

Dishonest Western Consultants¹

Peter Bowbrick

‘I had a spot of bother with one Western company, one of the largest of the middle ranking firms. They wanted me to do a job very badly indeed so the country would get a system that did not work. In fact they were effectively defrauding the country that was getting the aid as well as the donor agency that was providing the aid. I never worked out why they wanted to do it badly: it would have cost the same to do it properly. All it needed was that the consultants were honest with themselves, and that they looked at what worked in other countries.

‘I complained loudly and strongly about it of course. The Project Director could not understand me at all.

“‘What are you on about?’” he asked. “‘You are talking as though it was a moral issue.”

“‘No! No!’” I replied, alarmed that I should get the reputation of being a consultant with morals. “‘It’s just bad business to give the client a system that does not work. It damages the consultancy firm’s reputation.”

‘But he flatly refused to do anything to remedy the situation. I suppose the firm had found out over the years that no consultancy firm goes broke from doing bad work. The Managing Director who appointed the firm and commissioned the consultancy is not going to make a fool of himself by admitting publicly that he blundered.’

‘There is a bit more evaluation and monitoring with aid consultancy than in the private sector, and it is not so easy for dud consultancies to get away with it. In this case the EU and the country started asking very loudly what they had got for their \$2 million. The really annoying thing is that because I worked on this project, I can never work in that country again - it

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was seen as a complete disaster. This is in spite of the fact that I pulled out of it when I could not stop it going off the rails.

‘Not surprisingly, perhaps, I find that firms that are willing to cheat the client in this way are not too worried about the impact on their employees. In this case I lost four months’ paid work - most of my year’s income - because I pulled out rather than cheat the client. The firms that behaved like this are also the ones who cheated me out of my expenses.’