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Denmark in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has gone through tumultuous times recently; the government went through a collapse around 2000, and recently established a new government in 2009. Since that time, the country of Denmark has had a very noticeable presence in the south African country. Currently the two countries are engaged in the Danish-Zimbabwaean Development Partnership, a project spanning the two years of 2013-2015 (“Danish-Zimbabwean”).

I first found several online newspaper articles referring to the Danish Minister of Trade and Development visiting Zimbabwe, but lacked any context and decided to start by looking into the situation surrounding Denmark and Zimbabwe. One document I found particularly helpful was from a grant committee meeting from 2013 in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (of Denmark). It goes into meticulous detail about Denmark’s presence in Zimbabwe. In this document, Denmark defines its goals in Zimbabwe relating to democracy and justice, rehabilitation of infrastructure and new policymaking, and economic goals. The document details Danish efforts and partnerships in Zimbabwe; it mentions work with Zimbabwaean banks, UN organizations such as UNICEF, and civil society organizations like the Zimbabwe Peace Project. The document seemed to most heavily emphasize the importance of the work connecting back to democracy, justice and human rights; nowhere, however, is there any indication of thought given to the transferring over of a system which worked for Denmark into a remarkably different context.

The structure of this first document was very interesting and had a subtly familiar feel to it; as I read more I realized that it reminded me of a write-up of a scientific study. The document starts out with “summary” of the project (reminiscent of an abstract), breaks down the project description into categories, and walks through the reasoning behind and steps taken in each category. There is a “significant risks” paragraph reminiscent of a recognition of potential error in a scientific paper, and even several tables regarding subjects such as the budget for the projects and “Key economic data for Zimbabwe” (“Danish-Zimbabwaean”).

At first I didn’t notice the striking nature of the form of the essay, taking it as no surprise that the tone and overall feel of the paper would be formal. It makes sense to me that this document would be highly organized; there was, afterall, a lot of information to be discussed in this meeting two years ago—but I got the overwhelming impression from reading the document that Denmark’s involvement in Zimbabwe really was, in a way, a scientific study. The author(s) of the document seemed to have attempted to distill and quantify everything they could about the results they expected to see. Three whole pages are taken up by a rubric-like table with one column reading “outcome,” one “key results,” and one “indicators,” with outcomes such as “increased access to equitable and rights-based service delivery for children” (under the “Access to Justice” category), with “number of children with a diversion plan who avoid trial” under “selected outcomes” (“Danish-Zimbabwaean”). It strikes me as a very Western idea that every indicator of success can be quantified and exacted; that fail-safe statistics are always there to prove the success of such projects. But this approach raises a lot of doubt in my mind as to how the selection and use of only certain, quantifiable indicators—ones which will make for nice neat data points on a graph—could possibly generate a holistic view of the effects of the funding and projects Denmark supports. This need for quantified data in establishing a lens through which to view Zimbabwae is also made apparent in a table labeled “background facts” which include that of Zimbabwae’s rank of 163 out of 174 countries on the Transparency International Corruption Index, 174 being the most corrupt. I cannot help but wonder: who chose this fact to include in this document? Why is it important? What data went into the establishment of this index and its certification as “the truth?” Overall, the language used in this publication reinforces the opinion that this sterile, cut-and-dried “objectivity” can and should be applied to the context of Zimbabwe.

After I gained context of Denmark’s involvement in Zimbabwe, I looked at an article I found in NewsDay Zimbabwe online titled “Danish Minister Heads for Zimbabwe.” The facts of the paper include that the Minister of Trade is to visit the country for “high-level meetings,” visit sites of the projects and support of Danish funding, and dollar amounts of what Denmark has invested in the Denmark-Zimbabwe Development Partnership Program. When the language of the article is examined, all action is associated with Denmark, while only broad statements void of any detail are made about anything having to do with Zimbabwe. In the first sentence the author writes about how the “Nordic country moves to normalize relations with Zimbabwe,” establishing the former as the action taker and saying nothing about the latter. The article meanders on through details of where the Danish minister will go, while giving no specific names or details for the Zimbabwaeans he was to meet but referring to them only as “implementing partners” and “senior government officials.” Toward the end of the article, the author details how much Denmark has “availed,” what it has funded, and how it is “the largest contributor” to a fund supported by six other Western nations. The author says nothing explicitly to describe Zimbabwe, but rather lets it float vaguely as the backdrop to Denmark’s heroism. Zimbabwe is not presented as having any characteristics or specific names; if the reader had only information in this article to go off of, in fact the only impression they would have of Zimbabwe would be that it was a country in need of social, political and economic growth that receives funding from Denmark (“Danish”).

The second paper had a similar tendency to exclusively highlight the actions of Denmark. In this article, the aforementioned Danish Minister for Trade and Development announces a new approach for the achievement of gender equality “very much in line with the gender-based activities carried on by the Danish Embassy Office in Zimbabwe.” The Danish Embassy is the doer, and what is Zimbabwe? The location for the action of the Danes. As the article goes on to issues Denmark is addressing in Zimbabwe, the author employs words such as “enabling,” “raising,” “launch” and “supports” to characterize the former’s actions. Ironically, the words which imply the transferring of power seem to simply demonstrate Denmark’s use of its authority and power. The most unsatisfying sentence to me, however, was about how the new approach “showcase[s] Denmark’s continued commitment towards improving the rights of women and girls….” What about Zimbabwae’s commitment, or lack thereof? What reasons are there for the former or the latter? Like the previous article, the overwhelming impression given of Zimbabwe is of it sitting back and receiving all the benefits (as defined by Denmark; we do not know if Zimbabwaeans see them in the same way) of being supported by Denmark (“Denmark”).

Across the three documents pertaining to Zimbabwe’s partnership with Denmark, Zimbabwe consistently does nothing while Denmark swoops in with all of the solutions. Though the articles seem to be well-intentioned, overall their lack of characterization of the African country portrays it as passive and inactive while subtly giving the impression that the people they are presuming to help can be adequately represented by pre-determined measurements and numbers. The more articles such as these are circulated, the easier it is to understand why too often outsiders see Zimbabwe only as a country on the receiving end of help from Western powers.

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