# A DYNAMIC CONCEPT OF CULTURE AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE DECENTRALISED QUALIFICATION PROCESSES IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract: After a concise overview of the problematic of the lack of appropriation of innovative technologies in underdeveloped areas in developing countries the paper outline the need of societal embedding of technologies. First, the paper shows the hegemonic understanding of culture in the field of development policy as a static view and an expression of essentialism towards culture. By analyzing a large scale of studies from the mentioned political field the authors offers a dynamic concept of culture which is used as a heuristic toolkit to investigate development projects. After a short resume of the dynamic concept of culture it will be shown the range of the concept to order the variety of factors which influences the qualification processes. A specific qualification project in Cuban Sancti Spiritus province in coherence with a community development project by implementing decentralised renewable energy supply in Cuba is to clarify and to present here by showing and ordering the variety of factors influencing the project. After, the needs of qualitative field research and empirically prove of the presented approach are mentioned and discussed. The author concludes the large range of the theoretical grounded approach of a dynamic concept of culture to investigate empirically qualification projects in development countries and more theoretically, to neglect the hegemonic view of culture in the development policy by using the new approach. The improving of academic processes at the universities participating in the IKN-network will finish the conclusion.

Keywords: Culture; Renewable Energies; Rural Areas; Qualification; Appropriation of Technologies; Cross-disciplinary approach;

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the field of technical aid to developing countries we can very often recognize a lack of appropriation of technologies. Very often technologies are seen as universally valid, the modes of implementing, using and the functionality of technologies are noticed as a homogenous one. This mode should derive from the general principles of natural sciences and technical rules incorporated in the technologies. But this view is too reduced as we know from the large scales of studies from the social sciences concerning the different levels of the general handling of technologies (e.g. Schivelbusch 2004, Van Laak 2004, Ulrich 1993, Dierkes 1997, Knie 1991, Ruth 1995). The state of the art view of technologies is the embedding in societal contexts, the interrelation with the social world of a society or of a community.

For improving technical innovation in developing countries and/or to improve the living circumstances in rural or less infrastructure communities by implementing technical innovation we have to consider this state of the art. To do so we need a dynamic and flexible concept to include the variety of factors which influence this

processes of technical innovations. New technical innovation in different social circumstances needs cultural and /or societal appropriation by the social actors so the new technologies can reach its end to improve the communities living conditions. First step to reach this end is the qualification of community members to handle the technologies e.g. construct parts of, maintain and repair, second to qualify the communities to use the technical innovation as an aid in improving their life. Both will arrange a societal appropriation of technical innovation in rural and/or in city areas with less infrastructure in developing countries (Wolf 2007).

## 2   THE HEGEMONIC VIEW OF CULTURE IN THE DEVELOPMENT POLICY

The understanding of culture in the development policy is very often determined by the dichotomy of tradition and modernity. Herein culture is understood in a semantic cohesion with tradition. Therefore culture is very often seen as a constraint on the success of development projects. In the discourses of the development policy about the importance of culture and progress -starting in the early 80s- the fact was clearly discussed that cultural dispositions are to abuse as a means to realise the modernisation projects and the progress following the modernisation theories (Kidd; Colletta 1980: 9f.; Gilman 2003).

Similar developments can be observed in the field of international politics where culture is seen as a static und strictly joined base of political organisation of homogenised social order. Popularised as a clash of civilization this static understanding of culture is used as a mean to serve political interests (Abu Lughod 1991). Both the understanding of culture means an essentialism, an expression of the anthropologic substance quasi the natural constant to organise the view of the world(s).

The above mentioned hegemonic view of a static concept of culture gives us less possibilities to understand learning and knowledge transfer processes. To improve the understanding of knowledge transfer and learning in different societal and cultural contexts we need a different view lead by a reflective observation of cultural things (Durkheim). We need a dynamic concept of culture which leads us to an understanding of the different forms and means of knowledge acquisition and knowledge internalisation. These learning processes are clearly influenced by a large scale of different factors. With a dynamic concept of culture we can order the crowd of influencing factors of learning processes in different social and cultural contexts and arrive at a more comprehensive understanding. This understanding will facilitate and improve the qualification measures and learning processes and lead to a more appropriate design.

By analysing a large scale of studies from the development policy of Germany from the early eighties to the mid nineties of the twentieth century the different factors influencing development projects are extracted. With a focus on the specific role of German's development cooperation in the area of vocational education and training (VET) the study analyses the factors influencing development processes in the VET-field. To gain the above mentioned results it was necessary to formulate a theoretical approach of culture as a dynamic concept which can be used as toolkit to empirically investigate the factors that influence qualification projects.

## 3   CULTURE: A DYNAMIC CONCEPT

To use the concept of culture in the context of educational processes, it is helpful to place the social subjects at the centre of the analysis, yet without assigning the

subject too much autonomy. The subject and the social world are interdependent and mutually influence each other (Elias 1976). Culture is a result of this interdependent social process. Humans – social subjects – interpret the social influences around them; thus, they construct new or altered symbolic worlds and structures of order (Geertz 2003) and with these new symbolic forms interact again with the social world. This interaction between social actors and the social world takes place in highly contested social fields, in which the constructed cultural system of meaning and the symbolic world show their effectiveness on different levels.

Following Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu 2000), the social world can be analytically divided into a world of goods and groups; in other words, the material world and the cultural world. Social actors are subject to the influences acted upon them by both of these „worlds." In order to secure the subject's place in a social field, as well as to improve the subject's circumstances, the subject reinterprets the external influences acted upon him/her from both of these „worlds." Culture here is understood as a dynamic outcome of a social process of interaction that is internalized as pre-conscious regulator of behaviour as well as a deliberate cognitive structure. From this level of interpretation on the part of the social actor arise new, different and possibly unfamiliar and unknown cultural elements that can be called alter-cultural factors of influence. Similarly, the cultural and material influences interplay with the subject's social field of negotiation - the contested social fields (Wolf 2009). This model is still complex and does not lend itself to any easy further reduction. However, this model makes it possible to classify the multiplicity of influence factors in the social world that have been identified by analysing a lot of concerning studies in the realm of development politics and vocational education and training cooperation. Employed as a heuristic tool, this cursory overview of culture as a dynamic concept made an analysis of this jumble of factors possible.

First this cultural perspective is useful in understanding the dynamics of cultural disposition of social actors neglecting the essentialism of culture. Second, this cultural perspective is useful in examining empirically the factors that influence qualification measurement and learning processes.
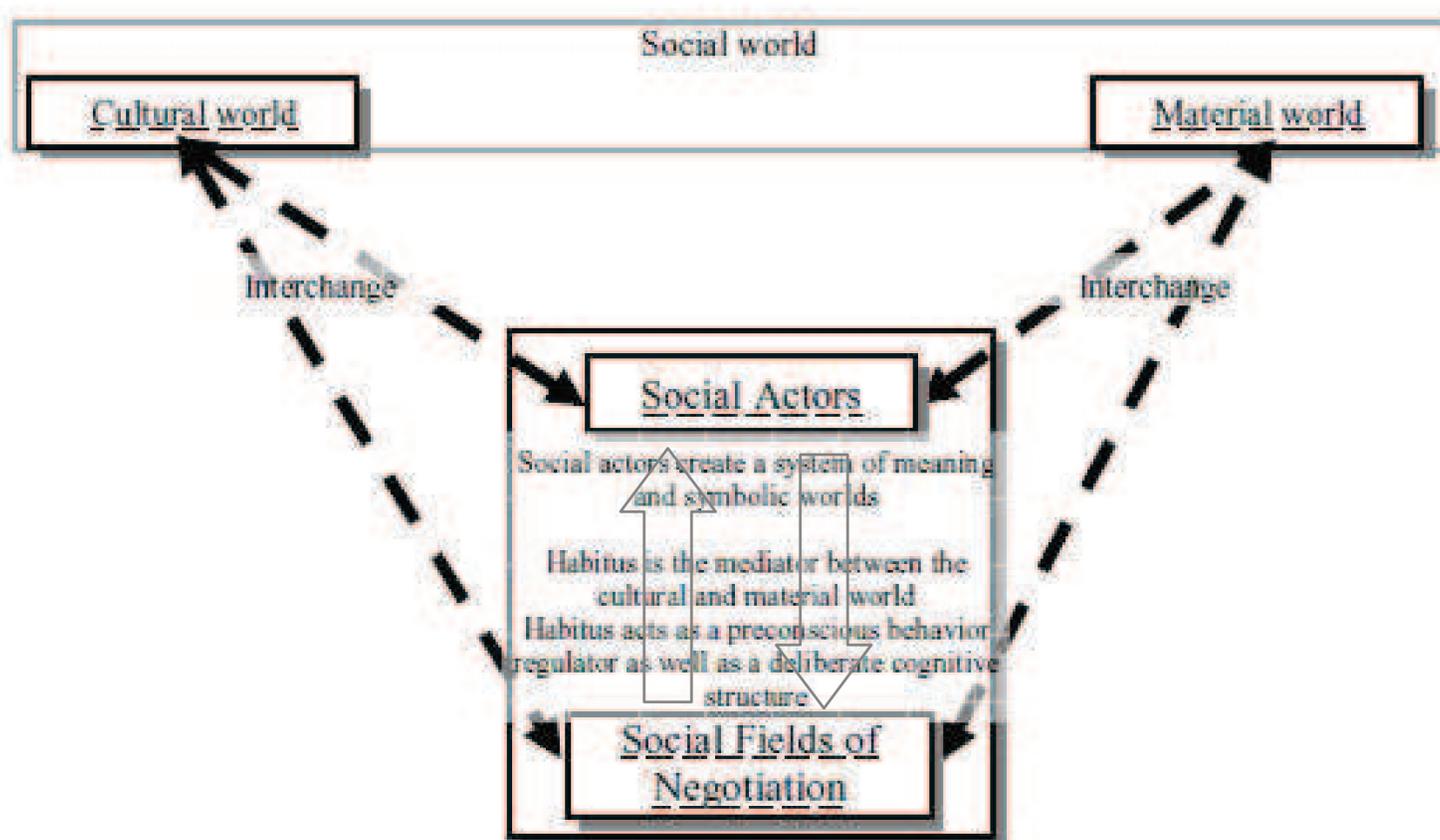


Figure 1: A Dynamic Concept of Culture

## 4  CULTURE AS A HEURISTIC TOOLKIT TO INVESTIGATE QUALIFICATION PROJECTS

By common work between different colleagues from different universities in the world specifically by interchange between the German and Cuban Universities in the IKN-Network we are able to pre-test the new approach of a dynamic concept of culture as a toolkit to investigate the interrelation between culture and learning and knowledge transfer processes. The Cuban project *Electrification in non-grid rural areas of Sancti Spiritus province* shows the need for an integrated qualification approach to facilitate the appropriation process. First, the implementing areas are very far from the logistic and infrastructure in the province, so we need to qualify the community members for securing the functionality of the implemented technology (Wolf 2009). Secondarily the need is given by the holistic Cuban approach of implementing technical innovation in rural areas as a mean to improve life situation in communities. Generally the participating universities can improve their cooperation between the different scientific disciplines towards a more cross-disciplinary scientific approach, i.e. to move the interdisciplinary approach which is often characterized by less cooperation in reality of research to a clear and fruitful cooperation between the different scientific disciplines in research practices, to entangle them with each other and with the field of practice (Schophaus et al. 2004, Schön et al. 2006). In the case of implementing decentralised renewable energy supply in rural areas it will be mainly the scientific disciplines of engineering, social sciences and educational sciences (Döring 2007).

To use the above mentioned dynamic concept of culture as a heuristic toolkit to investigate qualification projects we need to clarify the general concept. Before we can start to clarify the above sketched general approach of a dynamic concept of culture we need to take a preparatory step to designate the field of intervention, the social actors and the social field of negotiation. After the clarifying we will get a toolkit to investigate the specific qualification project in Cuban rural areas. The qualification project is linked to the technical innovation of a decentralised energy supply in the community, we can refer to the field of intervention as actions for community development. Next step, the general social actors in the above model change to primary recipients of educational measures and the social field of negotiation changes to social and work space of the recipients. Concerning the energy supply the primary recipients of qualification measures would be the craftsmen and social experts of the community or in the region. The social and work space needs to be investigated in a scientific manner by using tools of qualitative social research or general field research e. g. participant observation, interviews, field survey. Without this clarifying field research we are only able to propose a tentative approach to operationalise the dynamic concept of culture as a heuristic toolkit to investigate the interrelation between qualification projects and the influences from the social world. After the field research we are able to prove the fit of the tools we gain from the dynamic concept of culture and to modify the theoretically grounded concept on the empirically appearing reality if it is necessary.

We can identify a large scale of factors influencing qualification projects from the analyzing studies of the field of development policy (Wolf 2009) but now - as a heuristic purpose - we are able to order them in two ways. The first category of order is their influence towards either the primary recipients or to the social and work space. The second category of order is their origin either in the cultural part of the social world or in the material part of the social world. To design a qualification project in rural areas it is useful to consider the often different cultural dispositions of rural people (Hann 2000; Blum 1998; Adomßent 2004) in developing countries and elsewhere. And not to blunder into a trap of predominant understanding of western

knowledge as a universalistic general knowledge. To design a appropriate qualification measure it is needed to investigate the circumstances and contexts of the specific areas in a pre-study and to research precisely the influences to the measures.
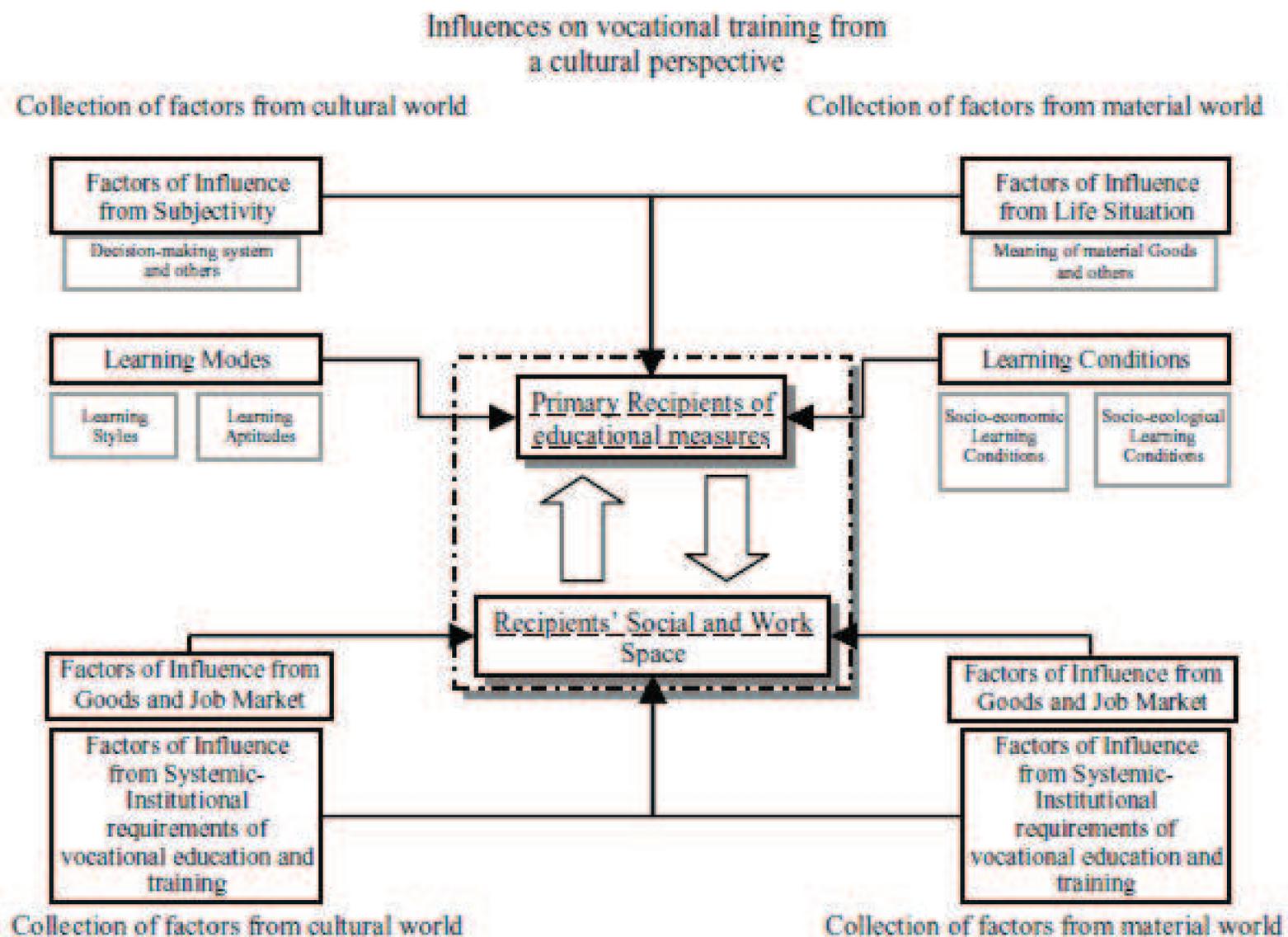


Figure 2: Cultural Factors of Influence on Vocational Training

## 4.1 Factors of influence affect the primary recipients

On the side of the cultural world these factors are factors of subjectivity e.g. the decision making systems, belief systems, traditional world views, the setting towards the world i.e. the attitude towards the shaping of the world or the fatalistic one towards life's contingency, the disposition to innovation and others of the target groups linked to the qualification measures need to be researched. The learning modes have a strong and direct influence on qualification measures. They can be divided into the learning styles and the learning aptitudes of the primary recipients. Learning styles convey internal dispositions as an outward expression of the social subject's mental, physical and societal conditions. This could include e.g. such phenomena as low self-esteem, uncommon social behaviour, less motivation and a lack of autonomy and self-responsibility (Wolf 2009a). Learning aptitudes, that is, externally perceived aptitudes, skills and knowledge e.g. the community knowledge concerning the rural agricultural conditions or the different meaning of nature (Adomßent 2000).

Factors on the side of the material world are factors of influences from life situations e.g. the importance of material goods, the behaviour of upward social mobility, myth, magic and taboo (Signer 2004), the economic sentiment (Bliss 1999) or the social activity and others. The learning conditions are grouped into socio-economic and socio-ecological learning conditions. Family income is considered a *socio-economic*

*factor* that directly influences access to knowledge and information. Similarly, the need to contribute to the family income also hinders a student's school attendance or to pursue further training. Financial stress, and the inability to cope with it, invariably has a negative impact e.g. the lack of a sufficient credit system to finance the next sowing. Family situation and living environment are included under *socio-ecological learning condition*, which impacts the learning process. One could also include the difficulty in negotiating encounters with government offices and authorities such as the police or justice system. Health, nutrition and hygiene issues can be counted here as well. Also the technical equipment existing in the regular rural environment to train and deepen the new knowledge are counted in this category of factors (Wolf 2009). With this short and sketchy accounting of factors of influence directing the primary recipient we will stop. A precise analysis of the factors is only possible if a specific rural area and the target groups of the qualification measures are determined. Than the inventory based on qualitative research can start.

## 4.2 Factors of influence affect the social and work space of the primary recipients

Now we move to the factors affecting the social and work space of the primary recipients. Two large categories can be distinguished. The factors of influence from goods- and job-market and the factors of systemic-institutional requirements of qualification measures. As factors of goods and job market deriving from the cultural world the following are noticed as important in the analysed studies. The meaning of time and the ethics of work, the gender perspective of labour division, the modes of mobility and the ken as similar as the forms of thinking (linear / teleological thinking or circular thinking) and more to identify in the field research are noted. Factors from the systemic-institutional requirements are to mention as traditional leading structures, networks of loyalties, the manner of work and production, i.e. a collective or a individual attitude towards labour and the societal behaviour towards individual richness. Others need to be researched in the field.

Factors of goods- and job-market derive from the material world are the economic exchange relations, similar to the technical capabilities of the target groups, the level of productive forces and the production of goods and services as similar as the structure of the regional labour force market and more are to locate. The transportation capabilities, the infrastructure, the laws and rules of vocational and further training, the structure in the field of training companies are examples of factors from the systemic-institutional requirements also located in the material world.
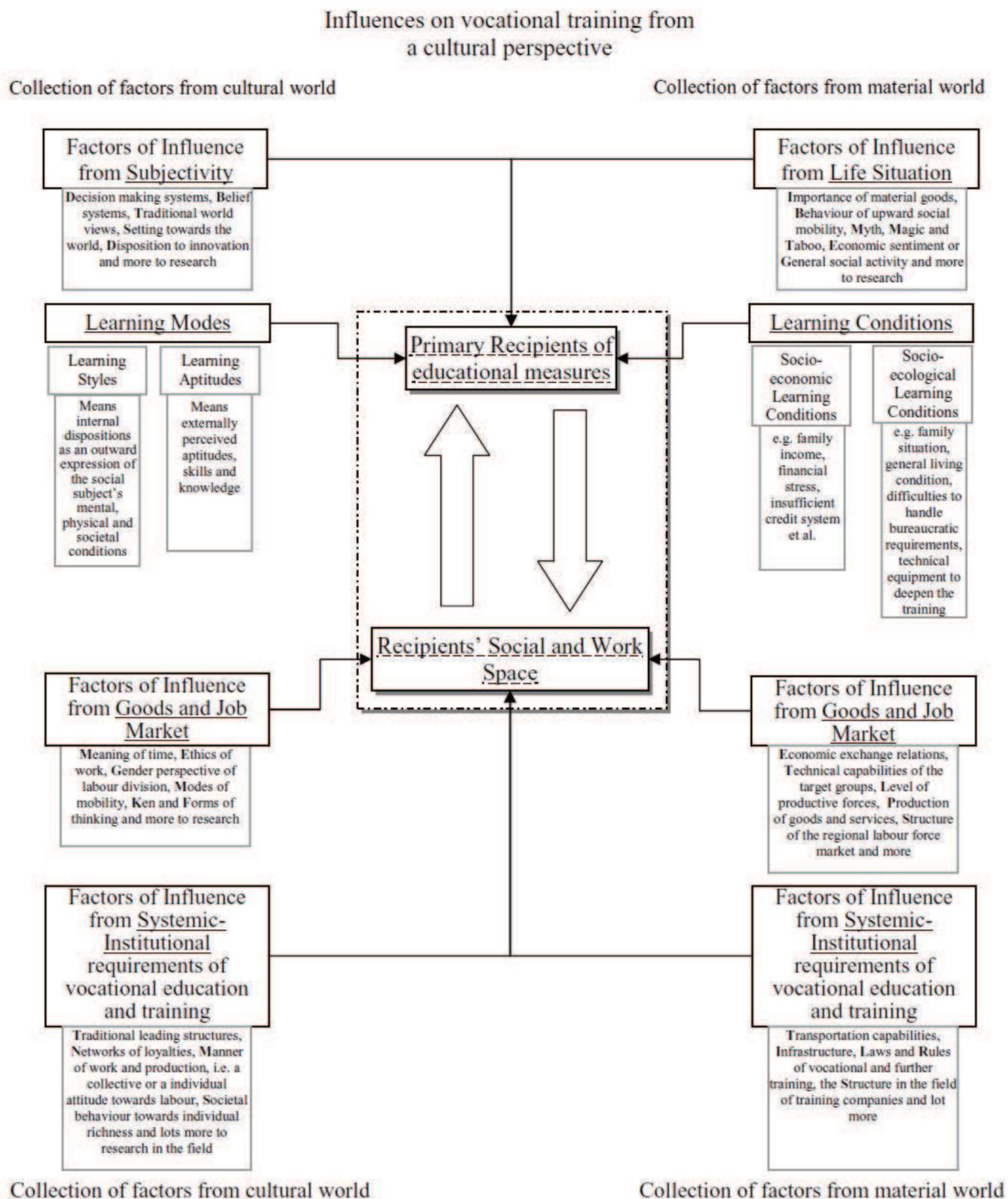
Influences on vocational training from
a cultural perspective

Collection of factors from cultural world                    Collection of factors from material world

**Factors of Influence from Subjectivity**

Decision making systems, Belief systems, Traditional world views, Setting towards the world, Disposition to innovation and more to research

**Factors of Influence from Life Situation**

Importance of material goods, Behaviour of upward social mobility, Myth, Magic and Taboo, Economic sentiment or General social activity and more to research

**Learning Modes**

| Learning Styles | Learning Aptitudes |
|---|---|
| Means internal dispositions as an outward expression of the social subject's mental, physical and societal conditions | Means externally perceived aptitudes, skills and knowledge |

**Learning Conditions**

| Socio-economic Learning Conditions | Socio-ecological Learning Conditions |
|---|---|
| e.g. family income, financial stress, insufficient credit system et al. | e.g. family situation, general living condition, difficulties to handle bureaucratic requirements, technical equipment to deepen the training |

Primary Recipients of educational measures

Recipients' Social and Work Space

**Factors of Influence from Goods and Job Market**

Meaning of time, Ethics of work, Gender perspective of labour division, Modes of mobility, Ken and Forms of thinking and more to research

**Factors of Influence from Goods and Job Market**

Economic exchange relations, Technical capabilities of the target groups, Level of productive forces, Production of goods and services, Structure of the regional labour force market and more

**Factors of Influence from Systemic-Institutional requirements of vocational education and training**

Traditional leading structures, Networks of loyalties, Manner of work and production, i.e. a collective or a individual attitude towards labour, Societal behaviour towards individual richness and lots more to research in the field

**Factors of Influence from Systemic-Institutional requirements of vocational education and training**

Transportation capabilities, Infrastructure, Laws and Rules of vocational and further training, the Structure in the field of training companies and lot more

Collection of factors from cultural world                    Collection of factors from material world

Figure 3: Detailed Cultural Factors of Influence on Vocational Training

## 5 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The cursory overview of the results of the mentioned study (Wolf 2009) show that it is possible to order the jumble of factors influencing educational processes. But as new the approach of a dynamic concept of culture is, it can not provide a comprehensive answer about the ways how to design a appropriate qualification project in rural areas. It lends us to an understanding of the complex phenomena of cultural dispositions of human beings and to an understanding of the interdependence between influences from the cultural world and material world. To handle and to shape our own world by re-interpreting the messy influences from the social world as an anthropological condition of human being make it difficult to operationalise culture for empirical research and to use it as heuristic toolkit to shape educational processes.

As I show it is possible to identify and to order factors influencing educational processes. But the partial collection of factors I've mentioned here shows that with the dynamic concept of culture we have a tool to research factors of influence which

impact educational projects in uncommon cultural contexts. But we have not yet an answer to how we have to apply the concrete teaching and training in the rural areas. Therefore we need more research to investigate the links between the cultural factors of influence and the training measurements. With the new understanding that we can achieve by using the dynamic concept of culture we are able to improve our training and teaching in a reflective manner and to ameliorate step by step our didactics and teaching methods. But we need also a research attitude leaded by the paradigm of interpretative social sciences research (Schröer 1994; Schnettler; Strübing 2004; Giddens 1984) to identify and to order the factors existing in the specific areas. A mixture of methods to research and to precisely identify the factors is recommended and a cross-disciplinary project approach is needed, too. We need more empirical research to prove the so far theoretical grounded approach and to enlarge the potential of this dynamic concept of culture (Wolf 2009).

## 6 CONCLUSION

The dynamic concept of culture to investigate education and training in qualification projects introduced here has potential to shed light on educational processes from a cultural perspective. We are able to identify, to order and to understand the large scale of disordered factors influencing educational processes in development projects. As I mentioned above some examples of factors of influence from the different categories are given. Further research is necessary in order to elucidate what the additional factors of influence from the cultural and material world would look like and which of these factors would play a role in the educational process. A first clue is the insight gained from the results drawn from studies on development policies (Wolf 2009). The concerning factors have to be explained from the concrete field of intervention where the educational processes are located. Scientific research following the paradigm of interpretative sociology is to deploy using various methods of qualitative research. However, it still has to be proven if these results are suitable for educational processes. And how - as a new research stream - we can ameliorate our didactics and teaching methods regarding the gained results from the research of educational processes with the dynamic concept of culture as a heuristic toolkit. Additionally, it is important to explain the ways in which trainings can have a positive impact on the factors of influence that students bring with them, and to identify the position the trainings might be in to change the habitual disposition for students' educational success.

Yet another, more theoretical conclusion is needed. Until now, there is no concept of culture that serves as an appropriate tool to illuminate teaching and learning processes from a cultural perspective in schools or in trainings. It does not help that the concept of culture is a controversial one in the German field of education research. Moreover, when the concept is applied, it often serves to essentialise the behaviour and views of students with a migration background (Yildiz 2008, Abu Lughod 1991, Stanat 2009). Educational studies that employ culture as a category of analysis end up focusing almost entirely on the experiences of migrant children, even though the deficiencies outlined in this paper are found across the German social spectrum. The cultural model outlined in this paper should be further developed and empirically examined in order to help expand the research focus in the field of education.

Last but not least the here mentioned understanding of improving the implementation and appropriation of innovative technologies in underdeveloped areas of developing countries by a cross-disciplinary approach of investigation and practice will challenge

the common sense of ordinary behaviour in the academic field. The approach of culture is far away from the mainstream understanding and neglects its common understanding, the cross-disciplinary research design will challenge the academic routine too, as it argues that the general interdisciplinary cooperation is to less cooperating in the research reality. The participating universities will learn from each other's experiences in this holistic approach and from the interchanges in the international network IKN. They will also be able to introduce this new concept of investigation in the universities' academic processes.

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