

the
**OVERSEAS
PENSIONER**

— ◆ —
Number 112, October 2016

Overseas Service



Pensioners' Association

1960 – 2016

Overseas officers and development today

How your personal account makes a difference

by Valentin Seidlerⁱ

In this short article I would like to directly address former overseas officers and readers of this journal. I hope to raise your interest in my research program and, even more, to motivate you to participate in a series of interviews. The article will briefly lay out the research program which connects the work of British overseas officers with long-term economic development and with development assistance today. This research program was designed at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton upon the invitation of Prof. Dani Rodrik (now at Harvard University). It has been financed by grants from the Austrian Academy of Science and the Austrian Science Fund in Vienna.ⁱⁱ

A research agenda connecting overseas officers and development today

The work of overseas officers in the mid 20th century is important for at least two arenas of perspectives on development in the 21st century. The first concerns international development assistance as it is practised today: it is in dire need of alternative approaches. The argument I will present here draws substantially on my own experience with the International Red Cross Movement overseas. The second concerns academic research on long-term economic and social development. In my opinion scholars today fail to correctly account for the role of human capital in the process called legal or institutional copying. I will start with this second area. I provide two charts in brief illustration of my argument.

Chart 1: GDP per capita of Sierra Leone and Botswana in 1960 and in 2015

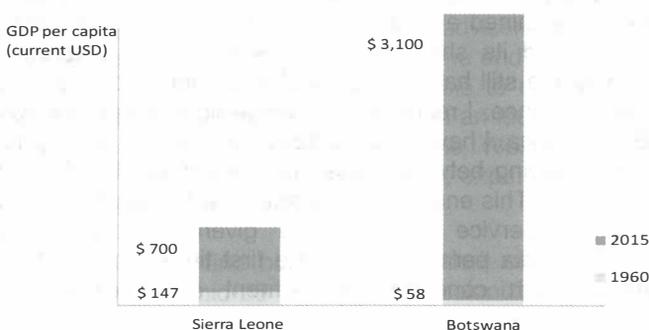


Chart 1 illustrates major differences in the economic performance across former British colonies. I picked Sierra Leone and Botswana as examples, because both are rich in minerals, of medium size and both were very poor in 1960. While Botswana has prospered since, Sierra Leone has not. This, in a nutshell,

illustrates where we stand in academic research at the moment. We cannot satisfactorily explain the differences of growth in former European colonies. There are of course lots of hypotheses ranging from the lack of (foreign) capital to the endowment of resources and geography, but there is not one dominant theory that explains these differences. Most economists however would agree that certain “deep” factors are fundamental for long term economic growth.ⁱⁱⁱ These are geography, trade and a country’s institutions. Institutions include the effectiveness of its administrative governance or of its rule of law. Institutions have been a promising field, but we lack knowledge about how good institutions can be established.^{iv} This is an important area where overseas officers can provide a new lens for the academic debate.

Chart 2: Percentage of overseas officers in the civil services of Sudan, Sierra Leone and Botswana

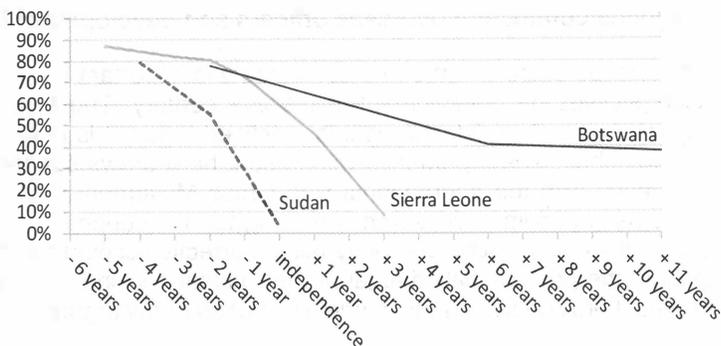


Chart 2 shows that there are considerable differences in the length of time that overseas officers remained available in the public services of former territories. Sierra Leone reduced its share of overseas personnel drastically within five years after independence, while Botswana still had over 25% of its senior officers from overseas 14 years after independence. I reconstructed these figures from territorial staff lists for most of British Africa. I have also digitized over 14,000 biographical entries of overseas officers serving between 1939 and 1966 which had been compiled by Anthony Kirk-Greene. This enables one to examine for example, the biographical data of all Legal Service officers in a given territory one year before independence. The data permit us - for the first time - to link the existence of overseas officers with concrete development outcomes in former British territories.

Our very first findings were presented at an international conference in Harvard in June 2015.^v Using a statistical model we found that the existence of overseas officers with a specific biographical designation influenced the quality of institutions in former colonies. Legal Service officers helped improve the rule of

law, while economists and trained statisticians promoted a country's integration into international trade, to give but two examples. The effect gets stronger the longer the officers had been serving in the colony before its independence. Even more importantly, the role of overseas officers seems to trump most other explanations that economists consider relevant for economic development. Adverse climate and geography, for example, matter less once overseas officers are accounted for.

While these are preliminary results which need to be tested in more detail, they are a promising starting point. To learn more I began to analyze the biographical records in more detail and contacted The Overseas Service Pensioners' Association (OSPA) for help and expertise. It was generously provided. A first paper describing the link between overseas officers and development has been submitted to the *Cambridge Journal of Institutional Economics*. Among others it includes the findings of ten interviews I conducted with OSPA members. From the academic feedback which I have received so far from international colleagues one may cautiously conclude that this research agenda has a huge potential for changing the way economists and development scholars think about long-term economic development.

Outside the ivory towers of academia, experts in international development assistance are searching for new approaches to deliver solutions for the development of low income countries. Ongoing practices by international agencies have been widely criticized for achieving few results despite huge amounts of money.^{vi} My own experience during ten years with the Red Cross in Africa and Asia is that the main actors in delivering development assistance are often poorly suited for their complex tasks. Local bureaucrats often have little expertise in the complex legal structures they are supposed to establish. Many of these structures are copies of best practices from industrialized countries with little adaptation to the local conditions. Expatriate advisers on the other side often lack a good understanding of prevailing local norms and customs. They may not have spent enough time in the country to be able to estimate the effect their proposed reforms will have in the local context. In an ideal world we would have local bureaucrats who had been trained in the Western world and hence understand how our institutions function. Or else, expatriate advisers who have spent many years in the receiving country.

Going back in history you find both types of "ideal officers" employed in the British territories in the mid-20th century. Decolonization was a period of intensified institutional reform and legal copying. Overseas officers were the key actors. Compared with the foreign experts and advisers today they held very influential posts. They also had longer tenure in the country and were accustomed to the local way of doing things. Most of them had passed exams in one of the local languages.

The biographies of overseas officers can inform development professionals today on what it takes to be suited for specific tasks. The digitized biographical records of the 14,000 officers will generate a considerable amount of research activity once I make them available online. Alas, the abbreviations and technical terms can be misleading for anyone who is not acquainted with the ins and outs of colonial administration. Furthermore, without the personal story of the corresponding officer the brief record remains little more than a historic source subject to the interpretation of later generations. We learn who served where, but not what they did there. That is why I am convinced that we also need to gather and share the personal experiences of overseas officers: what worked best and what failed? What were the conditions of life and work in the field and in the colonial capitals and towns?

Project VOICES - collecting personal account of overseas officers

I started to record interviews with former overseas officers in early 2016. The OSPA office kindly established contact with volunteers who were then interviewed over the phone. The transcribed recordings of those who wished to remain anonymous will be published with an indication of position, tenure and country only (e.g. "Education Officer in Gold Coast, service from 1948 to 1954"). The transcribed recordings of those who want to give their names will be linked to their digitized biographical records. These will help later generations of scholars - economists, historians, medical doctors, legal and political scholars or engineers - to understand their work and lives in the colonies better.

Together with Professor Peter Becker and students from the University of Vienna I plan another larger round of interviews starting in November 2016. We plan to conduct a hundred telephone interviews with former overseas officers across all services and regardless of where they are living today. The interviews will last between 90 and 120 minutes. They will follow a semi-structured interview guide sent to the interviewee before the actual interviews. The interview guide is intended to structure the conversation over experiences from recruitment to retirement. Interviewees will be encouraged to elaborate on topics rather than to respond to pre-fixed questions. We are also happy to receive documents (or scans thereof) which may complement the personal account of an officer. **If you are interested in giving an interview please contact the OSPA Secretary, David Le Breton at the OSPA office. The interviews will be conducted on first-come-first-serve basis according to the time an interest is registered with OSPA. Please indicate whether you want to give your name or prefer to remain anonymous. We would prefer you to give your name, but both options are absolutely fine. Either way, a transcription of the interview will be published on an online platform which will be available to researchers and practitioners in development.**

We do not know how much interest we will receive and our budget (as of today) is limited. Please understand that it may take some weeks before we are able to contact you by email or telephone to arrange an interview appointment. Please also recognize that the interviewer may not have a deep understanding of the British colonial administration. It is a sad fact that knowledge in this area is rare nowadays. One aim of the project is to change this. Your assistance is needed and deeply appreciated. I am very thankful to the OSPA office for supporting this project.

ⁱ Dr. Valentin Seidler is a member of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Historical Social Science in Vienna. He is currently a visitor at the University of Warwick, Department of Economics. This article is funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) under an Erwin Schrödinger Programme (Grant #J3848-G28).

ⁱⁱ I am grateful for the support from these organizations and from the Max Kade Foundation in New York. Ongoing research activities are financed by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) under an Erwin Schrödinger Programme (Grant #J3848-G28).

ⁱⁱⁱ Prof. Rodrik's book *In Search of Prosperity* is good introduction into the field. My brief overview draws from the first chapter in this book. Rodrik, Dani, *In Search of Prosperity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2003.

^{iv} Institutions are a term which economists use for "the rules of the game" in modern societies and economies. More specifically, they are considered "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction." They consist of both informal constraints (customs, traditions, and codes of conduct) and formal rules (e.g. contracts, the written law, the constitution, administrative regulations etc.). Institutions are fundamental to the discipline of institutional economics - a field established by the Nobel Laureates Douglass North, Ronald Coase and Olive Williamson (among others). A book by Douglass North may serve as an introduction. North, Douglass, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1990.

^v This is work together with Claudia Williamson who is an assistant Professor of Economics at Mississippi State University. Please note that these are very first findings and research in this direction is still ongoing.

^{vi} I would recommend a book by William Easterly as an entry point into this discussion. Easterly, William Russell, *The elusive quest for growth: economists' adventures and misadventures in the tropics*, MIT press, 2001.