

8.5 Problematising German interest

Drawing on a sociology of justification, social scientist and philosopher R. Forst outlines that societies have different conceptions of justice and the role of individuals and institutions to contribute to a common wellbeing or public welfare. Forst argues that the room of potential narratives of legitimation, and thus what is considered as a suitable legitimation, is socially constructed and limited. Within an overarching shared definition of public welfare, such as dignity of humankind as a grand principle, the potential justifications are ordered, structured and may compete (Forst 2015). In case of the BMBF's policies, justifications of economic wellbeing have successfully competed against other rationales. The BMBF often employs an abstract concept of German interest in order to justify a German benefit in the cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies. In view of cooperation with Asian countries, the Action Plan for example states that "[i]n all cooperation, it must be ensured that accelerated knowledge and technology transfer – which newly industrialized countries often call for – must be carried out in a controlled manner that is in harmony with German interests" (BMBF 2014e: 46). Here, the underlying assumption is clearly that cooperation might lead to a German disadvantage if German partners do not carefully guard their interests.

As other terms, interest may be defined, interpreted and conceptualized in a plenitude of ways. In case of the BMBF, German interest is mainly defined as economic interest. In interviews, the *German tax payer* is often mentioned as an anonymous authority epitomizing public interest. As a rhetoric device, the reference to the German tax payer thus is made to demonstrate that research funds are spent well:

"We fund over 500 international projects with a volume of EUR 300 million, in 60 countries on five continents. And you have to justify that toward the taxpayer. And you cannot only put forward knowledge generation as an argument. In addition, we will have to try to solve concrete problems abroad." (PA11)

According to this interviewee, the German tax payer apparently would not approve science without further impact than generating new knowledge; but would endorse research for problem solving. Much more commonly, however, interviewees referred to the German tax payer to back up the idea that research funding needs to return German economic benefits. An assumed interest of the German tax payer in economic returns is used for legitimizing that the BMBF sticks to a rationale of science policy aimed at the export of German technologies. The logic behind this view entails that first, the taxpayer seeks German benefits; second, that he/she seeks these benefits in economic terms, and third, that the taxpayer in some way benefits from technology exports. The underlying assumption of the tax payer is that of a *homo oeconomicus* who through a mechanism not specified, in a sort of

trickle-down-effect, benefits from technology exports that the BMBF seeks to enhance through participation of SME in research consortia.

The reduction of the alleged tax payers' requests for German economic benefits and the contrasting dismissal of altruistic notions in international cooperation demonstrates the main accepted storyline for cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies in the BMBF's policy discourse. Both the reduction of policy objectives to German interests as well as the further reduction of German interests to economic interests have been criticized by bearers of the alternative discourse coalition. In this sense, a member of the advisory board of the Megacities funding initiative stated that "[i]n development cooperation, too, I observe a tendency to narrow down cooperation to German interests, which in turn are narrowed down to business promotion. This is such a strong reduction. German interests go beyond business development." (EE06)

