

Global expert : the religion of words

Autor(en): **Kalaora, Bernard**

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Global Expert: the Religion of Words ¹

Bernard Kalaora, Paris

1 Expertise reconfigured: a speech act

Scientific expertise as it developed in France from the 19th century onwards was intended essentially to facilitate State decision-making by calling on the appropriate knowledge, particularly statistics. The function of experts was closely associated with the functions of authority and power, and their activities were confined for the most part to ministerial departments. At that time, there was a strict separation between research organisations and the major public bodies from which most of the experts were recruited. The classic form of expertise, whose proximity to political power gave it a national and statist character, was invisible and accorded little attention by public opinion. It remained confined to central government and to certain institutions, such as the judicial system.

In contemporary societies, there has been a shift in the status of expertise as a result of its extensive redeployment at both the national and international levels. Partly as a consequence of the environmental crisis and the rise to prominence of the notion of sustainable development in international institutions, the scientific expert has come to play a crucially important role in our social and political lives. As HANS-GEORG GADAMER says, «the expert has to a certain extent become the most sought-after personality, and in any case the one that is decisive» (GADAMER 1996).

The importance of the role played by experts is not so much a sign of the increasing rationalisation of decision-making as a product of growing uncertainty caused by the complexity of problems and situations, the complication of our administrative, industrial, commercial and private lives, which make decisions difficult. In everyday language, the expert is the person reputed to have acquired complete knowledge in a particular sphere, and in the traditional Weberian schema there is a strict separation between the scientist and the politician: the politician decides in accordance with his soul and conscience, while the scientist produces the knowledge required to take a decision. The process of expert evaluation is part of a stabilised framework, in which each element has its place: the politician's responsibility, the

scientist's competence, the order of values and that of facts. In a society regarded as vulnerable in the light of recent anxieties linked to world environmental crises, the adverse effects of technological and economic development impact on the perception of science and its contribution to social progress. In this context, the provision of expertise is no longer based solely on the validity of knowledge and the scientific backing it gives to a decision but on its ability to take account of uncertainties and to write the script for an uncertain future.

It is not so much a question of overcoming the risks as of circumventing or avoiding them by anticipating them and adopting an attitude of prudence. Against this background, it is no longer solely recognised and certified scientific facts that are important to public decision-makers, but also probabilities, hypotheses, doubts, values - in a word, the process of research and construction itself. The expert is no longer necessarily the one who can speak with authority but the one who must also, if required, reveal his doubts, understand and listen to those with whom he is speaking, in short, be is the one who communicates. In this sense, the provision of expertise ceases to be an act of truth and becomes an act of language. It now involves working with and on language in such a way as to renew, regenerate and extend the conditions of exchange and the field of signification, to make language burst through its institutional, disciplinary or geographical limits. Thus, expertise as constructed today is indissociable from an ethic of communication and debate.

The expert is no longer the quintessence of the scientist, nor even of the researcher or teacher; it falls to him to mediate, through language, between the scientific culture of modernity and its social formulations in the course of everyday living. He is the one who intercedes between science and social and political practice. It has, as a result, become impossible to separate expertise from the decisional and political dynamic, from its relationship to values and the permanent process of negotiation surrounding them, since environmental problems are new and complex, located at the junction of several disciplines and unfolding in a context that can be both hotly debated and clouded by uncertainty. Language and expertise are closely linked, particularly in the environmental sphere, which is the locus *par excellence* of semantic and rhetorical invention. This is illustrated, for example, by the notion of sustainable development and the multiple interpretations thereof.

Caught up in a linguistic and decisional dynamic, scientific expertise has tended to enter into contractual relationships and to claim its autonomy from authority and power; in doing so, it has acquired social and even media visibility, since it is an object of communication and

¹ A slightly altered French version of this paper appeared in the *Revue d'Ethnologie Française* in December of 1999. This issue will be wholly given over to the topic of «the words used by institutions», which was the theme of one of the LAIOS seminars.

publicity, in the sense of being opened up to debate. This claiming of autonomy has been accompanied by a dissemination of expertise, by its relocation in new geographical and semantic territories. Expertise has become an exchange value, particularly in the environmental sphere, where the problems have a cross-border dimension. The result is the emergence of an international scientific community and new institutions charged with promoting sustainable development that call on experts as a matter of course and are expected to improve the ability of institutions, decision-makers and scientists to manage and utilise natural resources in such a way as to safeguard the future and strike a balance between conservation and development. The ideal-typical figure in environmental expertise is no longer the Counsellor to the Prince but the Global Expert, commissioned by international institutions (such as UNEP, World Bank, UNESCO, United Nations etc.).

New beneficiaries or seekers of expert evaluations are emerging, thereby contributing to both its inflationary expansion and its generalisation. This has created the impression in certain quarters that expertise knows no limits, both in terms of its image and its geographical expansion. In our world, it has become compulsive, an instinctive and magical appeal to the collective anxiety produced by our inability to accept the present or the future, because or in spite of the accumulation of knowledge and technologies at our disposal. There are various types of beneficiaries of expertise, and the range is much broader now than it was in the past: public authorities at the national level (central and local government), European institutions, institutions in developing countries, international organisations and NGOs, private and service companies.

These changes in the experts' sphere of operations have gone hand in hand with a redefinition of the relationship between expert and commissioning body. All configurations seem possible between experts commissioned by institutions, individual experts working on their own account, collective or individual expert evaluations, provision of expertise at the local, national or, international level, etc.

2 The globalisation of expertise: semantics in power

The BRUNDTLAND Report, a real Bible of sustainable development, was the act that inaugurated a period in which things were never to be the same again. The concept of sustainable development that appears in the World Commission report «Our Common Future» (BRUNDTLAND 1987) is the result of an inquiry that had begun in 1983 into «the paths of human progress which meet the needs and aspiration of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their needs».

Unlike the notion of development, which is fixed and stable, that of sustainable development introduces movement. The notion of sustainable development is structured around two axes, one horizontal (the present), the other vertical (the future). It can be interpreted as the expression of a three-dimensional system comprising the past (the planetary ecosystem, heir to more than 4.5 billion years of history), the present (the relationship between the ecosystem and the economic and social dimensions of life today) and the future (the desire not to compromise future needs).

Thus, the temporal dimension lies at the heart of the concept. However, time is no longer defined on the level of a territory; we are dealing rather with a definition of time on the planetary level which incorporates the implications of our actions and forecasts of possible futures. Thus the forward-looking aspect lies at the heart of the problem. Nevertheless, this concept which brings together economics, ethics and history, lies within the liberal tradition, since it implies recognition of the market as a regulatory mechanism and minimises the role of the State. At the same time it puts forward a moral principle, namely that of responsibility towards future generations.

In the wake of the BRUNDTLAND Report, international organisations, specifically the World Bank, armed with a doctrine and a conceptual tool and surrounded by a cluster of experts from various disciplines, were to go into the field in order to set up projects and programmes intended to promote sustainable development and the integrated management of non-renewable resources and fragile spaces.

3 Global Expert: the launching of semantics

3.1 Creating coherence

The World Bank was to play a key role by entrusting the implementation of its programmes to executive agencies on the ground. In his capacity as a «social scientist», to use the official term, the present author has himself been called upon to provide expertise for projects focusing on the integrated management and sustainable development of coastal zones.

The term «integrated management» was introduced in 1987 by the OECD in the wake of the problems raised by the notion of sustainable development and in response to the recognition of global environmental problems (climatic change, pollution of the oceans, etc.). The notion of the integrated management of coastal zones (IMCZ) (see Fig. 1) was proposed by OECD experts as a preferable alternative to the traditional notion of the protection of coastal zones. The OECD in 1987 was a hotbed of ideas, a veritable production line for conceptual propositions that in no way committed their authors since they were not commissioned to put them into practice. A few years later, in 1992, the

OECD drew up recommendations for its member states in the form of a methodological guide, and more than 500 000 copies of a circular letter were distributed. The World Bank, the UNDP, the UNEP, the GEF (Global Environment Facility) and the FFEM (Fonds Français pour l'Environnement Mondial), to name only the most important institutions, were to put into practice the proposals put forward initially by the OECD for the harmonisation and integration of policies on coastal zones in accordance with a «bottom-up» approach. Several million dollars were to be provided to fund projects and programmes at national, regional and local levels. From this perspective, the «social-scientist» acts less in his or her capacity as a specialist in the social sphere, in social demand, for example, than as an expert in the procedures and processes of decision-making (governance, development of grass-roots initiatives, etc.). Knowledge is defined not as the distancing of social

processes but rather as a reflexive process located in the midst of social processes. The social scientist, irrespective of whether he or she is a sociologist, anthropologist or social psychologist, operates at the interface between the scientific, market, political, ecological and domestic spheres (BOLTANSKI 1987), in a relationship of permanent tension and under an obligation to use a multi-disciplinary approach and to act as mediator. The objective goes beyond the social sphere, and amounts to nothing less than an attempt to manage coastal zones in a sustainable way through the use of real or virtual procedures intended to break down the barriers between notions, practices and uses and to establish a consensus on the future of natural resources.

The expert's role in this process is to bring coherence to the resource-population-environment-development nexus. Taking an actual management situation as a starting point, he or she is supposed to assist the community in



Fig. 1: L'estuaire de la Seine (France)
Seine Estuary (France)
Seinemündung (Frankreich)

Source: OLIVIER MÉRIEL,
Conservatoire du Littoral et
Région Haute-Normandie (France)

altering the state of their environment or of a resource in order to make it more sustainable and therefore transmissible to succeeding generations in the near or distant future. The expert is commissioned to take a pragmatic approach with a view to establishing a system of «coherent management» for the coastal environment, thereby harmonising public policies and making the uses of that environment more compatible with each other. In other words, the expert is supposed to create social and cultural frameworks likely to foster mediation and agreement. His/her actions take place at the point where several dimensions meet: the territory in question, its ecological, economic and socio-political context and social aspirations. He or she practises what might be described as eco-socio-systemic and anthropological engineering.

The role of the IMCZ expert goes beyond the provision of a single, self-contained service, defined solely in terms of his/her own competences. The global expert is required to abide by a pre-defined framework and to internalise the organisational and cognitive constraints that structure a programme that is part of a collective process. On the organisational level, the executive agencies established by international organisations have national information centres, known as «focal points», which are obligatory stopping-off places for those seeking to gather data and gather information. The territorial focal points provide a link between international organisations and nation states, between regional and international experts and between decision-makers and local populations. They act as channels of communication and monitoring posts, from where checks can be made on the relevance of programmes and their suitability for local conditions and existing constraints.

Structuring expertise in this way makes it possible to establish a «top-down and bottom-up» management regime with various levels of territorialisation (local, regional, national and international). On the conceptual level, the terms of reference for each expert are specific to his or her level of competence.

These terms of reference define the parameters of his actions. They are precise yet open, thereby preventing the expert from becoming locked into his area of specialisation and making him more receptive to negotiation. A biologist must be able, on the basis of his findings and the solutions, to put forward a national legal framework or even to devise public policies. The «social scientist», for his part, will have to have skills as both a naturalist and a sociologist and be able to play a part in environmental planning. The provision of expertise produces a new »priesthood«, the global expert. To become an expert entails adopting a mode of thinking specific to the international organisations that shape ways of seeing, speaking and acting. The purpose of international forums is in part to create new languages and to make them into instruments of action. The provision of expertise is based on a belief in the actual power of a

vocabulary to change situations and to modify behaviour. The words specific to expertise, such as consultation, negotiation, contractuality, sustainability, equity, agreement, community, governance, relevance, performance, iterativeness, strategy, consensus, etc., have the particular quality of being communicable in different languages and of lending themselves to discussion and dialogue. The multi-dimensional nature of their meanings make them the object of negotiations among experts, resulting in the adoption of the meaning best suited to a particular situation. These words are characterised by their pliability, flexibility and adaptability.

Use of them is reproducible, and by virtue of their iterativeness, they circulate and spread through all spheres of society. The first task that falls to the expert is to appropriate these words and to adhere to the principles and values underlying the integrated management of coastal zones. These principles constitute a mixture of instrumental and normative propositions: multi-sectoral approach, balance between the needs of conservation and development, participation of all actors in all stages of the IMCZ process, actions with an immediate and visible result combined with longer-term actions, use of a mix of regulatory and non-regulatory tools, a mode of governance based on a dual viewpoint: from central government to groups of local actors. All those involved have to adhere to them.

The other requirement is that the expert should agree to be a full member of a working group made up of individuals with very different geographical and intellectual trajectories. Within a short period of time (between ten and twenty days), the experts have to reach agreement, transcending their cultural and disciplinary differences in order to hammer out a common framework for action. To this end, the participants in this experiment are invited to provide biographical notes on their own particular disciplines that will be discussed by each of them. This whole exercise helps to create a group culture that will, in turn, produce a programme that emerges out of a collective consensus finding process rather than being based solely on individual skills. The expert is defined less by his knowledge than by his ability to negotiate it with others, with the relationship to the other being an essential precondition for the success of the whole enterprise. In the same spirit, the alternation between individual and collective work gives a certain rhythm to the course of the project. The writing of the report is a collective process, requiring numerous phases of discussion and restitution. These working practices are very different from those usually adopted by academic researchers. This is why the choice of experts is based less on criteria of status and academic competence than on a recognised ability to become part of a decision-making dynamic and an aptitude for negotiation.

4 Adventure and interaction as the principles underlying the construction of knowledge

4.1 Adventure

Uncertainty and adventure are the basic constituents in the construction of knowledge over the course of an expert evaluation. The first rule is not only to accept other forms of knowledge but also to come to terms or even cooperate with them. Thus, depending on the arrangement of the various elements in a project, a «social scientist» may turn himself into an ecologist, biologist, an economic anthropologist or a legal expert, and the converse holds as well. Secondly, he has to come to terms with the terrain, his knowledge of which is necessarily imperfect given the time allocated for the project (which varies between several days and one month for individual experts), even if he has recourse to an impressive and often unusable quantity of memoranda and information. All the characteristics of adventure are present: the importance of improvisation, a vague understanding of situations, the perfunctory nature of the actors' knowledge.

The expert has to put doubt and ignorance to one side and not wait until he has fully mastered the brief before he acts. He is operating in an uncertain world with as yet indeterminate objectives that he hopes will become clearer over the course of the project. His success depends on his skilfulness in transforming uncertainties into opportunities for action. In the case of IMCZ, for example, there is no model that can be used to lock the behaviour of the social actors and of local populations into a theoretical framework. Other aptitudes will be required, including a willingness to be learning permanently on the ground as observations are made and actions taken. To proceed in this way requires that the expert agrees to operate in an uncertain world, that he has a taste for experimentation and risk-taking and that he has a highly developed sense of curiosity: he has to watch, listen and act.

4.2 Belief

The problem of integration, of the search for overall coherence between policies, management and development, is a dominant question that arises as soon as the environment becomes the focus of attention. This is hardly surprising: one of the core elements of the environmental problem is the vital link between man and nature. A moral obligation is assigned to these relational systems. Paying due respect to the vocabulary of sustainable management, it might be said that the whole purpose of environmental management is to lead each individual, each institution and each organisation to act in accordance with the good of the community as a whole, which is perceived as being inextricably linked with the fate of its natural environment. Thus, integration not only has a technical and scientific resonance, but also lies within the ethic of conviction and responsi-

bility characteristic of the Protestant ideology.

A sort of moral obligation hovers over this notion of integration, as it does over that of sustainable development. It can be formulated as follows:

- identity of the species, its fate on the planet
- taking account of the whole. Individualism, sectional interests and particularism are counteracted by invoking the notion of a universal community for which each individual has his share of responsibility. Sustainable action must arise out of an acknowledgement of all the factors contributing to the expression and unity of the whole.
- communication and listening as basic tools.

5 The language of the expert

The language of the expert might be described as neutral speech. The terms used have little emotional or affective power but, on the other hand, considerable instrumental and functional value. Technicity, communication, management, guardianship and governance are words that wittingly avoid any ideological or political allusion. Managerial rhetoric makes of the firm a model to be imitated in all circumstances and contexts. This neutralisation is intended to homogenise political landscapes and configurations. IMCZ must be applicable throughout the world, in developing and industrialised countries, and affect regions with such diverse modes of government as those of Albania, Greece or even Mauritius and the Comoros, to take some extreme examples.

For the sake of efficiency, and out of a desire to spread sustainable development throughout the world, experts have to behave as if market democracy were a reality virtually everywhere and authoritarian regimes were consequently mere epiphenomena on the point of extinction. To attach too much importance to national particularisms would be to strengthen the obstacles and impediments to the diffusion of a model of management and development considered to be the best one for the human race. Concepts susceptible of being used to pass value judgements on modes of government do nothing to further the idea for which victory is sought, namely universal communication. Emphasis is placed rather on common objectives that are self-evident and on which there can be no open disagreement:

- cognitive democracy, based on reflexivity. Democracy is enhanced by the deliberations of experts, the fundamental characteristics of which are communication and transparency. The environment contributes to the rise of cognitive democracy since the notion of sustainable development calls for a pragmatic mode of decision-making that offers considerable scope for negotiation, for dialogue between decision-makers, actors on the ground, scientists and public opinion. In this context, the expert's role is less to provide ready-

made solutions than to contribute to a collaborative approach and to define the terms of the dialogue that make it possible to negotiate a compromise between interests and values.

- The market as the best mode of regulation. This recognition of the market is offset by a concern to mitigate its effects when the supply of a product or service is accompanied by negative externalities that are not taken into account in the transaction between supplier and buyer. In this situation, the expert becomes a decoder of negative externalities.
- The right of each individual to protection and to the environment. This notion, like that of human rights, is unquestionable.

These various elements of the expert's neutral language can be interpreted as so many routine discourses, ways of creating a frame of reference and tools for observation that facilitate discussion of the same objects despite

socio-cultural and political differences. In the light of these minimal agreements, which open up a sphere of problems rather than providing ready-made solutions, the expert is led to reformulate the underlying principles of public action (including the institutional frameworks) and to produce new values by working to justify and legitimate sustainable development.

6 Charming with words

The semantic regime thus put in place differs from one based on constraint and authority. The aim is not, as it is in the classic paradigm of «governmentality», to «keep watch over and to punish» but rather to charm in order to persuade. The procedures of persuasion are no longer the same. What is propagated are the notions of participation, transaction, transfer, exchange, listening, even empathy. Local populations, indigenous peoples are no longer to be subjugated. On the contrary, what is required now is to work in concert with them, taking local knowledge as a starting point for restoring the conditions for their survival. Local populations have to be helped to resolve the conflicts surrounding the exploitation and appropriation of resources; to that end, their motivations have to be understood, legislation has to be based on local customs, the role of women in economic life and not merely the social sphere has to be recognised, etc. Applied anthropology is called on to assist in the decision-making process.

In this concept, indeed, indigenous knowledge becomes a tool for the sustainable management of development, a management aid, and the local populations themselves are partners and experts, since they show us the ways in which their territory can be sustainably managed. One of the objectives of the integrated management of coastal zones, for example, is to construct local indicators of coastal development based on the local population's own understanding of the marine ecosystem, on their analysis of the behaviour of fish populations, on the use of taxonomies to describe and classify species, etc. Efforts are made to combine empirical data gathered on the ground with scientific data by placing them on the same level and giving them equal value. The recommendation on all fronts is to allow local communities free expression (particularly for women, whose importance has suddenly been discovered) in order to help them stand up to officialdom and to communicate with the traditional mass media. To this end, local radio stations, community-based forms of expression and forums for debate and controversy are encouraged. The aim here is to develop channels of communication for local bodies of knowledge that might hold their own against established bodies of scientific knowledge. The notion of governance that has emerged from international forums seems to be a response to this desire for generalised communication and a non-hierarchical,

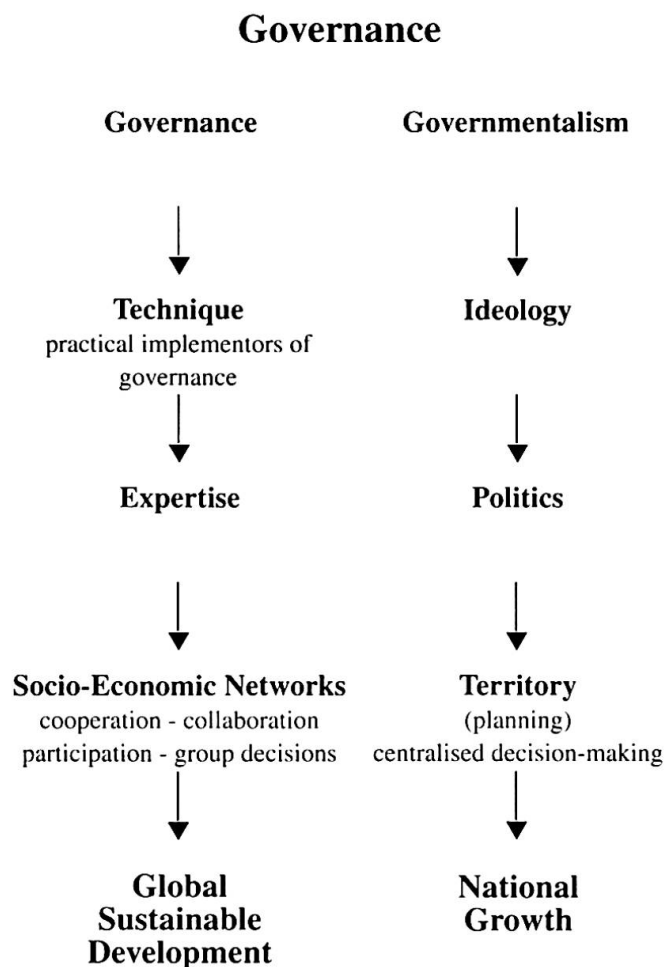


Fig. 2: The distinction between Governance and Governmentalism

Ce qui distingue la gouvernance

de la gouvernementalité

Der Unterschied zwischen Verwaltung und Regierung

convivial, interactive, cooperative mode of administration (see Fig. 2). In this sense, indeed, governance becomes a sort of virtual world of the future, akin to «cyberspace», in which the capacity for self-management and government depends on the linking of different sites in a multidimensional space. In this respect, it is a notion that falls within the modern field of communications rather than the traditional political space, emerging in the form of a vast range of institutions, networks, directives, regulations, norms and customs that may be political, social, administrative, public, private, formal or informal in nature.

Governance is a set of institutional arrangements that include governmental and non-governmental organisations and the legislative framework, as well as the social traditions and norms of local populations (see Fig. 2). Its hybrid, polysemic nature means that it is a notion that everyone can relate to. There is something in it for everyone. The experts, for their part, have the task of making it effective by reinforcing, at all levels of the society and territory in question, the capacity for self-government and communication, which depends in part on the ability to anticipate risks and environmental crises.

This capacity to govern is no longer a function of authority or of institutional legitimacy but rather of the degree of proximity to local populations, who are also invited to take part in the decision-making processes. This is far removed from the administrative or academic model of «governmentality». In this system, the State no longer governs but encourages, interacts, stimulates or, conversely, reacts or restrains by taking various measures and making use of its network of influence. This form of governance is all the more appealing since it claims to be participatory, responsible and democratic. The current trend towards the adjustment and increased efficiency of the State and local government in Western and, more particularly, Anglo-Saxon, countries has its roots in this approach. The structural adjustment programmes put in place by international organisations have encouraged the dissemination and transposition of institutional reforms of this kind in the Southern countries. In the name of efficient decision-making, the method of governance advocated by international organisation seems better able than more traditional, hierarchical forms to respond to the complexity of problems and the plurality of public and private participants in the decision-making process. In view of the uncertainties and risks to which the world faces, decision-making requires greater interaction between the State and society and horizontal coordination among a multiplicity of social agents.

Governance can be regarded as a new ethic for world capitalism based on demands for participation, autonomy and careful use of available resources. It is undoubtedly no coincidence that the notion has emerged in modern countries with Protestant traditions. This form

of governance, which is well-suited to decision-making at local and global levels, and for which experts are the semantic vectors, proves to be more problematic at the level of the State. There, the objective of the «community of decision-makers» is to resolve sectoral, spatially specific problems by taking account of the interests of society as a whole.

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Abstract: Global Expert: the Religion of Words

In the BRUNDTLAND report, certain notions such as «sustainable development», «ecodevelopment», «integrated development» shine forth like beacons and have since been taken up by international organisations. Intended originally for politicians and administrators, these expressions have now become part of the vocabulary of experts and scientists. Starting from situations in which expertise in the integrated management of coastal zones has been provided in an international context, the process is described of expert evaluation, the semantics used, the know-how exploited to target practices towards «sustainable management» of the environment.

Résumé: Global Expert: la religion des mots

Depuis le rapport BRUNDTLAND, certaines notions telles le développement durable, l'éco-développement et la gestion intégrés, font florès et sont repris de manière récurrente par les organismes internationaux. Au départ destinées au monde politique et administratif, ces ex-

pressions appartiennent au vocabulaire des experts et des scientifiques. A partir de situations d'expertise de gestion intégrée des zones côtières nous décrivons de la manière la plus fine le processus d'expertise, les sémantiques utilisées, les compétences mobilisées pour orienter les pratiques vers une «gestion durable» du milieu. Ce diagnostic clinique amènera à se poser la question du rôle de l'expert et de sa fonction dans un contexte international.

Zusammenfassung:

Der Globale Experte: Die Religion der Werte

Seit dem BRUNDTLAND-Bericht haben Begriffe wie «Nachhaltige Entwicklung», «Öko-Entwicklung» oder «integrierte Entwicklung» Furore gemacht und sind wiederholt von internationalen Organisationen aufgegriffen worden. Ursprünglich waren diese Begriffe für die Welt der Politik und der Verwaltung gedacht, doch sind sie inzwischen Teil des Vokabulars von Experten und Wissenschaftlern geworden. Im vorliegenden Text werden anhand von Expertisen im integrierten Management in Küstengebieten folgende Punkte detailliert beschrieben: der Prozess der Experten-Begutachtung sowie der Sprachgebrauch und das Fachwissen, das aktiviert wurde, um die Praktiker zu einem «Nachhaltigen Management» hinzuführen. Diese klinische Diagnose ermöglicht es, die Frage nach der Rolle von Experten und ihrer Funktion im internationalen Kontext zu stellen.

Bernard Kalaora, Conseiller scientifique du Conservatoire du littoral – INRA, 36 quai d'Austerlitz, F-75013 Paris.

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