The dual model of vocational training – a promising practice for transformative TVET?

1 ABSTRACT

In Austria, the dual model of vocational training constitutes a significant part of the national TVET system. It refers to the traditional form of apprenticeship of simultaneous company-based training and formal education in vocational schools, whereby usually 80% of training takes place in the company.

It is assumed that low youth unemployment rates in the German speaking countries are, at least partially, due to the dual model of vocational training. Consequently, international interest in this model has grown substantially. In Austria, government and private business alike have started to consider exporting the dual model. Austrian development cooperation has opened up a funding scheme for companies engaging in TVET activities in developing and transition countries including transfer of the dual model.

Can the dual model offer any promising pathways to a transformative vision of TVET? As a traditional form of work-based learning with high social status it might be an effective practice to strengthen the relevance, poverty-impact and overall appreciation of TVET. At least this is assumed by its advocates.

My paper is based on ongoing research into current transfer activities of the dual model from Austria to developing countries. It attempts to analyze whether and how these activities match the vision of transformative TVET in a social justice approach. It then reflects on possible consequences of transferring a model, which is rooted in a specific historically determined form of organization of labour, to substantially different social contexts.

2 INTRODUCTION

The dual system of apprenticeship, a traditional form of TVET in Austria and other German speaking countries, is perceived as a demand-driven and efficient TVET model which substantially
contributes to employment, income and productivity. In fact, youth employment rates and economic indicators reach relatively high scores in the German speaking countries. Consequently, interest in this TVET model has been growing internationally. In addition, Austrian enterprises increasingly seek to establish the dual system of apprenticeship at their establishments abroad for their own workforce requirements. This double dynamic has led to an increasing trend to transfer the Austrian dual system to other countries, including to a number of developing and transition countries.

This paper examines the question whether the dual system can be a valuable contribution to transformative TVET in a social justice perspective. It argues that the system’s socioeconomic specificities have to be recognized since they severely limit its transferability. The system’s underlying social contract should serve to inspire TVET policies in other countries rather than transferring the system as a whole.

The paper is based on a recent study on the transfer of the Austrian dual system of apprenticeship to developing and transition countries (Langthaler 2015). Main findings include the key role played by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) in Austrian transfer activities. This is due to the fact that ADC currently offers the main funding source for private business willing to do vocational training in developing and transition countries. While transfer activities respond well to the development criteria set out by ADC, a number of open questions remain. These include sustainability of activities and their systemic impact. From a wider developmental perspective, the economic bias of both policy approaches as well as prevailing concepts is remarkable. This goes to the detriment of educational considerations such as learners’ rights and a more human centered notion of vocational education.

In a first section, this paper briefly sets out the theoretical framework it is based upon. It then goes on to elaborate on the dual system’s particularities and its transferability from a conceptual as well as practice oriented perspective. The third section discusses the findings of the above mentioned study. The conclusion summarizes the paper’s main arguments.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of transformative TVET stems from the Shanghai Consensus of 2012 (UNESCO 2012) and essentially gravitates around the notions of lifelong learning, innovation, sustainability and education for well-being. Until date, the new concept appears to be rather vague, both theoretically and with regard to policies and practices.

For the purposes of this paper, theoretical support is therefore sought in a number of approaches sharing a critical stance towards the human capital orthodoxy, which has traditionally dominated the TVET debate. Political economy approaches analyzing globalisation processes and their impact on education (cf. Dale 1999, 2000, 2005, Avis 2012, Robertson 2009) as well as the political economy of skills (cf. Brown et al 2011, Lauder et al 2012, Allais 2012) are of interest here. These approaches question dominant paradigms such as the knowledge economy and its allegedly increasing demand for highly skilled workforce. In contrast to this paradigm, the above mentioned approaches emphasize wide spread precarization of the highly skilled as well as de-skilling processes linked to new technologies.
As for the general role of TVET in society, political economy approaches are critical of the widespread assumption that employment creation directly results from the supply of skills. In contrast, job creation cannot be understood as they sole responsibility of TVET, but depends on the interaction of economic, social, labour market and education policies.

In addition, political economy approaches place recent restructurings in the TVET sectors such as National Qualifications Frameworks in the wider context of neoliberal public administration reforms and commoditization processes in the education and TVET sectors. Against this background, claims to enhance TVET’s relevance for the world of work by diversifying providers and patterns of provision – as legitimate as they may be in themselves – have to be analyzed as to whose interests they serve.

This points to another theoretical approach this paper refers to, namely the recent discussion on a more human centred notion of TVET. A number of academics suggest Sen’s capabilities approach to be helpful in this regard (cf. McGrath 2012, Powell and McGrath 2014). In contrast to the ‘productivist’ orthodoxy of skills provision supposedly leading to employability, this approach makes those opportunities and capabilities visible that are required to ensure that skills can make a difference in peoples’ lives. In this perspective, agency and learners’ rights acquire centrality.

While there is an inherent tension between structuralist approaches and those emphasizing agency, both offer important contributions for the conceptual debate around the notion of transformative TVET. Based on their analytical work, this paper takes a normative stance in arguing that transformations of and by TVET should be informed by a social justice perspective. Consequently, the categories used in this paper to analyze the transfer of the dual system are inspired by a notion of social justice combining both structural and rights-based considerations.

4 THE DUAL SYSTEM OF APPRENTICESHIP

4.1 Functioning, strengths and weaknesses of the Austrian dual system

The dual system of apprenticeship in the German speaking countries is highly reputable for its perceived relevance and quality in terms of skills training. Unlike most TVET models, it consists of a concomitant training scheme based on 80% in-company training and 20% instruction in vocational schools. Adolescents can enter an apprenticeship after nine years of compulsory schooling. Apprenticeships are covered by special job contracts between the apprentice and the company. They mostly last three years and end with an officially recognized leave-examination.

The governance structure of the dual system is complex since it is based on close cooperation of different institutions and interest groups. In Austria, it involves the Ministries of Economy and Education, the Economic Chamber and the Chamber of Labour as well as regional governing bodies.

Contrary to many other countries, TVET has a high reputation in Austria. After completion of compulsory schooling, 80% of the age group is trained in initial vocational education. 40% of adolescents choose a TVET school or college, and another 40% an apprenticeship.

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1 For an overview of the Austrian dual system of apprenticeship see Federal Ministry of Economy, Family and Youth (2012).
Graduated apprentices are assumed to have good chances on the labour markets and to contribute to economic productivity thanks to high levels of skills. However, a number of academics question these assumptions as too simplistic. Lassnigg (2012 and 2013) draws on a more complex picture to explain Austria’s low level of youth unemployment. The strong system of full time vocational schools, a good level of economic performance and an active labour market policy are other factors that have to be considered besides the dual system of apprenticeship.

In addition, the employment assumption is challenged by the constant decline of apprenticeship positions in companies, which is particularly true for typical female apprenticeships such as hairdresser. In general, strong gender segregation and structural underrepresentation of migrant adolescents are perceived as a shortcoming of the dual system.

At the level of skills, the low standards of apprentices’ basic competencies are of concern. This points to the general weakness of the dual system arising from the highly segregating character of the Austrian education system. From a sociological point of view, the dual system represents and reproduces the lower levels of this hierarchical and impermeable education system.

4.2 The concept of Beruf

In the public discussion the dual system’s particular socioeconomic and institutional setting is often overlooked. As Deißinger (2001) points out, its basic organizing principle is not so much the duality of places of learning, but the vocational concept of Beruf. A Beruf means something between job, profession and vocation. It designates a set of operations for which a range of specific knowledge and abilities are required, whose execution encompasses self-reliance and autonomy and which comprise multidimensional work processes. In this holistic understanding, Beruf is sometimes seen as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon model of work processes fragmented into narrowly defined tasks, for which a restricted set of skills without prior qualifications are sufficient (Allais 2012, Brockmann et al 2011).

In a societal perspective, a Beruf is a formally recognized social category which structures the TVET system and the labour market and is in turn structured by them. Beruf is a decisive category for the allocation of individuals in society and the employment system. Berufe are strongly linked to a specific institutional pattern in German-speaking countries, i.e. a system of institutionalized bargaining between public administrations, employers’ and workers’ representatives as well as other relevant interest groups. This corporatist form of a social contract does not only frame the TVET system and its complex governance structures. It shapes all aspects of public life, work and political representation. It is considered – rightly or wrongly – a major factor of socioeconomic stability.

In order to understand the specificity of the dual system, it is helpful to have a look at its origins. Mayer (2001) summarizes the genesis of the German dual system in times of accelerated industrialization in the 1860s and 1870s as a paradoxical recourse on the medieval educative principle of apprenticeship. She stresses that the driving force for the establishment of the modern German TVET system and the dual model at its core were not the requirements of expanding industry, but political reasons, above all the social integration of working class youth against the background of emerging social democracy.
Atzmüller (2011) analyses the germanophone dual system of TVET from a perspective of political and cultural hegemony in a Gramscian sense. In his view, the dual system helps to allocate working class youth in a socially stratified system by offering a socially recognized identity (a Beruf), entitlement to a certain level of remuneration, long-term job perspectives and social benefits. Hence, the principle of Beruf as the specific shape of the workforce in germanophone countries and its reproduction by means of the dual system constitute a pedagogical relationship between the workforce and employers. This relationship helps to stabilize the employers’ political and cultural hegemony well beyond their immediate interests. In this perspective, the above-mentioned social contract does not only grant a certain extent of economic and social wellbeing to the workforce, but also their political consensus around social stratification. Hence, as Ribolits (1998: 9) points out, Beruf also serves as a legitimating instrument of social inequality.

4.3 Transferability of the dual system

In the German academic discussion, there is widespread consensus on the dual system’s limited transferability due to the historical and societal entrenchment of the Berufskonzept (cf. Deißinger 2001, Mayer 2001). The lessons of experience of German development cooperation confirm this hypothesis. Unlike Austrian Development Cooperation, which has only recently embarked on dual system interventions, German development cooperation has heavily relied on this instrument since the 1970s.

Stockman (2014) drawing on a number of major evaluations of German development cooperation in the TVET sector summarizes that projects related to the dual system have had diverse, but generally rather limited success. While project goals at the institutional levels were mostly attained, hardly any impact at the system level could be assessed. The main conclusions drawn from this are that local context had not been sufficiently taken into consideration and consequently ownership by the partners was lacking.

As a result of these lessons of experience, the limited transferability of the dual system appears to be common sense in German-speaking countries today, at least among academics and practitioners. Context has become a leading category for transfer activities in development cooperation. Consequently, there is a somewhat shared understanding that the system cannot or should not be transferred in its entirety, but only certain elements in accordance with the existing contextual settings in recipient countries.

5 STUDY FINDINGS

Research on TVET is scarce in Austria. This is particularly true for TVET in a developmental context. The aforementioned study (Langthaler 2015) is the first attempt to analyse the increasing trend to transfer the Austrian dual system of apprenticeship to developing and transition countries. The study firstly investigates the status quo of the trend as to key players, funding possibilities, approaches, lessons of experience and challenges. In a second step, the developmental impact is assessed from a twofold perspective. Firstly, compliance with ADC’s main principles is examined. Secondly, the above outlined theoretical approaches are used to analyse the findings from a social justice and learners’ rights perspective.

The study is based on 17 semi-structured expert interviews as well as on the analysis of available policy documentation. Given the limited scope of the study, findings have to be considered as preliminary and further research is recommended.
5.1 The status quo

The main target countries of transfer activities are located in Central and Eastern as well as South Eastern Europe (CEE and SEE), as this is traditionally the key region of Austrian influence and economic investment. There is also increasing transfer to Turkey, Asian countries, mainly China, North Africa and Latin America. Hardly any transfer projects are implemented in Sub-Saharan Africa or in the least developed countries (LDCs).

Background conditions in all target countries are essentially different from Austria. The dual system is unfamiliar to the local economic and educational cultures. TVET systems in the target countries are primarily school-based and considered as lacking relevant links with enterprises and labour markets.

Key players can be grouped as follows: a) donors and public administration, b) implementers (companies, NGOs) and c) supporting organizations. Among the first group, the Austrian Economic Chamber plays a leading role in target countries thanks to its network of 110 offices abroad. Another key player is the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) since it offers the main funding source for companies’ TVET activities in developing and transition countries. ADA’s dual system interventions range from financial support to TVET projects by Austrian private enterprises to a continuum of measures implemented through country programmes. These include interventions targeting vocational schools, public administration and stakeholder dialogue.

Main funding opportunity is the ADA budget line for business partnerships open for TVET projects by Austrian private business in developing and transition countries. Another, but by far minor funding source is provided by the Economic Chamber.

There is a wide range of project types and approaches with only very few closely corresponding to the Austrian dual system of apprenticeship. Similarities are strongest where Austrian companies train their own work force at foreign establishments. In most other cases, some components or aspects of the Austrian system are implemented or dual system type reforms are supported at the system level.

Main success factors are reported to be context sensitivity, local ownership, stakeholder participation, as well as political commitment by the involved institutions. Given the short duration of many projects, lessons of experience are scarce. So far, projects supported by an ADA business partnership are reported to be quite successful in terms of high levels of qualifications of apprentices and strong stakeholder commitment. For the CEE and SEE region, which has a longer tradition in dual system interventions, some negative aspects are pointed out such as little context sensitivity leading to low levels of sustainability and local ownership as well as scarce quality of training.

Among the main challenges and risks is loss of trained workforce either to other countries or to other companies, limited commitment by companies at the system level, quality assurance and low sustainability. Companies report low levels of apprentices’ general competences and diverging work cultures to be a problem.
5.2 Compliance with ADC principles

In general, ADC criteria such as context sensitivity, sustainability, broad impact and systemic effect are reported to be attained at a satisfactory level. However, some contradictions emerge in particular as to standalone projects in the context of ADA business partnerships with private Austrian companies. Sustainability of training arrangements is an open question in case of companies closing down their establishments or refraining from further training. In the same vein, systemic impact seems questionable. Even where dual system interventions can be successfully integrated into local TVET systems, this does not ensure a systemic effect in terms of making local TVET systems change into dual systems. Structures introduced by Austrian interventions may persist as integrated but isolated islands in traditional school-based TVET systems.

Poverty reduction is a basic principle of ADC. Here a structural contradiction becomes apparent since dual system projects are an instrument for middle-income countries rather than for LDCs. They necessitate embedment in existing structures, both educational, economic and of stakeholder dialogue. These requirements are rarely met by LDCs. Moreover, classic dual system training targets adolescents having at least lower secondary education. Consequently, trainees seldom belong to the poorest and underprivileged sections of society.

5.3 Wider developmental impact

From a social justice perspective as defined above, a number of open questions emerge as to the developmental impact of the current trend to transfer the Austrian dual system to developing and transition countries.

With a critical view of prevailing ‘productivist’ TVET conceptions, the dominance of economic considerations both at policy and conceptual level is striking. While for the Economic Chamber and the involved private companies this arises from their mandate it should be less obvious for ADC. ADC’s engagement with dual sector interventions has to be seen in the context of prioritizing private sector development and the promotion of private business cooperation. In contrast, educational considerations are much less influential.

At the conceptual level, an economic bias is tangible in an often, though not always, present underestimation of the strong role of school-based TVET for the Austrian system’s overall success. The dual system is lauded for its high share of in-company training and its responsiveness to the needs of enterprises. Rarely are its educational weaknesses in terms of neglecting general competences and lack of social permeability given sufficient attention.

Most interviewees show an exaggerated faith in TVET as a major instrument for development. To a certain extent, awareness is lacking that TVET, as any other educational intervention, might have little to detrimental effects in adverse circumstances. This firm belief in the developmental effect of TVET can have problematic implications at three different levels.

At the level of economic development, exaggerated faith in TVET sometimes reflects an insufficiently sophisticated concept of private businesses’ developmental role. This refers to a more general debate on private sector development. As pointed out by Küblböck and Staritz (2015), interests of international enterprises do not necessarily correspond to those of the local private sector, not to mention national development strategies. While there are indeed a number of potential win-win-situations, e.g. knowledge transfer and local spillovers, conflicts of interest
may arise as to the distribution of gains along the chain, tax issues, social security and the facilitation of local spillovers, among others. The point here is not to assess the activities of Austrian enterprises as to these risks, but rather to draw attention to the necessity of a highly differentiating discussion on private sector development and the role of international enterprises. A risk emerges from some interviews. Since the positive development impact of TVET, in particular dual system training in companies, is taken for granted there seems to be no need to consider potential detrimental effects at other levels. If the assumed higher quality of TVET provision by international enterprises is the main factor of consideration, shortcomings at the level of tax policies, labour rights, local structures and distribution of gains become aspects of secondary importance.

Secondly, exaggerated faith in TVET is in some cases associated with a distorted conception of TVET systems at an educational level. It is questionable that TVET alone can lead to more employment and better productivity of local economies in the absence of appropriate economic, industrial, social and labour market strategies. The risk here is twofold. TVET conceptions lacking sufficient contextualization might lead to neglecting appropriate support for the above-mentioned strategies. On the other hand, ‘blaming the schools’ for wider systemic dysfunctions can entail further withdrawal of public funds from the already underfunded TVET sector.

A third level of concern is culture. Different work cultures in target countries are rarely considered a potential resource, nor is there much interest in understanding their socioeconomic background and functioning. They are rather perceived as problems. Hence, implicitly the transfer of the dual model introduces a rating of work cultures.

From a more general perspective, there is little awareness among Austrian players that TVET systems are culturally not neutral. Mayer (2001) elaborates on how German TVET support in developing countries has for decades transported a Western concept of modernization and the gender stereotypes inherent in the German TVET system. Austrian organizations with a long history in TVET provision report similar facts. Training in typically male occupations in the industries was for a long time the most valued type of TVET support for developing countries.

Last and most importantly, a somewhat biased notion of the Berufskonzept and its underlying social contract emerges from the interviews. The social contract’s complexity is frequently reduced to a stakeholder dialogue, which seeks the involvement of employers in TVET, while the employees’ (and the learners’) interests are often overlooked.

It goes without saying that the Austrian model of social contract cannot be transferred as such. Yet, it is recommendable that its centrality be considered in dual system transfer activities. Active integration of workers’ and learners’ interests in stakeholder dialogue should be part of transfer activities as well as support for the establishment of adequate representational structures. From an educational point of view this means strengthening the learners’ perspective. Participants in dual system training arrangements have to be considered not only as trainees, but as learners whose rights to receive an education that goes beyond immediate employability on the labour market should not be forgotten.

6  CONCLUSION

Can the dual model offer any promising pathways to a transformative vision of TVET? In a social justice perspective of transformation there is reason to remain cautious.
Current dual system transfer activities from Austria to developing and transition countries show a number of flaws. At best, dual system training arrangements can hope to survive as isolated islands in an otherwise differently-functioning TVET system. This might be the case where training arrangements are linked with existing TVET systems and enjoy official recognition; and where a substantial number of companies participate in similar training schemes allowing for replication and normalization of the occupational training scheme. However, this does not in any way ensure impact on the system level in terms of transforming existing TVET structures into the dual system. Since TVET systems reflect the patterns of social organization of work specific to each society, the dual model cannot take roots where these patterns substantially differ from those in German-speaking countries.

At worst, dual system training arrangements turn out to serve the business interests of the involved companies without much benefit either for the learners or for the TVET system. To the contrary, in a context of political interests pushing for the transfer of the dual system policy dialogue is often accompanied by a polemic dichotomy between the dual system as a form of work based learning and school based TVET. While in Austria, as in the other German-speaking countries, school based TVET contributes indeed a lot to the overall success of the dual system, this if often neglected at the level of policy dialogue. As a consequence, there is the risk of funds being withdrawn from traditionally school based TVET systems resulting in an overall deterioration of educational quality.

At the conceptual level, the risk persists that dual system transfer may entail the strengthening of a ‘productivist’ vision of TVET and a further reaffirmation of the Western model of economic modernization. Against the background of globally growing concerns of social inequity and ecological sustainability, to name but a few, this appears to be problematic.

However, the dual system could indeed serve to inspire a transformative vision of TVET. In this perspective, the underlying social contract reflected in the concept of Beruf assumes importance. While mostly lauded for the involvement of private companies in TVET governance, from a social justice perspective two other aspects should be in focus. Firstly, the social contract also includes the involvement of workers representations in TVET governance, a fact which is often neglected in public discussions. This is, however, of utmost importance in order to give voice to the learners’ and future employees. Secondly, the complex system of TVET governance based on a sophisticated stakeholder dialogue allows for smooth alignment of TVET systems with the needs of society, which should not be equated to the needs of private business.

In a social justice perspective, these two aspects offer promising pathways to a transformative vision of TVET in a view of strengthening learners’ rights and promoting decent work. They should, however, serve to inspire TVET policies in other countries rather than being transferred into different socioeconomic contexts.

7 REFERENCES


