



chapter **08** / Joost Zonneveld

The world as your area of experience

Energy and emotions, here and there

Commitment, more specifically international commitment, led to the employees of the Beech Consultancy going abroad. The idea was that knowledge and experience brought in from the West would work to the benefit of developing countries, but every advisor returning from a foreign project also realised the big impact the assignment had on him or herself. The learning process worked both ways, which had an effect on the advisors and caused emotions as well. (For example, being affected when, just after the collapse of communism, Russian women officially agreed that “one is permitted to have different opinions within the organisation”.)

In the course of the years, the Beech Consultancy regularly carried out foreign assignments. It all started one day through the support of an organisation of lesbian women in South America, followed by projects all over the world. From The Philippines to South Africa, and from China to Yugoslavia and to Kurdistan. At first, employees of the Beech Consultancy went to ‘the third world’ because of a feeling of international commitment. The idea was that developing countries would profit from the knowledge and experience brought in from the West. But over the years, this international counselling changed due to new relations between North and South and changing views on development and cooperation. Under the influence of economic and political changes

around the world, the role of the advisors of the Beech Consultancy changed as well; they focused their attention more and more on facilitating change processes.

Managing director Dorien de Wit: “Initially, we went to the South thinking that we had to solve problems over there. These days we still have something to offer, but our work is now based on the approach: how can we help you to be self-supporting and how can we help you to help yourselves?”

Local NGO’s and authorities in Africa for instance, have adopted an attitude that is much more self-confident. For example, halfway through the nineties Ron Rutherglen was asked to assist SNV, an organisation for development cooperation, to help improve the development of the organisation in Kenya and Tanzania. The head office wanted a closer cooperation with the new regional teams in these two countries. During a period of five years Rutherglen worked on teambuilding and setting up more autonomous and ‘horizontal’ teams within the regions. “At first, the teams were half black and half white, while towards the end they were almost completely black. At a certain point my task was finished and the team members were able to manage the situation themselves. For the first time I realised that it was a good thing that my role was not an everlasting one.” This is typical of the current views on consultancy in the South, where a certain amount of restraint on the part of the advisor is called for.



1995

In 1995 Ron Rutherglen trained Councillors and Communications Officers of the Sint Maarten government. An international media- and communications team was formed by the Washington D.C. advisor Bill Hamilton. Bill was Ron’s Focus Group mentor.

1988



‘Lesbian in Latin America’ was a travelogue written by Sylvia Borren about her advisors assignment for lesbian women’s organisations in South America. The publication was sent to all Beuk associates in 1988 as a New Years gift.

2007

André Mooij trained the Governors of the Dutch Antilles; the Mayor of Vlaardingen Tjerk Bruinsma was co-trainer and provided expertise based on his own experiences.



Contributing to a better world

International assignments were never considered a first priority by the Beech Consultancy. Foreign projects cannot be planned in a

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structural way and due to the sometimes harsh local circumstances as well as the barriers of speech and culture, they certainly aren't the easiest assignments. Moreover, the financial output is not really something to write home about. André Mooij: "For us, foreign rates are not profitable, we always lose money on foreign projects."

There are other motives to go abroad on a fairly regular basis, and the need to contribute to a fair and peaceful world is one of them. For instance, Rutherglen went to Africa for a week to help an Advisory Board put the professionalism of their team on a higher level. This monitoring body was set up in the aftermath of a civil war and was one of the measures to prevent such a crisis from happening again. Rutherglen felt good about being able to contribute to a more stable situation, preventing the country from going off the rails again. That's his "modest contribution to a better world".

Even though the client relationships changed, the ideals about

emancipation and democratisation still survived during all the foreign activities carried out by the Beech Consultancy. Several advisors played a supporting role during the aftermath of major historical changes in a number of countries. A modest role, but it is a fact that the Beech Consultancy participated in assignments setting up political and social organisations after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, at the end of the apartheid regime and at the end of the war in former Yugoslavia. Perhaps that is why internationally, the Beech Consultancy was particularly active during the first half of the nineties.

Support in times of crisis

In 1994, Febe Deug, an organization consultant and an expert in the field of women's aid, was asked by Admira to support a women's centre in former Yugoslavia. This centre aimed at supporting women who were victims of sexual violence. The situation of many of these women was quite miserable. Rape was the order of the day during the war and the economic embargo of Serbia created difficult conditions for families. This increased the risk of domestic violence in the post war situation.

Together with a social worker, Deug went to Belgrade. She was supposed to focus on the organisational aspects of the women's centre, but even before she arrived in former Serbia, it appeared that the women were arguing seriously among themselves and threatened not to show up for the agreed training days.

This women's organisation was hardly structured, but nevertheless it was growing quickly. Deug: "these growing pains often occur within new social organisations. Large sums of money are transferred by foreign countries. This is well meant of course, but it does not make the situation any easier. For example, Yugoslavia was coping with an enormous inflation, so there was not much point in putting more money in the bank. Besides, many women had voluntary jobs and only a few of them were paid. This also

caused tension when all of a sudden money was not in short supply anymore."

"First we had talks with all the employees individually, letting them blow off steam and explaining the concrete situation" says Deug. In a crisis situation, this is an important first step for her. "Only then can you create the emotional space necessary - only then will be people be prepared to carry on a conversation again to start changing things." In addition to her being directly confronted with the grief of these women, there was a total lack of a historical perspective on the phenomenon of NGO's. "Leadership as a concept was still equated with authority there, and people kept their distance from any sort of power manifestation. This is not strange at all, considering that the country only recently changed from feudalism tot communism. And all of a sudden, after the war that was over." It meant that employees had to come to grips with their traumatic experiences of the war and at the same time had to learn to deal with oneanother in a different way. "Particularly in such a turbulent situation, the women would benefit from a good organisation. In fact, they first had to find out what 'democracy' means within an organisation, what it is like to consider minority points of view, and to find other ways to solve their conflicts." According to Febe Deug, it was a learning process that required quite some time to undertake. It is clear that not only historical power relationships were involved. Deug: "In the Balkans, conflicts are fought out rather violently. When my Dutch colleague and I did not agree, we did not fly at each other, but tried to talk it out. During the evaluation, it was clear that the women were seriously impressed by the simple fact: if you do not agree, you can talk it out and try to find a solution in stead of walking away or fighting."

Mutual learning

Working abroad does not solely consist of 'helping' other people. André Mooij: "While working on foreign projects, we immediately

try to make it clear that we want to learn from the people there too. We do not just come to pass on knowledge."

Mutual learning is not always easy. The stay abroad is often a short one, under pressure by the need to show concrete results. "Working in another country can be compared to working in a pressure cooker. You have to achieve something in a short time and there is hardly any time for reflection", says Deug. In The Netherlands the situation is different as long-term projects are more common.

By definition, the advisors of the Beech Consultancy are less familiar with the social context of the foreign country than with their own Dutch culture. Cultural differences clearly play a part as well. Views on authority and organisation structures appear to be different from the Dutch ones. "Suddenly you are confronted with things you usually take for granted", says Febe Deug. Discoveries of this kind have regularly been written down by the advisors in their travel reports. This way, they shared the joys and sorrows as well as their learning experiences. In her travel report, Sylvia Borren wrote frankly about her stay in India in 1992. She described her search for an effective way to advise Aware, a development organisation in Andhra Pradesh. Borren was asked to help this organisation, which was led by a guru. Her assignment was to improve their organisation. This was quite difficult, because within the system there everyone accepted that the guru was superior to all classes. His qualities were considered to be so sublime by all employees, that they expected him to personally solve every last detail. This resulted in a strange and complex situation. In order to initiate changes, Borren had to meticulously steer a middle road between respect for the guru's position and the need to get him to delegate tasks. In the end, she succeeded by pointing out what the bottom line was concerning the guru's responsibilities. The lesson being that leadership is viewed in a completely different way in the two cultures.

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1992

Design floppy-box; brought back from an international assignment in Eastern Europe by Tjeerdo Wieberdink. Made especially on assignment with a Beuk-logo.



2005

Tanzania, 2005, SNV-teambuilding



2004

Tanzania, 2004, SNV-teambuilding



Febe Deug noticed that in South America, people deal with the appointment process within organisations in quite a different way. It was the early nineties and she was on her first foreign assignment as an organisation consultant. She had to get by with her limited Spanish. “For us, it’s normal that giving leadership in an organisation comes with both rights and obligations for the manager involved. In our situation, a manager is often called to account. However, in Colombia this was not self-evident. This aspect of the culture made it quite difficult to increase the structure of an organisation.”

During these projects, the advisors of the Beech Consultancy became aware of their European approach, but also learned about other types of leadership and other organisation structures. “And”, Dorien de Wit says, “we take this knowledge home to The Netherlands with us. The experience gained abroad offers an opportunity to rethink the things we consider self-evident. This is a very useful effect, because the Beech Consultancy is constantly looking for new approaches to solve the next dilemma.”

Well-structured Europeans

Febe Deug clearly remembers how things were at the Women’s World Conference in Beijing in 1995. Three female Beech-advisors gave, together with Philippine and Kenyan female trainers, workshops about organisational issues. Deug: “We wanted to be well-prepared, but these trainers seemed to withdraw from the preparations. This led to irritations, but now I understand, because ‘we’ are used to considering ourselves responsible for the final result and therefore felt the need to discuss everything beforehand in detail. Right from the start of the workshop, ‘they’ felt that the group as a whole was responsible, so they left more up in the air for the process to develop then and there.”

Dorien de Wit describes a similar situation in her travel report

about a project in Sri Lanka: “The assignment giver kept saying I wanted too much structure. We had big discussions about whether or not that is Eurocentric. I was not even allowed to make an agenda when I was afraid that some issues otherwise might not be

In exceptional cases, the simple presence of foreign experts might lead directly to manifest resistance.

discussed. This does not suit our culture, she said.”

In exceptional cases, the simple presence of foreign experts might lead directly to manifest resistance. For instance, during a training that was given by Ron Rutherglen in an African country, a team leader indicated that too much knowledge was being brought in by external white advisors: African pride was at stake. This means that the self-assured advisors of The Beech Consultancy, although handling cautiously according to their norms, have to be even more aware of their own role as white Northerners. At the start of her project in India, this made Sylvia Borren wonder in despair: “What on earth is a Westerner doing here?”

Most advisors don’t go that far, but they certainly take their background into account, like Ron Rutherglen: “While working in Africa, I am the born and bred Canadian. I consciously choose not to be the representative of the ‘consolidated European stronghold’.” Cooperating with local advisors may be helpful. In Africa for instance Rutherglen gave a training together with an advisor from

another African country. This cooperation made it easier to build a bridge to the participants of the training. “He was able to be very sensitive to cultural differences.” That became evident at the end of a hectic week. “He had arranged to have his word of thanks written out phonetically by a hotel guest, which enabled him to thank the participants in the local language. It was very touching and these are things I keep learning from. It has to do with honour and with respect for another culture.”

More than one client

The fact that the advisor may have to deal with the different interests of the client is also a factor to be taken into account during foreign projects. Typically, a Dutch NGO would call in the Beech Consultancy based on the idea that the subsidised local organisation has problems which are not necessarily acknowledged on site. Febe Deug: “You have to deal with this double client situation. The local client may just have a completely different set of questions. On top of that you have your own analysis of the situation.”

This tension is made clear by an example mentioned in the travel report of Dorien de Wit regarding an assignment for Hivos about the Women and Media Collective in Sri Lanka. “In the afternoon I discussed the Terms of Reference as drawn up by Hivos as well as our intended approach with my contact. Her first reaction was that Hivos was making very high demands. In her humble opinion, Sri Lankan people were not used to being this explicit, neither in articulations nor in giving reports. Oh-oh I thought, am I faced with a mission impossible here?”

After much discussion, De Wit eventually proposed to write a feminist Terms of Reference, providing an essential basis for trust and also providing an opening to talk about what does and what does not work within the women’s organisations. De Wit on the final presentation: “Much to my relief, they were very positive about

our findings and conclusions. They felt that ‘finally everything is said out loud for a change’. That this was not meant as a false compliment, was proven when this rather old fashioned feminist collective decided they should streamline their own organisation, making priority decisions and yes, maybe even appoint a coordinator.”

Emotions

There are more examples of foreign projects which created a lot of energy and emotions. At the outset of the first Nelson Mandela government, Ron Rutherglen was invited by the New South Africa Foundation to South Africa, the country that had only recently abolished apartheid. The new ministers and secretaries of state, inexperienced in parliamentary work, were to be trained regarding communications and media use. Rutherglen: “Or anyway, some high ranking ANC-official had probably said that they had to attend the training, whether they wanted to or not. Without a doubt, the reason was that the black leaders who were to be inaugurated in the new government had to be prepared for the role they were to take up in South African politics in the coming years.”

But the new democratic leaders appeared to be ‘little emperors’, who had a strong position of power within their own ethnic group. “That week I learned that the chiefs in South Africa hold more power than a member of parliament”, Ron Rutherglen says. “During the training, some participants were surrounded by several lieutenants. It was quite normal for them to give orders and to treat others as their servants. Some of them also treated me that way.” As usual in Africa, a farewell dinner was organised at the end of the week. Rutherglen: “I was relieved, but dead tired as well.” When the ANC party - all black Africans with the exception of the white advisor from the Beech Consultancy - were seated at the table, the waiter, also black, asked Ron Rutherglen of all the people at the table for the order. One of the ANC members was offended

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1995

During the United Nations International Women’s Conference in Peking (1995) a Beuk team (together with Oxfam/Novib and other organisations) organized various workshops and trainings with the title: “The Art of Organizing”.



1996

During his assignment for the ANC in Capetown, South Africa, Ron Rutherglen visited a rally where Nelson Mandela gave a speech.

RON RUTHERGLEN



and started a scathing discussion with the waiter about the new balance of power in South Africa. Rutherglen: “Then I broke down, I unintentionally appeared to be the reason for a quarrel and had to cry for South Africa.” This involvement felt by Rutherglen with the situation in South Africa is not an exception. In a travel report,

Dorien de Wit describes how she experienced a women’s conference in Russia in 1992 where the participants first discovered that they had the opportunity to say what they wanted to say, and to stand up for their rights. After a slight hesitation to join in, Dorien de Wit noticed ‘how the problems of these women became mine

as well’. “This conference made me experience personally how a women’s movement grows in circumstances like these. And I became personally involved with this new developing organisation and with women in a country I knew relatively little about.” During the conference, one whole day was reserved for the presentation of all kinds of women’s organisations, ranging from business women to the wives of farmers, who were all given the same warm welcome. After the conference, efforts were made to establish a federation of all these organisations. The statutes included the afore-mentioned sentence ‘we are permitted to have different opinions within this organisation’.

André Mooij also recognizes the enthusiasm of the period after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. In Hungary, he organised the so called Münchhausen project, a conference for small rural towns. “It was a big success. The aim was to find out how the countryside could be developed by means of laying footpaths and bicycle paths in the woods and by developing lodgings for these tourists. Far more people than expected attended the conference and that resulted in so much energy, emotional involvement and hope! It really felt like we were going to make something happen.”

Inspirational lessons

These foreign assignments are well worth the effort for more than one reason. It’s about gaining another kind of experience. André Mooij: “You work your fingers to the bone, but you do it because it’s exciting.” Or because it broadens your horizon. Ron Rutherglen: “Seeing the world through other eyes gives you energy. For me, working abroad means gaining a rich experience.”

Problems abroad tend to be quite dissimilar from problems in The Netherlands. “You come to realize what is really important in life. When you are abroad you are dealing with very essential issues.” And a change of scenery also provides you with input for your work in The Netherlands: the experience gained abroad enables

the advisors of the Beech Consultancy to improve their own work. Dorien de Wit: ‘If you carry out a project in The Netherlands while you have just been to Sri Lanka for the same NGO, you really know what you are talking about, it’s not just a matter of hearsay.’ That also goes for Febe Deug’s projects on trafficking in human beings in India: this experience is extremely useful while discussing the policy on prostitution in The Netherlands.

The foreign projects carried out by the Beech Consultancy are valuable, as they provide us with good stories, a richer life and a broader experience. The lessons drawn from each project become an essential aspect of our international work as well. In 2007, the significance of this fact was reconfirmed when the consultancy chose Dublin as the location for their yearly Annual Special Advisors Week. This provided new knowledge about a different kind of politics and a different social system, with inspirational ideas and opinions on cooperation between the public and the private sector.

The advisors of the Beech Consultancy will continue to carry out foreign projects in the future. While working on these projects, they intend to keep on looking for input that will enrich their Dutch national work for the Beech Consultancy as well. Without a doubt, inspiration is to be drawn from developments in the field of ecology, employee participation or labour relations in a global perspective. This inspiration is relevant with regard to both method and content, but helps to keep a close eye on market trends as well.



2008

Ron Rutherglen explains the importance of Listening, Summaries and Depth Questions during an exercise with African participants.



Tanzania, 2005, SNV-team presentation training.