

Help expresses a balance of power

Interview with former teacher Gilberte Raymonde Driesen about colonial behaviour in school partnerships. Translated by Lisa Niemann

Gilberte Raymond Driesen was a teacher in Senegal and works now as advisor concerning development policy, coaches at BtE (education meets development), organises workshops for ENSA (development political school exchange program) and offers advice to municipalities concerning development policy and intercultural opening in NRW (North Rhine Westphalia). She is co-founder and president of the organisation AXATIN e.V.

glokal: What is your relation to work in partnerships?

GRD: I was a secondary school teacher in Senegal and my school had a partnership agreement with a German school. This partnership changed over time. At the beginning the parts were clearly divided: the donors from the north, who financed everything, and the grateful receivers in the south, who got the presents. The dominance of the north was always present but not wilful. This partnership still exists, though it has become more self-critical through the company and advices of ENSA.

Since a few years I have now lived in Germany. Because of my experience in development policy and my work with migrants I accompany projects and organisations who work in the global south. The work for my country and my commitment in development policy made me become even more critical towards the dominance of the north, which seems so omnipresent to me. I've been looking for alternatives until my husband gifted me a book with the title: how to found an organisation in Germany.

And that's what I did. The organisation is called AXATIN and aims to offer enlightenment and education to disadvantaged children and teenagers. To reach this goal we cooperate with organisations in Senegal, with the education authority and the head of the schools. The decisions and allocation of responsibilities don't come from Germany but are made together everyone is donor and receiver.

glokal: What did the dominance you are talking about look like?

GRD: Well, it starts with the visa. As a German you'll easily get a visa to Senegal, whereas it won't work as easy vice versa. And then there is a simple dominant attitude. In another school in the project village it worked like that: When Germans came to the school they evaluated everything. Some came into the classroom in the middle of a lesson and started to hold speeches. Or they brought people who would reconstruct things at the school. Whether the teacher approved or the principal knew wasn't important. Many Senegalese teachers were really angry about this. But they didn't dare to openly criticise the Germans, as they were their partners and gave the money. At some point the principal was about to quit his job. Just imagine: A principal in Senegal wants to quit his job because Germans were interfering all the time. And of course it is an organisational problem: The projects are planned in the north. The south can't voice his opinion. No wonder, projects are dominated by northern ideas and prejudices. When one drafts a concept

and others just participate but can't decide on anything, it is not a partnership. The Germans always talk about partnership. But they really mean help.

glokal: How would you describe the relationship between German organisations and their partners?

GRD: The Germans come and treat the Senegalese like children, who can't take responsibility or like servants who have to follow their instructions. One day something in my school was broken. A German went to the principal and said, "Hey, that's broken. Go and fix it!" The principal called me and said: „I'm not a builder. I am a teacher. Why does someone tell me to fix something?" Another example: On the homepage of a German organisation pictures of a school were published without permission. They said: "This is our private school and we Germans gave a lot of money. We need to show pictures like this to generate more donations." But it's never been only about the money. Everyone is part of the project and everyone in Senegal participated in some way. One gave two hectares of his property to the primary school. The Senegalese government paid the teachers and provided the school with learning material. The villagers promoted the school mouth-to-mouth and organised transport for the children. The women's organisation took care of the food for the children. But all this work – human dedication and the support of the society – didn't mean a thing. Only money counts and in general the western concept of what is important. And because the German organisations donate the money to build classrooms they think they can decide everything without asking. It sounds like peanuts but these things cause huge frustrations. It really got to me; I couldn't sleep for nights.

glokal: Would you say it is more important to the German organisations to present themselves than a real partnership`?

GRD: They came to our school with paint and brush and wrote on the school walls: Germans are building here. That's not a partnership. Another example: The German school checks when a date fits their schedule, they book a flight and afterwards they just inform the Senegalese about their arrival date. A Senegalese principal once wanted the Germans to change their dates because it was her school holidays. The German school didn't want to change the date and that destroyed the partnership in the end. The relation between helpers on the one side and indigent people on the other side is always present and is reproduced every time. I mean: helping is normal and human. But it also shows a balance of power. It shows: These are the poor, these are the victims. A Senegalese paediatrician told me: "I neither need computers nor old furniture. " But anyway: he keeps receiving container loads full with computers and old furniture from Germany.

glokal: Do you think the Germans are aware of this behaviour?

GRD: I often see people who are certainly aware of the power they receive through them offering help. And that is a motivation for them. In my closer circle of friends there are some who are actually really nice. But they get a lot more attention for their work in Senegal than when doing something similar here in Germany.

Glokal: What do you think is their motivation?

GRD: I keep saying: When they are in Senegal it's a kind of therapy for them. They get more attention, feel much better and human and that's what they need for their self-confidence. But then: who is actually the disadvantaged and who is helping whom?

glokal In post-colonial theory it's called colonising of the mind, meaning that people from the north are used to be in a superior position, which they can't reflect upon but which is unconsciously the foundation of their behaviour.

GRD: It's difficult to talk about this unconscious level; there is a lot of resistance. For many Germans – thank god not all of them – their behaviour is normal. They say: “We want to help!” and that's why they think they can't behave like colonial masters. And if you question that they say: “What are you talking about? We are helping. Full stop.”

glokal: What would be the foundation of a real partnership?

GRD: The partners need to take each other serious. Partnership doesn't mean aid, but participation. Therefore one should know something about his partners in the south. Instead the Germans come and say: “We know what you need and we decide what you do.” That is colonial behaviour to me.

glokal: If money wasn't important, which structures would you change first?

GRD: We need structures in Senegal itself. Then we could organise independent seminars and projects in Senegal. The money to finance the projects always comes from Germany, from BMZ (Ministry for development policy and cooperation), but in Senegal I have to organise a lot on my own; I need to write letters to ask for petrol if I want to take the Germans on a trip and things like that. Similar structures like the ones in Germany are hardly existent in Senegal. If there was something like ENSA, there might be totally different priorities in the projects. And that, of course, would endanger the stability of the international partnership. Maybe people in Senegal would decide to rather invest the existing money in education, building of schools and health than in travels of Germans and their pedagogic preparation.

glokal: The colonising of the mind involves the colonised as well. The oppressed position often seems normal to the colonised.

GRD: Exactly, there needs to be a change on both sides. It becomes very clear when you look at the villagers. They don't have a lot of formal education and that's why they are often not very critical. Their logic looks like this: “Before, we didn't have a school. Then the Germans came. Now we have a school. They must be nice“. It's also not very common to criticise guests or question their motivation. I'm always sitting between the chairs.

glokal: Which activities or workshops could be offered to villagers to face exactly the problematic of inner colonising of the former colonised?

GRD: In our organisation in Senegal we offer for example extracurricular workshops for children. Important are alphabetisation classes for women, as well, so they become a more self confident. But that is still not

specific enough. We would like to do workshops with the Senegalese teachers concerning balance of power and colonisation. We want to offer teachers and south partners empowerment training and workshops to decolonise the mind.

glokal: How do German organisations take your criticism?

GRD: They take my criticism as a kind of interruption. And behind my back they say I'm crazy. And that I should quit the organisation. I can be very diplomatic and nice but when I voice criticism, I am always between the chairs. A black woman can't say what to do. Only whites are allowed to do so. But of course, I also meet Germans who support me and make similar experiences.

glokal: Would you like it, if a lot of white German persons, become members of your organisation?

GRD: Yes, of course. Most of our members are whites, I'm honest about that. Main point being, that I am heard and am allowed to work in the board to organise our work. Now, that we are recognised as an organisation, we are allowed to hand in motions and offer workshops concerning partnerships and colonialism.

glokal: Do you think your organisation is able to work on a par with organisations in Senegal?

GRD: Yes, because I made these bad experiences and I know with whom I work there. We try to communicate everything in a transparent way. But, of course, it is hard to be on the same level when one has more power. Knowledge is power. I will use my power in a positive way and will try to share with my partners in Senegal. Every human being has power. The question is how to use it: to abuse, to decide solely or to act in an equal and decent way.

glokal: What could be the criterias for a good partnership?

GRD: One aspect would be, that the Germans should see themselves as learners, as human beings, who listen first and then offer advice. Participation must be enabled on many levels. For example at communication. It cannot be that a program for a project is organised and planned in Germany and only presented in Senegal. A partnership means as well, that there is always more than one perspective, as a matter of principle. Otherwise it's not a partnership but a hierarchy.

No one is an expert in everything and I would wish for migrants here in Germany to be recognised more for their ability to be an expert. Because we are able to participate. But this knowledge isn't really used. And there needs to be a change in public relations as well. You can't just take pictures of schools and naked children and publish them on the internet without talking it through with your partners beforehand: How do we do this? Who decides? Is it published online or in a newsletter? These things need to be decided together.

glokal: Are you sometimes tired of fighting against the same old structures all the time?

GRD: Oh yes, I am (laughs). Always fighting; no one can do this. But you can achieve something through fighting for it and even the negative experiences give me strength. And I am happy for the smallest success. I can now say: I don't leave development policy to the whites. Full stop. And as a Senegalese woman I can

also do something in my home country. This is my small revolt. I am now very active and am currently working with German organisations, who know what partnership really means. Now I ask: What actually means 'development'? Who is really undeveloped? Who defined development? What means development to a white person? What means development to me? What means poverty to a white person? What means poverty to me? And I also think that the ENSA-program and *glokal* as well are making small steps in the right direction. The change is coming, even though very slowly.

glokal: Thank you very much for the interview and your time.

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