has an intrinsic effectiveness that is relatively independent of the contexts in which it is implemented, social engineering is, on the contrary, very dependent on the contexts in which it is implemented.

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the concepts used in this article (social engineering, but also contextual experts, critical reformism, pragmatic contexts, travelling models, practical norms) are set out in detail in the book *La revanche des contextes. Des mésaventures de l’ingénierie sociale, en Afrique et au-delà* (Olivier de Sardan, 2021).

Development and humanitarian aid constitute an original form of social engineering, with no historical equivalent: their interventions, developed by international experts and omnipresent in Africa in standardised forms, are not directly submitted to market mechanisms, even if the market sometimes plays an important role. Besides, they are not dependent on a single decision-making centre either: a multiplicity of institutions does intervene, generally in several or all African countries, each with its own agenda, and these are poorly coordinated among themselves, despite the existence of a common language and organisational isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, 1991).

It is important to avoid any misunderstanding on the matter. Our purpose here is not to condemn development aid and humanitarian relief in principle, let alone to proclaim they should be stopped. Nor is it to say that aid is only a failure or that all development projects are botched, which would be absurd. We are not in a normative position with regard to aid. Our starting point is an observation: development programmes, humanitarian interventions and public policies, once implemented in the field, have many unexpected effects, no matter how “well designed” they are, and whether they are evaluated as successes or fiascos. This is true all over the world, but even more acute in Africa, because these programmes, interventions and public policies are developed by experts who are very foreign to local conditions. Moreover, what interests us in this finding here are the unexpected effects of aid on the African public services’ functioning. To put it another way, an excellent programme, generally considered beneficial and broadly successful, carried out by such and such cooperation agency or NGO, with the best of intentions, will nonetheless experience discrepancies between what was planned and what actually happens in a given context. Moreover, it will unwittingly participate in the reproduction of aid dependency within state services.

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## The Perverse Effects of Aid

Aid functions in various ways as a “rent”. It has long been known that mining or oil rents are not only economic assets, but also have numerous perverse effects (for Gabon, see Yates, 1986), to the point where we have justifiably dubbed it a “resource curse” (see Murshed, 2018). Development and humanitarian rents are no exception, even if the pernicious effects they generate are often different (Collier, 2006 ; Bierschenk, 2009 ; Olivier de Sardan, 2013). Some are already well known, such as the spread of petty (and sometimes grand) corruption (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan, 2007), or the excessive weight of per diems that sidetrack training and workshops from their objectives (Jordan Smith, 2003; Ridde, 2010). Some are less well documented: for example, the “brain drain” from national civil services to the “developmental configuration” (international institutions, development agencies, NGOs, consultancies, and so on) all continuously deprive African states of their best-trained and most competent staff.

This latest point refers to a more general phenomenon: the loss of initiative within African states and bureaucracies. *The bulk of public policy and public action initiatives come from aid institutions.* The main objective of the majority of African civil servants is to be recruited by a “project”, and if not, at least to be designated as its “focal point”, or to benefit from its resources, formally or informally. One has to “get one’s share” of aid, so one has to speak the language of aid, adopt the “good practices” promoted by aid organisations (in other words, be a “good student”), accept (or pretend to accept) their rules of the game and their procedures, in other words, play on their side, rather than trying to improve one’s own with one’s own ideas and means.

This is true from the top of the state to the grass roots. Research by Lasdel<sup>3</sup> on the perceptions of aid by Nigerien officials (Lavigne Delville and Abdelkader, 2010) showed the latter reproached government authorities for systematically accepting any project proposed by technical and financial partners (TFPs) as long as it was endowed with significant resources, and even if it was not suited to the country’s needs, or had little chance of success. At grassroots level, the large number of “practical norms” that informally regulate the multiple behaviours of civil servants who do get around official norms and directives (i.e. “non-compliant” behaviours) testifies to the importance of the gaps between official discourse and realities on the ground (Olivier de Sardan, 2015, 2021); between programmes on paper and their actual implementation in particular contexts; between posted organisational charts and actual practices; and between formal and informal accountabilities (Blundo, 2015). This “great divide”, this quasi-schizophrenia, also has the effect of producing poor quality services delivered to the population (suffice it to think of absenteeism, favouritism, corruption, among many other standard practices), and a focus on capturing aid resources. Admittedly, in the course of our investigations we met “admirable exceptions”, state agents who prioritise the quality of health

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<sup>3</sup> Lasdel is a Nigerian-Beninese research laboratory specialising in qualitative methods, whose work is at the origin of the analyses developed in this text ([www.lasdel.net](http://www.lasdel.net)).

care or education in their work, and who develop local micro-reforms, but they are clearly in the minority, generally isolated, often bitter, and rarely supported by their superiors.

Yet there is one area in Africa where inventiveness and ingenuity are remarkable, and where these have already been analysed and even celebrated: the informal sector (Hart, 2009; Meagher, 2010). Yet, precisely, these operate far from the state, and even more so from donors. One could also mention (this area is less highlighted, though, and when it is mentioned it is in a highly critical register) local and national politics. In its power games, clientelist manoeuvres, alliances, ruptures, intrigues and other transhumance, it shows a formidable inventiveness, far removed from the democratic injunctions of international experts' often naïve moral-political recommendations. But all this is also very opaque to aid institutions, which are not invited and can hardly interfere.

As for “civil society”, celebrated by NGOs and aid agencies, which see in it a capacity for endogenous mobilisation, our own assessment is much more reserved: the various national and local associations (for civil society is in fact nothing more than a heterogeneous fabric of associations) are most often in tow of external aid, anxious to capture “projects” in which they generally play a subcontracting role, having a say only in minor aspects. While civil society has real room for manoeuvre and innovation, and includes autonomous reformers, it is generally highly dependent on aid. Moreover, the most creative associative activists are most often taken over by the development world, trained in its language and integrated into its procedures. This is also true of women: the gender policies pursued by international institutions, development agencies and large NGOs often result in women activists and/or feminist leaders' absorption into the aid social engineering rather than supporting their own initiatives and increasing their autonomy.

As one might expect, the lack of initiative within public administrations and services is directly correlated with the omnipresence of aid, and is by no means a general hallmark of African societies. It is a vicious circle: aid dependency stunts internal initiatives, which in turn increases aid dependency.

Another perverse effect is the feeling of humiliation brought about by such dependence. A proverb is often quoted in Africa in this regard: “The hand that receives is always below the hand that gives.” The anti-Western feeling fuelled by this assisted status is widespread, all the more so when it concerns the former colonial power. It is amplified by “partners” frequent clumsiness or arrogance, as well as by their propensity to seek to impose their own moral values, and it is frequently expressed in various ways—on social networks, in everyday chatter, or during demonstrations. It is obviously exploited by Salafist Islamist ideology, and all the more legitimises opportunistic behaviour and double talk with regard to external aid.

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## The Test of Contexts and the Central Role of Pragmatic Contexts

An important feature of the development and humanitarian world is its predilection for “travelling models” of social engineering (Behrends *et al.*, 2014; Bierschenk, 2014; Olivier de Sardan *et al.*, 2017). The idea is to promote a succession of standardised, “high-impact factor” interventions across Africa, each of which is assumed to have intrinsic effectiveness, regardless of the contexts they are implemented in. However—contrary to the predictions of the experts who have produced these models and the politicians who have accepted them—on the ground it does not work quite that way. Each local context “undermines”, to a greater or lesser extent, and in its own way, the course of interventions (public policies, programmes, projects, protocols, etc.), which are much more often circumvented or dismembered than faithfully adopted. Any travelling model, no matter how well developed, and no matter how technically or technocratically perfect, is thus subjected to the “test of contexts”, a test with unpredictable results, which often turns into the “revenge of contexts”.

Yet development and humanitarian experts and policy-makers know that contexts matter, and they accumulate knowledge about them. However, what they mean by “knowledge about contexts” consists mainly of statistical indicators, socio-demographic variables, institutional data, cultural or “ethnic” clichés. These are “background maps”, hardly more, which only document what we call “structural contexts”. However, this knowledge says nothing about the “pragmatic contexts”, i.e. the interplay of actors, civil servants' practical norms, departments and offices' routines, the power and influence relationships, the expectations, perceptions, frustrations and rumours, the clans, cliques and factions, which structure the administrations and affect the populations' daily lives they interact with. Public policies only mobilise knowledge about structural contexts, and ignore the reality of pragmatic contexts.

Technical engineering expertise (which development aid's and humanitarian aid's technical aspects are based on) and developmental social engineering expertise (which the programmes these technical aspects are embedded in<sup>4</sup> are based on) remain in a sense "off the ground", due to the lack of "contextual" expertise that neither designers nor aid managers have mastered. Admittedly, the failure of international development institutions to take account of pragmatic contexts is also due to other reasons, such as an accountability that is focused on Northern institutions alone, or the fact that too much information should not be used when it comes to taking action (Naudet, 2001). In other words, even if aid agencies are concerned with commissioning study after study, piling up consultants' reports, or recruiting the services of experts who they believe know the country and the intervention field, they hardly use the knowledge thus produced. Nevertheless, this knowledge mostly relates to structural contexts, not pragmatic perspectives.

Only knowledge of pragmatic contexts can form the basis of contextual expertise. This implies close proximity to the field actors involved in an intervention. It is necessary to know health workers' "non-observant" behaviours, farmers' calculations and uncertainties, magistrates' habits and ambitions as well as patients' concerns and representations. This requires daily insertion, a common experience and trivialised interactions. International development experts, humanitarian aid agents or public policy-makers are generally very far from this. They are competent in their engineering fields, but glaringly ignorant of the contexts experienced by the actors concerned. Scanning statistics, reading reports, taking guided tours at the double, talking to local officials or taxi drivers, all these do not provide any real access to pragmatic contexts; nor does being more or less friends with a minister or having an ongoing relationship with a local courtesan. The "local knowledge" that some development professionals boast of (whose caricature is: "I have toured Togo, I know Togolese people well") is therefore largely overrated, and often outrageously ludicrous, and it in any case remains general and superficial.

Similarly, though, being an African citizen and speaking a vernacular are not by any means qualifiers for contextual expertise. National decision-makers and senior officials are generally far removed from the day-to-day realities on the ground. We were often surprised—when we reported on our surveys with Nigerien officials—at their lack of knowledge of the data we had produced. One doctor was unaware of what was really happening in his own department and of midwives' many practical standards. A university lecturer working on the agropastoral system did not master the real context of a livestock service at county level, nor was he acquainted with its thousand-and-one-trick schemes. Most senior civil servants and members of the political elite are ignorant of the daily lives of nurses, teachers, agricultural extension workers, clerks and secretaries. In fact, some are genuinely ignorant, others have a vague suspicion but do not want to look further into it, and others know something about it but feel it ought to "stay between us", that it is "none of the white man's business"; more generally, they feel it is not relevant either in the (very conventional) language of development or in the (very guarded) parlance of national politics. As for the development agencies that recruit African executives—assuming they will bring with them the mastery of contexts expatriates simply lack—they are most often mistaken: these executives are, bar a few exceptions, largely cut off from their compatriots down below and are more concerned with obeying house rules in the institution that employs them than with taking into account ordinary users' or petty civil servants' action patterns, which they often ignore or disregard.

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## The Three Properties of Contextual Expertise

Contextual expertise can only be based on real familiarity with everyday practices and relationships. In fact, actual practices are often out of step with prescribed guidelines, and everyday life is often more informal than formal, latent rather than explicit. The real world is far removed from the official world, in which development institutions almost exclusively operate. A superficial knowledge or episodic contacts are not enough to establish contextual expertise. It requires an intimate knowledge of the working environment, of its constraints and of its discreet or hidden realities.

Although this intimate knowledge is a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient one. If that were so, every health worker, farmer, magistrate and patient could be considered a contextual expert in the field he or she works in. We believe that more is needed.

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<sup>4</sup> Political engineering (Darbon, 2003) is for us a component of social engineering. The same is true of religious engineering (note in passing that the current successes of Muslim and Christian fundamentalisms are largely due to their ability to be embedded in everyday contexts).



It also requires a minimum of hindsight, a capacity for critical distance. In other words, a reflexive competence needs to be added to a practice of intimacy. Contextual experts not only know “from the inside” the reality of a clinic, a farm, a court of law or a care quest, but can also describe their problems, flaws and bottlenecks. They can testify to what works and what doesn’t, can attest to deviations from official procedures and guidelines, and analyse the many cobbles, tricks and fiddles that are part and parcel of the country’s everyday life. They know that official rules are far from being applied, either because they are inapplicable or because they do not suit the actors in the field; they know the practical norms that replace them to regulate daily routines, and they are sensitive to their limits and the inconveniences the user suffers as a result.

Finally, we will add a third dimension to contextual expertise: “concernement” (Canguilhem, 1991), in other words, an involvement in improving the usual course of events, a desire to make the delivery of services to the population more responsive, more benevolent, more efficient, more equitable, of better quality, a certain readiness to innovate, to seek practical solutions and make concrete reforms. Surely, there was a time when concernement often took the form of political commitment, in Africa as in Europe, when the changes hoped for were not limited to the professional world pertaining to social engineering, but were expressed through radical criticism and ambitious political projects. Disillusionment crept in, utopias went awry. Consensus-building for better health care or education, for fairer justice or for a type of security protective of citizens, is certainly less ambitious than the emancipatory ideologies born out of the proletariat’s struggles or national liberation campaigns. It is more realistic and more discreet, but it is nevertheless a major quality, indispensable to contextual experts if they are to be able to act as a counterbalance to the current dependence.

Familiarity, critical capacity, involvement: these are the three characteristics that define contextual expertise.

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## Contextual expertise and methodological populism

It may be worth explaining here how this definition of contextual expertise, derived from thousands of hours of Lasdel research on bureaucratic practices and modes of social engineering intervention in African contexts (in other words, modes of governance), relates to some of the more general debates on expertise.

Indeed, in recent decades there have been various attempts within the social sciences to somehow broaden expertise beyond experts. Expertise in the usual sense is based on recognised professional competences (technical, social, managerial, etc.), usually institutionally validated (diplomas, curricula and functions), which reflect a certain form of elitism based on specialist knowledge in a particular field. However, in the wake of the rehabilitation of popular knowledge in the face of specialised knowledge, grassroots actors are sometimes considered to have a specific form of expertise, different from that of scholarly experts, but no less valid, and sometimes more so. Already in the 1980s, various studies on African peasantry had highlighted farmers’ sound local mastery of soils, seeds and climates, contrasting it with agronomists’ abstract knowledge, based on theoretical data as well as on, indeed, station and laboratory experiments, yet far removed from the conditions and constraints of working the land in a real context (Richards, 1985, 1986; Boiral, Lantéri and Olivier de Sardan, 1985; Chauveau and Yung, 1995). This type of analysis applies well beyond farmers: all occupations that do not depend on specialised studies nevertheless require expertise acquired on the job (Sennett, 2008): farmers, workers, craftsmen or employees have knowledge and know-how relating to their “in real life” working conditions and concrete exercise of their occupation, which the engineer and technocrat simply lack. This “everyday expertise” (Sennett, 2009), this “knowledge of use” (Sintomer, 2008), is generally not recognised by professional and social hierarchies.

Such broadening of the notion of expertise is not unrelated to the concept of “agency” developed by Anthony Giddens (1984), which has been widely taken up in sociology: each social actor, whoever they may be, has room for manoeuvre, they have capacities for knowledge and action that are specific to them. We find a similar analysis—though development-oriented and in the field of political economy—with Amartya Sen and his “capability” concept (Sen, 2000). Finally, we are in line with the perspective of “methodological populism” (Olivier de Sardan, 2008b), which is common in anthropology: dominated, marginalised or stigmatised social groups deserve the greatest attention from social sciences, which must investigate their knowledge, perceptions and practices (already in the 1960s, Oscar Lewis had systematically studied the “cultures of poverty” in the West Indies and Latin America; see Lewis, 1969).

However, this does not mean that all knowledge is equal in terms of action, or that knowledge from below is necessarily superior to knowledge from above. As much as methodological populism is productive in terms of research, it is important to avoid the pitfalls of “ideological populism”, which would give rank-and-file actors a monopoly on the truth or grant them ontological

superiority or epistemological immunity. While every social actor, however deprived, has some form of expertise, while every actor is at least an expert on his or her own life, not all expertise is equivalent when it comes to changing behaviours or institutions.

When looking at social change, or more precisely, when improving public policies (i.e. improving the quality of services delivered to the population by public actors), it is more productive to determine which types of expertise should be combined. This is where contextual expertise comes into play, not as a miracle solution that could cast social engineering expertise into oblivion, but as a missing link in public-policy development and implementation, allowing for a “resumption of initiative” by state agents, and less dependence on external expertise.

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## Who are the contextual experts when dealing with social engineering?

Let’s go back to the “familiarity, critical capacity, involvement” triptych. Who actually ticks these three boxes in relation to social engineering’s implementation?

If we look at the contextual test, the most interesting category of contextual experts are field practitioners who are directly involved. Their familiarity is based on their own belonging to the contexts themselves—in which they work and live in a sort of “natural” way. They are “experts in everyday life”, they have “practical use expertise”. We are dealing here with what could be called direct contextual experts, provided they also have the other two characteristics: able to lucidly analyse the situations they participate in, and to feel involved in any changes. These “admirable exceptions” mentioned above, these “reformers from within” we have sometimes met in the course of our investigations over the past twenty years, are typically contextual experts: nurses or doctors, teachers or professors, court clerks or magistrates, all critical of the current state of public services (far from the administration’s official cant), all anxious to improve the way they function (in contrast to most of their colleagues’ passivity or resignation). There are only a few of them, they are not very visible, often not very vocal or talkative, but they do exist.

There is a second potential category of contextual experts: indirect contextual experts, who are also able to combine the three necessary characteristics; these are social scientists who practice prolonged insertion in the professional environments they study (namely socio-anthropologists and all those—whatever their disciplines—who conduct qualitative research based on immersion, observation, open interviews, etc.). Their familiarity with local contexts is different, because it is not based on “naturally” belonging to these contexts, but on their presence in them in sufficient depth and on a daily basis (most often in the context of an ethnographic survey). They therefore are aware of all the dynamics, underpinnings and implicit meanings: they have mastered the codes, innuendos, strategies and idioms. As for critical distance, this is a prerequisite professional skill for them. But as for involvement, it is not self-evident: Many researchers do not feel directly and personally involved in improving public services in the country they work in (this is a matter of positionality: see below), either because they confine themselves to basic research or because they are foreigners in this country and have no civic commitment to it. African researchers are obviously more willing to be civically involved.

If we now return to the question of innovations and the imperative of placing internal innovations at the heart of (necessary) public service reforms, then direct contextual experts are obviously at the forefront. They are the ones who need to be identified (not an easy task), and it is their backgrounds and practices that need to be documented. To this end, indirect contextual experts are well placed. We believe understanding (direct) contextual experts’ motivations and choices, analysing their relationships with their colleagues, and studying their successes and failures form a fundamental line of research for African social sciences, at least those that have chosen to conduct in-depth empirical research *in situ*.

Very little insight has been produced on such actors. Donors are not very interested in this area, because they are mired in institutional perspectives, organisational charts, deference to hierarchies, conventions and official norms as well as relations with governments and, moreover, they are primarily concerned with the observance of protocols and the level of indicators for the implementation of the activities they promote: there is therefore a lack of funding for research on a theme that concerns informal, discrete innovations, and which moreover often than not remain invisible to the ministries of African capitals, and therefore even more so to international institutions.

In 2004, Lasdel submitted a pioneering 3-year research programme to the Belgian Cooperation, the leader in health matters in Niger. The aim was to identify, in the health region of Dosso (the preferred site for interventions by the Belgian medical cooperation), a number of “reforming” or “innovative” health professionals, delivering better than average quality services,



an identification made on the basis of criteria established through interviews with numerous actors in the local health arena (health workers, health centre management committee members, local authorities, etc.). In a second phase, the research programme focused on collecting the selected “reformers” biographies, in an attempt to understand some of the factors that might explain, at least in part, why they were particularly “concerned” with care quality or improving service operations. This programme had been negotiated with a Belgian technical assistant who had been sensitive to the originality of the theme and the potential that could result in terms of action for Belgian cooperation. After a one-year work period by Lasdel researchers, the technical assistant’s contract expired, and the person replacing him flatly turned down any more funding for the programme. The data produced has remained boxed up to this day, and is hardly usable any more, as it is incomplete and outdated.

Nevertheless, more and more international development and humanitarian professionals are aware of the limitations and frequent failures of traveling models, the poor state of public services, and the usefulness of in-depth qualitative research for documenting implementation gaps, the circumvention of programs on the ground, and the “real” functioning of public services together with their agents’ “non-observant” practices. Granted, these professionals are not generally in the driving seat of large institutions and do not have the ear of important decision-makers, but hopefully, thanks to them, windows of opportunity will open up for research on “reformers from the inside”.

For example, an article published in the *Lancet* (Maaloe et al., 2021) criticises the standardised clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) widely disseminated in low-income countries for being unsuitable in local contexts, and calls for front-line health providers to be involved in the development of realistic clinical guidelines as “co-creators”, as they are “experts” in delivering care in precarious situations.

However, from the perspective of gradual freedom from aid dependency, African researchers’ main interlocutors should not be international development and humanitarian professionals, but national public actors at all levels. African countries’ executives, national experts in social engineering, and public service decision-makers must be confident of the “added value” brought by rigorous diagnoses of public services’ “real” functioning, and of in-depth documentation of endogenous innovations within them. But the struggle is long-term and the battle yet to be won.

In terms of diagnosis, the High Commission for the Modernisation of the State (attached to the Prime Minister’s Office) asked Lasdel in 2014 to carry out research on Niger civil servants’ “non-observant” behaviours—in full knowledge of Lasdel’s critical approach and of its concern to carry out rigorous empirical investigations, besides its refusal of any complacency or “tongue-in-cheek” (Olivier de Sardan, 2014). We presented the main conclusions to the Prime Minister, several ministers and many senior officials: these findings, though severe, have remained unchallenged. It was therefore a first step: it is exceptional for this type of study to be requested from a national laboratory by a national authority and for the results to be accepted as they were. Nevertheless, this diagnosis did not lead to significant measures within the civil service in the years that followed. It has remained just another report in the ever-mounting pile. However, just recently, the Lasdel diagnosis has been put back on the agenda by the authorities, with a view to reforming the administration. We can therefore hope that it has brought about greater awareness, and will continue to result in tougher critical attitudes and more innovative behaviour.

In terms of innovations, since 2016 Lasdel has been experimenting (with funding from the Canadian IDRC, which has now been scrapped) with action research on the identification and networking of “contextual experts” in the field of maternal and child health in Niger and Benin, a network was formed on the basis of research that has highlighted various local reforms driven by field staff without donor intervention. A Niger contextual experts workshop put forward a series of realistic proposals on the major dysfunctions of the maternal health system that the standardised programmes of technical and financial partners have failed to correct over the past 20 years. But we have had no reaction to our report from either the Ministry of Health or the West African Health Organisation.

In the *Lancet* article cited above, the case of Kenya is mentioned as a rare example of endogenous production of health protocols, at the national level, without using WHO guidelines, and with field health professionals taking an active role (see English *et al.*, 2017).

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## Involving conceptual experts in national public policies

Getting conceptual experts to play a significant role in national public policies design and implementation is no easy task, indeed. It must therefore be done through a complex experimental process, which includes several steps and implies a number of favourable conditions, which are far from always being met. By outlining some proposals here, we leave the researcher's comfort zone, his or her area of competence, to take risks as a concerned (Niger) citizen.

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## Steps

The first step is obviously identifying contextual experts according to the administration areas that are chosen to conduct the experiment. Areas such as education or health can be considered as priorities—in a stepwise fashion, however, starting with particular sectors such as maternal health or primary education. Identification cannot be done through the hierarchy because of the importance of clientelism, favouritism and corruption in human resource management. Detailed ad hoc investigations are therefore necessary. They should preferably be conducted by national researchers (provided they have the necessary skills), who are more familiar with local contexts than their colleagues in the North. Only insofar, though, as they have no conflicts of interest and are not subject to any form of censorship or pressure. These surveys not only identify contextual experts, but also document their practices and the innovations and reforms they have implemented, besides their successes (and failures).

The second step consists of networking the identified contextual experts in each particular field, in order to enable them to exchange experiences, to confront their innovations and to evaluate what can be imported from one working context to another at the cost of various adaptations.

The third step proposes that contextual experts confront “critical nodes”, bottlenecks and unsolved problems in their respective administrations. They are asked to go beyond their own working context to make a diagnosis and realistic proposals, from a national perspective, to improve or correct what can be improved.

These three steps were taken in the context of the Lasdel action research mentioned above, targeting maternal health professionals in Niger. But the process is currently halted at this level.

The fourth step is to scale up the system on the national scene. On the one hand, it would consist of initiating collaboration between contextual experts, national specialists and national decision-makers in the chosen field. In the case of the process initiated by Lasdel, this would be the Niger health system, in order to find low-cost national solutions to the problems encountered in this field. On the other hand, it would be a matter of promoting internal innovations within the administrations through media campaigns. Finally, staff training schools would incorporate modules and field trips on this theme into their curricula.

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## Conditions

As can be seen, these different steps require different conditions to be fulfilled. The first three require only relatively modest funding (which may come from donors, but it would be much better if the state took charge of the process). Now, it also requires a minimum endorsement from the ministry in charge, often through the presence of allies or supportive actors within it. However, endorsement does not mean commitment or involvement. Above all, it requires researchers who are motivated by this type of experiment, who know the field well, and who are trained in qualitative methods.

The last step requires real political commitment at government level. Giving national visibility to contextual experts, even if it is an experiment, even if it concerns relatively circumscribed fields (maternal health, primary school teachers, court clerks, road safety, etc.), means coming up against interests, disturbing routines, and therefore meeting resistance. It is therefore necessary to have the support of high-level decision-makers, powerful political backing, and reliable support from the top of the state. A recognised public institution must adhere to this orientation and make it its own.

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## Conclusion

There was a time (1960s–1980s) when the slogan “rely on your own strength” was circulating in Marxist and anti-imperialist circles. Widely promoted by Maoist China and the Vietnamese FLN, it was taken up in Africa by regimes that wanted to be revolutionary. Unfortunately, the reality has often proved to be far removed from the rhetoric, and the slogan has disappeared, as have the illusions associated with these regimes. Only Thomas Sankara is known and remembered, which shows that the innovations he introduced and the attempts he made to get his country out of dependence still have a positive echo among African youth. This may be grounds for some optimism.

Indeed, the strategy of “relying on one’s own strength” is not in itself absurd, and undoubtedly deserves a measure of rehabilitation, or, more precisely, it is hoped it will be rethought and founded on new foundations. It is no longer a matter of situating oneself in a Marxist-Leninist perspective, nor of hoping for a radical break with imperialism, which has now become neoliberal globalisation, nor of creating self-sufficient revolutionary fortresses<sup>5</sup>. For example, contextual experts will not replace social engineering experts, but they will counterbalance the latter’s power in public policy elaboration and implementation, where they will bring knowledge and skills “from the field”, which are currently lacking.

It is a case of inventing multiple gradual breaks, often low-key, always at low cost, with aid dependency; it is a matter of promoting endogenous initiatives and local innovations as much as possible; it has to do with supporting reformers from within. It is obviously a political struggle, in the broadest sense – one that is, nevertheless, far removed from party politics and that is based on small steps, on trials and experiments, on bets and risk-taking, and is therefore of an incremental nature. It is a patient, long-term struggle, which does not correspond to the short time of programmes and projects (usually limited to four years) and the equally short time of parties (from one election to the next). It is a struggle that does not depend on injunctions from the top, it does not wait for some *leader maximo*, because it can and must be led at different levels of the state and society: at the bottom by users, by associative actors, by public agents in contact with the populations (“interface civil servants”, or street-level bureaucrats, Lipsky, 1980); half-way down the ladder, by administrative executives, department heads, municipal officials; and at the top by political leaders, general directors, high commissioners, ministers... Can we not dream of such a reforming alliance, beyond government changes and political struggles?

But this political or militant struggle is also addressed to researchers, because it covers a scientific orientation that is part of the perspective of what we have called “critical reformism”. For political scientists, sociologists or anthropologists who analyse social engineering (in particular development and humanitarian aid, public policies, the functioning of states and public services), critical reformism is one of the four “civic positions” available to any researcher. The other three civic positionalities are “pure” research (not directly interested in action), “applied” research (directly serving an institution), and “radical” research (focused on denunciation and advocacy). Critical reformism can be defined as “combining independence from the institutions concerned, a desire to contribute to improving interventions, and a critical, empirically based analysis of their design and implementation”.

Uncompromising and well-documented diagnoses of the functioning of public services and public policies are in a way part of the DNA of critical reformism as practised by a growing number of African researchers.

For the past 20 years, Lasdel has been a major contributor (but not the only one) of such diagnoses, which have made it possible to highlight, among other things, various concrete facets of aid dependency and its perverse effects. Many of these diagnoses are freely available in the 128 issues of the *Etudes et Travaux du Lasdel* series.

However, the identification and documentation of “insider” innovations and contextual experts should also be part of the remit of critical reformist research. This is one of the main ways to avoid blindly following Northern “partners” recommendations, incentives and interventions, to encourage initiative and imagination within administrations and public services in Africa itself, in other words, to implement a renewed and realistic strategy of “relying on one’s own strengths” that will gradually break the vicious circle of aid dependency.

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<sup>5</sup> A clarification may be useful here to avoid possible misunderstandings: the intellectual legacy of Marx and his successors must be reconsidered in a rigorous way, and thus neither rejected wholesale nor defended as such.

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