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The Knowledge Gap

**Abstract:** The new approaches in Western aid necessitated the creation of a new field of knowledge that became increasingly isolated from other professions and experience in donor and recipient countries. A complex and expensive knowledge system has been developed, tailor-made for aid. Much of the knowledge produced is not useful outside the sector and not demanded from recipient governments. Since it makes it difficult for donors to accommodate experience that does not fit into the logic of aid, it is not well suited to facilitate a re-orientation of aid to fit better with reality.

When aid was primarily about single-purpose projects and projects were similar in nature as what happened at home, donors could apply experience from home. Professional expertise was available for every purpose, such as industry development, infrastructure, health, education, public management and so on. The success of projects, to a large degree, depended on how project managers managed to balance general professional skills with knowledge of local and national conditions. If they failed, they could improve by learning from experience, so that future aid would become more successful. It would take time, however, since aid is a long-term process where both successes and mistakes become evident only after several years.

Instead of focusing on improving what they did, donor attention drifted away from the problems they were struggling with, towards new and ever higher goals. About every decade – or about the time it takes to learn by experience – donors tended to start something new, where they could rely less on previous experience. Soon, aid had become a sector where professional experience neither at home nor in the host countries could be used.

This is the new knowledge gap in aid. Initial aid strategies were based on assumptions of an existing knowledge gap: poor countries lacked the knowledge necessary to improve societies and economies, and Westerners could fill that gap. The new knowledge gap is created by aid itself. The gap is not between rich and poor, but between policy and experience: between what Western donors want to achieve, and what they know and can. It came by shifting attention from simple tasks to complex governance issues where relevant knowledge and experience was not available even in the West. Every time donors took a step further in this process, the knowledge gap increased.

In this chapter, we will demonstrate how the drift in Western aid over time necessitated the creation of a separate field of knowledge. Closely integrated with aid management and policymaking, it forms a closed system of knowledge detached from other sectors and seemingly resilient against experience.

Since aid could not anymore receive guidance primarily from experience at home or abroad donors had to produce the knowledge themselves for the specific purpose of aid. To close the new knowledge gap, they invested enormously in knowledge. They produced analyses of all the problems that aid is intended to solve, followed by design of appropriate strategies and interventions, management and monitoring.