The Big Five as dangerous as ever: German development cooperation, colonial-racist imagery, and civil society's response

Daniel Bendix with glokal e. V.;
Germany with glokal e. V members

At the end of April 2013, the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) launched a billboard advertising and internet campaign entitled "The Big Five!" The poster (see image 1 below) – displayed across Germany 3600 times – shows images of an elephant, a lion, a leopard, a rhinoceros and the silhouette of a buffalo. We see a map of Africa in the background. Short slogans are written next to each animal: "Protecting human rights – promoting democracy", "fighting poverty – fostering growth", "promoting education – creating opportunities", "safeguarding resources – sustainable economy", and "preserving biodiversity – visiting Kaza". Above the big heading "The Big Five!" we find a smaller heading stating, "The new German development cooperation". At the bottom of the poster lies a photo of the German Minister Dirk Niebel (Liberal Democratic Party) who is shown with a QR code and a question next to him stating: "Which animal are we looking for?" – asking the spectator to identify the anonymous animal shown as a white outline.

Did the creators of this advertisement have in mind that this animal, the African or Cape Buffalo, used to be (and still is) known as "Kaffernbüffel" in German? This translates to "kaffir buffalo" – "kaffir" being a derogatory, racist term used for Black South Africans during Apartheid, a term still in use today to dehumanize Black people (the word is derived from the Arabic term "kafir", which means "unbeliever"). Neither do we reckon that the people behind the campaign were looking for the answer: "the racist pig" – as was written by an unknown adbuster on the billboard shown below. Be that as it may, both buffalo and adbust bring us straight into the debate amongst German NGO and activist circles. As we will explicate below, this debate has been marked primarily by criticism of the advertisement's colonial-racist stereotypes, but at times also of the neo-colonial stance it conveys. In this essay, we trace the reactions by German civil society and augment the points of critique voiced thus far with a couple of additional problematic dimensions of the advertising campaign. Above all, however, we argue that we should be wary of reserving our criticism to racist imagery and crude neo-colonialism if this entails overlooking the neo-liberal daily grind of German "development" policy and the centrality of racism (as well as other forms of oppression) for the perpetuation of neo-liberal "development" policies.
Off for big-game hunting to this country called Africa...

A coalition of individuals and development NGOs – not generally at the forefront in the fight against racism and colonialism – wrote an open letter to the Minister criticising the poster, and stating that the poster "reinforces colonial, discursively conveyed patterns of thought" and called for an end to the campaign. Other NGOs and associations disseminated a press release and lamented the "discriminating depiction of Africa".

This campaign for 'the new German development cooperation' is disrespectful and absolutely unacceptable. The German government reduces a whole continent with more than 1 billion people to a national park for wild animals. It thus directly links up to the dichotomy constructed during colonialism of European 'culture' and 'civilisation' vs. African 'nature' and 'wilderness'. The ministry is obviously far from appreciating African people and cultures and from the 'partnership at eye level' it continues to postulate.

Concerted criticism of this billboard from civil society and in the media thus far has been concentrated on the slogan "The Big Five!" as a colonial term for big game hunting and on the imagery in as far as it uses animals to speak about Africa (e.g. Stielike, 2013). "The Big Five" refers to the five animals which were thought to be most dangerous and difficult to hunt by foot. Today, it is often used for the same five animals, but in the context of tourism: these are the animals (white, Western) tourists need to necessarily hunt down with their cameras. Studies on the representation of Africa in the German public have highlighted that a one-sided racist image prevails, which is disseminated via family socialisation, mass media, school books, films, advertising, and travel magazines/brochures (Arndt & Ofuatey-Alazard, 2011; Arndt, 2001; Gieseke & Bechhaus-Gerst, 2006; Ndumbe III., 2006; Poenicke, 2001). Other studies have particularly focused on development cooperation's contribution to this image through fair trade campaigns (Kiesel, 2013; Lemme, 2010; Ringwald, 2009) and billboard advertising (Kiesel & Bendix, 2010). Africa is commonly perceived as a homogenous entity, associated with backwardness, and reduced to "Sub-Saharan Africa".

Usually, the topics include war, catastrophes, AIDS, hunger, oppression of women, underdevelopment and dependency on aid from outside/the West.

Africa is mostly associated with negative phenomena, the "heart of darkness"-"white man's burden" couplet is never far. This is implicit in "The Big Five!" campaign, as Germany positions itself as the necessary player to help Africa get rid of its problems referenced by the five dimensions of Germany's activities. Yet, the imagery vis-à-vis Africa in Germany not only includes barbarity and negativity but also always the other side of the racist coin: Africa as close to nature, no - as nature per se. This exoticising dimension of anti-African racism is fulfilled by the choice of using animals on the billboard. Such imagery is not harmless and innocent.

Naturalising and infantilising societies and people in the Global South are fundamental for the perception that the Global North should develop them and, in practice, prevent an equitable international cooperation. [...] What is particularly pernicious about exoticising racism – in contrast to demonising racism – is that it allows to conceal structures of domination and violence, because it can be invoked that one merely expressed something positive. (Danielzik & Bendix, 2013, p. 37)

There is also a tangible connection between the images of Africa in Germany and the treatment of Black Germans, Afro-Germans and Africans and Black people living in Germany. Only recently a study has found a direct link between the portrayal of Africa in school books and racism amongst white German children and teachers vis-à-vis Black and African children in the classroom (Marmer, Marmer, Hitomi, & Sow, 2010). Consequently,
criticising the development ministry for the use of colonial-racist stereotypes is indispensable for tackling racism in the global context as well as within Germany.

The initiation of the Ministry's campaign needs to be situated and understood in the context of another event initiated by the BMZ: the German Development Day. On 25 May 2013, the German government as well as several development institutions and NGOs organised this day to promote the ideas of development cooperation amongst the German public. It took place in 16 cities and several other venues across Germany and cost at least three million Euro (excluding staff expenses). The German Development Day as well as "The Big Five!" campaign are in fact presumed to be part of Minister Niebel's personal election campaign (parliamentary elections are due in September 2013) (Jentzsch, 2013). Niebel's rule has been criticized as self-serving on various occasions: for example, since 2009 more than 40 key positions in his ministry have allegedly been allocated to members of his Liberal Democratic Party; and only recently, some staff members have disseminated sham departmental notes speaking of "developers of airflow" ("We produce hot air – join in") instead of the official slogan "developers for the future".

As it happened, the day of the German Development Day, 25 May, is also, first and foremost, "Africa day" – the annual commemoration of the founding of the Organisation of African Unity (O.A.U) in 1963, an organisation that is the predecessor of the African Union (AU). This year, incidentally, is the African Union's 50th anniversary. 50 years ago, leaders of 30 of the 32 independent African states signed a founding charter in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. On this day, celebrations are held in many African countries as well as in the Diaspora. The Afrika-Rat – a network of organisations, associations, initiatives and people of the African Diaspora in the federal states of Berlin and Brandenburg – pointed out the BMZ's choice of this day for their own event as a sign of impertinence.

In this year of all years, in which the 50 years of existence of African unity are celebrated, the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has decided to not put emphasis on the dignity of those Africans who were active in the liberation movements and in the development processes on the continent and in the Diaspora, but to celebrate itself and other actors imprudently.

The Afrika-Rat as well as supporters of its press release thus called for the minister's resignation in light of his disregard for African people. Such disregard for African agency and expertise was also evident in the programme of the German Development Day. The roles were clearly defined and distinguished along racist lines, which is why the headline of the article in one German newspaper read: "black artists and white experts." This newspaper reported that, for example, a Senegalese man present at the events said: "I am ashamed that my children have to witness this [...] since I have arrived, there were only German [and white] discussants on the podium and then you have Blacks and they make the music.

We would like to draw attention to a couple of colonial-racist aspects overlooked thus far in the reaction to this campaign. First of all, we would invite the readers to take a closer look at the way the African map is depicted on the billboard advertisement. Africa is once again reduced to "Sub-Saharan Africa" or to what is often referred to as "Black Africa" in German, as the top (as well as the bottom) is slightly cut off and the animals are invariably placed in the Sub-Saharan region. Frantz Fanon (1981) pointed out the functionality of creating a "black" Africa: "One divides Africa into a white and a black part. [...] On the one hand, one assures that it is part of the occidental culture. The Black Africa is characterised as a dull, brutal, uncivilised – a wild region" (p. 138). Blackening a particular part of Africa and whitening others as well as Europe serves two purposes: On the one hand, it perpetuates the myth of a white Europe that has allegedly only recently started losing its homogeneity. On the other hand, North Africa (as well as the "emerging country" South Africa) is awarded to the occident which – given that Greek "civilisation" was heavily influenced by North Africa – is a necessary move to uphold the idea of Europe's supremacy and Africa's inferiority.
(Bernal, 1987). Such hierarchy between the "West and the Rest" is central to the idea and practice of "development cooperation".

Also, thus far nobody seems to have noticed any significance in the colours used to paint Africa in the billboard: red, gold and green. These Pan-African colours are found on the national flags of many African nations and are inspired by the colours of the Ethiopian flag. These colours are widely referenced in Rastafarianism, where Red is said to signify the blood of martyrs, green the vegetation and beauty of Ethiopia, and gold the wealth of Africa (Murrell, Spencer, & McFarlane, 1998, p. 134). In this light, the fact that German development cooperation occupied 25 May as the day to celebrate the "white man's burden" of developing Africa and the Global South takes on a whole new dimension. The company which devised the campaign has thus far not explained its use of imagery, text and colours, but this can only be read as a deradicalising appropriation of African and African diasporic struggles for freedom from colonial oppression. The image below (Image 2), created by Mansour Ciss Kanakassy, is a reaction to the campaign and the attempt to stay true to that special day and highlight that African liberation (whether from colonial or "development aid's" oppressive relations) is not in the former colonisers' hands but has always come from Africans themselves (including women, to correct the male bias in this image). The points raised thus far underline the necessity to pay attention to, and stand up against, the presence of colonial-racist stereotypes in German "development aid". However, they do not yet adequately criticise the material relations and structures created and perpetuated by German development.

Image 2 by Mansour Ciss Kanakassy, Laboratoire Déberlinisation.xvi

...If you're environmentally conscious, please follow suit

The reactions to the BMZ's billboard and internet campaign "The Big Five!" are a necessary anti-racist and anti-colonial critique, but they seem to overlook the everyday neoliberal agenda of German "development" policy for which racism is incremental. Some of the criticisms have in fact raised economic dimensions and taken the content of the advertisement seriously. According to the Afrika-Rat, for example, the fact that Africans and
Africa are not portrayed as actors but as passive objects raises the question whether the BMZ is interested in cooperation or if it is not more about “the implementation of a neocolonial agenda through which Africa is kept in poverty and dependence”.\textsuperscript{xiii}

Here, we would like to take a closer look at the agenda suggested and articulated in the billboard advertising. One commentator reiterated the charge of neocolonialism,

What is new about the Germans wanting to 'fight poverty in Africa' and to 'secure resources' and foster their growth at the same time? That they are of the opinion that they can 'preserve biodiversity' through hunting and photo safaris? What is new about Germany wanting to export its ideas about 'democracy' and its models for 'education'? What is new about Europe talking about the 'protection of human rights', while denying African refugees that protection?\textsuperscript{xviii}

"Securing/safeguarding resources – sustainable economy" is a particularly ambivalent statement. It could be understood as meaning that German development aid supports African countries in protecting their resources for their own sake; however, it can also be perceived as referring to Germany's interest in securing access to resources on the African continent. The last German politician who connected Germany's policies abroad to securing resources was the former president Horst Köhler. He justified Germany's war in Afghanistan for the sake of economic interests, and consequently had to leave office. If the development ministry's statement had said "protecting resources", the charge of neocolonialism would be more difficult to make. Thus, let us take a closer look at the some of the other objectives, such as "sustainable economy" and "fighting poverty".

From the 1980s, German development policy has pushed for an economic re-orientation in line with neoliberal principles and has asserted such a policy via conditionality (Ziai, 2007). After 1998, under the Red-Green coalition government, German development policy has increasingly shifted to what is referred to as "global structural policy", which aims to promote an international policy environment conducive to "sustainable development". Since Minister Dirk Niebel of the Liberal Party took office in 2009, the BMZ has more and more emphasized cooperation with the (German and other countries') private sector. In this respect, the German ministry is quite frank and outspoken. In an interview with the leading German tabloid BILD, Dirk Niebel outlined his approach to development cooperation as follows,

If we pursue smart development policy, we raise money for Germany. With every Euro spent for development cooperation, two Euros flow back to us in the long run. [...] Through business contacts. It is by far cheaper to engage in trade with peaceful countries than to fight hostile ones.\textsuperscript{xx}

While neocolonial tendencies of direct exploitation and colonial-racist paternalism certainly hold sway in German development cooperation, Germany today seems more interested in "integrating" the Global South into a "free" market economy. "Development cooperation" is about transforming countries of the Global South – through "democratization", "education", "health care", legal reforms, environmental policy etc. – so that these countries may serve as places for German investments and as consumer markets. The following quote from an interview with a desk officer at the BMZ is evident of such logic. The interviewee was asked about Germany's interest in reproductive health and population policy in the Global South,

I think it just becomes clear that it [reproductive health and population policy, DB&glokal] is one building block to create functioning, long-term functioning societies. [...] So, here it is the case, we have an interest in stable countries, in stable partners, [...]. I mean the countries that function, where the people then also have purchasing power, that will in the long term also be of benefit to the former .. still export world champion.\textsuperscript{xx}

Such a position also aligns with recent tendencies in the German conservative-liberal coalition government to explicitly voice Germany’s self-interest in Development cooperation (German Federal Foreign Office, 2011; Kuhn, 2011). What is crucial, however, is that such economic rationality is intertwined with racism: Germany considers population growth in the
Global South as detrimental to "creating functioning societies" and links high fertility rates to backwardness and traditionality (Bendix, 2012).

Other policy suggestions evident on the billboard are similarly controversial, with one stating "saving biodiversity – visiting Kaza". As a footnote to Kaza, the bottom of the billboard explains: "'Kaza is the biggest national park on earth in Southern Africa.' The 'Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area', also known as Kaza, is situated in a region where the international borders of Namibia, Angola, Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe converge. The billboard thus encourages the German spectators to spend their next holiday in this national park – to bring back the Big Five on paper or as a jpeg image. This is of course a classist request that presumes that any German can naturally afford to go on a pricy holiday. It also arguably suggests that one can protect the environment by stepping into an airplane (the emissions for a return air flight from Berlin to Harare alone, for example, are more than three times as high as the annual carbon emissions in India per capita, and more than twice as high as what has been calculated as the "climate compatible annual emissions budget for one person"). Furthermore, conservation politics and national parks are often a colonial heritage and privilege the pleasure of tourists and the economic interests of national and international elites (Adams & Mulligan, 2003). For example, the Selous Game Reserve in South Tanzania, one of the largest faunal reserves of the world, was first designated a protected area in 1896 by the Governor of "German East Africa" Hermann von Wissmann and became a hunting reserve in 1905. The subsequent Maji Maji war against the German colonisers from 1905 until 1907 resulted into an appalling ecological disaster across southern Tanzania. These parts have not yet recovered from this trauma. Selous was expanded to the detriment of people's livelihood. Germans were to ban African hunting in South East Tanzania, since it was found to have caused the Maji Maji War. But the banning was for other reasons than those, since elite sports hunting paid more to the government coffers than African taxes. Over the years, Germany, through GTZ has been spending millions of money in conservation measures. These measures resulted into the harassing and beating of the poor men, women and children of Southern and Southern East Tanzania on the pretext that they were poachers and illegal arms owners in 1989. GTZ had devised a 'participatory' method of benefits sharing for the people around Selous – in terms of getting a share of a hunt once in a while. The Selous game reserve remains very important for elite hunting and it is quite profitable for the hunting companies that have blocks in the game reserve. (Chachage, 2006; cf. Kößler & Melber, 2004)

As Chandra-Milena Danielzik (2010) argues, international tourism policy as part of "development cooperation" is marked by the intertwining of colonial-racist and neoliberal economic rationalities. Thus, suggesting tourism as a panacea for "development" issues disregards the fact that tourism from the Global North to the Global South is historically and contemporarily based upon racialised cultural and economic exploitation of people in the Global South. Zooming into the policies suggested in the "The Big Five!" campaign thus brings to light how routine German neoliberal policies are intertwined with racism.

Partnership at neoliberal eye level?

As an alternative to the alleged German neo-colonial agenda evident in the "The Big Five!" advertisement, some commentators suggested that, the African continent does not need development aid but economic partners with whom it cooperates at eye level. It is time that the BMZ thoroughly reconsiders its principles of cooperation with Africa and adapts to the zeitgeist. Yet, is "the zeitgeist" not about asserting a neoliberal agenda worldwide? Current German "development" policy takes the Ministry's addendum "Economic Cooperation and Development" seriously. This seems to be much harder to scandalize than obvious racism.
and neocolonial aspirations. Yet if we reserve our criticism to colonial-racist stereotypes and crude neocolonialism, we forget that we are in the midst of the "neoliberal revolution", in which "neoliberal ideas, policies and strategies are incrementally gaining ground globally, re-defining the political, social and economic models and the governing strategies, and setting the pace" (Hall, 2011, p. 708). To aspire to partnership between Germany/the West and Africa at neoliberal eye level is neither desirable nor possible: capitalism necessary means exploitation by building on and (re-)producing racist, sexist, ableist etc. divisions and hierarchies amongst people. A scrutiny of development policy needs to incorporate a critique of racism (both within Germany and in Germany's North-South relations) as well as capitalism – and what is most needed: a critique of the intertwining of different systems of oppression as well as suggestions for their dismantlement. In this light, we need to be careful not to remain on the level of criticising colonial-racist picture language if this means overlooking how the fundamentally neoliberal- and capital-friendly policies of Germany's development ministry rest upon and perpetuate racism.

References


GTZ. (2010). Press release: German Development Cooperation with Tanzania on a glance (accessed through German Development professional).


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1 Many thanks to Timo Kiesel, Chandra-Milena Danielzik, Kristina Kontzi, Juliane Juergensohn, Mpaki Molapo and an anonymous reviewer for the very helpful comments, suggestions, improvements, and corrections.


4 All translations are our own.


6 The "scientific" term of Syncerus caffer also lives on and may not be changed according to the international regulations of biological nomenclature.

7 http://epizberlin.de/download/Ueber_EPIZ/Brief_Plakat_Big_Five.pdf, 28.05.2013. As glokal e.V., we also signed this open letter.


9 For more reactions see: http://www.berlin-postkolonial.de/cms/, 28.05.2013.


16 http://www.berlin-postkolonial.de/cms/, 03.05.2013.

17 http://www.africa-rat.org/Presse/PM_Afrikatag_BMZ-1.pdf, 29.05.2013.


Interview with a desk officer responsible for the field of education, health, population policy at BMZ headquarters, January 15, 2010.

For example, the official German press release regarding the 2010 visit of Dirk Niebel to Tanzania stated the following: "We will continue to work together in order to achieve our common goal: To fight the still widespread poverty in this country. The high population growth in Tanzania of 2.9% threatens to undermine our joint efforts." (GTZ, 2010)

https://www.atmosfair.de/, 29.05.2013.

The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for Technical Cooperation, GTZ) was a private-law enterprise primarily commissioned to implement German "technical cooperation" on behalf of BMZ. At the beginning of 2011, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation, GIZ) was formed by merging GTZ, the German Development Service (DED) which deployed development workers on behalf of BMZ, and InWEnt (Capacity Building International) which was active in "human resource" development and training.

http://www.afrika-rat.org/Presse/PM_Afrikatag_BMZ-1.pdf, 29.05.2013.