Edited by

Jerker Carlsson and Lennart Wohlgemuth

LEARNING IN DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION

Jerker Carlsson
Associate Professor
Department of Peace and Development Research
University of Gothenburg
Sweden
Telephone: +46 370 30 14 30
Telefax: +46 370 493 31
e-mail: jerker.carlsson@quest.se

Lennart Wohlgemuth
Director
The Nordic Africa Institute
Box 1703
SE-751 47 Uppsala
Sweden
Telephone: +46 18 56 22 00
Telefax: +46 18 56 22 90
e-mail: lennart.wohlgemuth@nai.uu.se

Table of contents

Part I

Learning in Development Co-operation – an Introduction

Jerker Carlsson and Lennart Wohlgemuth

This book deals with learning in development co-operation. The point of departure for our discussion is that learning is a common concern, involving all parties active in development co-operation. Looking at learning from such a multi-actor perspective is necessary in order to maximise the policy relevance of the discussion. Thus, the purpose of this book is not only to highlight problems of learning in development co-operation, but also to use the insights of the contributions to the book, to develop suggestions as to how effective learning can be implemented in development co-operation.

To enable us to do this, we approached the issue of learning from the perspective of the aid practitioners themselves. We asked people with long experience of working with development aid, inside and outside donor and recipient agencies, to present their personal reflections and ideas about learning (see the Annex "Notes sent to the Authors" in Part IV). We wanted to provide them with an opportunity to tell their own story. The contributors would have quite a free hand to approach the subject of learning as they felt to be most relevant. The only constraint given was that they should focus on some or all of the basic learning issues: How do we learn? What do we learn? From which sources do we learn? What do we do with our knowledge?

Inviting people, from different backgrounds and experiences, to write freely around four rather open questions will inevitably result in contributions that vary quite considerably among themselves. The articles in this volume do not follow a common format. There is a wide variation from the typical academic article, to a more "journalistic" style of writing. Furthermore, there is no common definition of learning among the authors. It is up to each of the authors to write and think about learning as they see fit. They also choose their examples from different countries, organisations etc.

A book which is based on such a personal, narrative approach should, we hope, become more accessible to a wider audience, and not only to those interested in the subject of organisational learning.

Learning in the development debate

During recent years there has been a lot of interest in the subject of organisational learning in development co-operation. This interest emerged as one issue in the debate on aid effectiveness. A range of studies was produced in the late 1980s and during the 1990s about aid effectiveness including well-known studies by Cassen *et al.* (1986), Mosley (1987), Bauer (1992), Berg (1993) and Burnside and Dollar (1997). Although there was no firm verdict as to whether aid worked or not, there seemed to be a consensus that there was little solid knowledge about the impact of aid. Generally the conclusion was that the situation would be much improved if such knowledge was made available, and if aid agencies, and their counterparts on the receiving end, devoted more attention to the issue of learning. Aid agencies and their counterparts would be well advised to ask themselves: Do we learn from our experiences and do we feed that knowledge back into improved practices?

What has happened since then? If learning is evidenced by changed development thinking and practices, then certainly there has been a lot of learning which has taken place in development co-operation. The question of learning is, unfortunately, more complicated than that. As Forss points out:

> …are the changes driven by increased knowledge and accumulated experience? Are the actors primarily reacting to external changes as well as they can, or are they taking a more active role in shaping the nature of development co-operation? Does learning help the actors to keep abreast with a complex and chaotic world? (Forss *et al.*, 1998, p.1)

Perhaps it is not a question of either/or. Actors are subjected to strong external forces which demand change. The actors respond partly by drawing upon the lessons learned from their previous aid programmes. This is, for example, what happened when Finland was forced to reduce its aid programme in the 1990s, due to the economic crisis (Lintonen[1]).

There are still only a few answers to these important and very relevant questions. Learning in development co-operation is more or less virgin territory for organisation research. Although there is a significant body of research on organisational learning in general, there are few studies that focus on learning in development co-operation (RRV, 1988; Samset

---

[1] In the following we refer to the contributors to this book by giving their names in brackets. References to other sources are referred to by name and publication year.

et al.; 1993 and Forss *et al.*, 1998). Studies of internal learning processes and the structures of donor agencies are important and much needed. But just as important are studies of learning processes involving the donor and its counterparts in the recipient countries.

Studying learning processes in development co-operation offers its own complications. Aid is a relationship between basically two parties – a donor and a recipient. The effectiveness of development co-operation therefore depends largely on the quality of this relationship. It is a complex relationship characterised by huge differences in the terms and conditions by which the parties collaborate with each other. Since donors and recipients have very different roles and positions within the structures of aid, what they consider important to learn may differ in some, but not all, respects. If the purpose of learning is improving the effectiveness of aid, then learning becomes an issue which cannot be confined to one party only. Effective learning does require that both parties learn and that they have an opportunity to share their experiences and jointly work out an agenda of action.

The notion of aid as a relationship between two parties – the donor and the recipient – is a simplification of a considerably more complex reality. On both sides there is a wide range of actors who communicate with each other at different levels and in ways that are not always clear and logical. In the recipient country we find actors, they can be private or public, at four different levels: the community, the district, the province/region and the national level. They can be a community council or a women's group, a district and/or a provincial council and at the national level a Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Development Planning or any other line ministry.

On the donor side you will have an equally diverse set of actors, such as consultants involved in studies or in implementation, the embassy in the recipient country, the aid agency itself and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or a specialised Ministry of Development Co-operation. This intricate web of relations adds further to learning as an analytically complex phenomenon to study.

What is learning?

Learning is commonly associated with a change in how we understand and interpret the reality that surrounds us. From our perspective – the objectives of development co-operation – learning is not a purely

intellectual phenomenon, but a process which is linked to a change of practice. It is not enough to identify a problem and propose a solution. The solution must be put into practice before learning can occur. This raises the interesting issue about the relationship between organisational and individual learning. Organisations can be said to learn if knowledge based on past experience is incorporated in organisational skills, procedures and cultures. Such processes reflect organisational interests, structures, functions and decision-making contexts (Suhrke).

The focus of this book is *both* on the learning of individuals *and* how the structure, process and cultures of aid agencies, and their counterparts in the developing countries, fail or succeed in creating conditions that are conducive to individual learning.

The process whereby the learning of individuals is transformed/ aggregated into organisational learning is extremely complex and difficult to study (Suzuki). In development oriented organisations, with their multitude of objectives and activities, it is not an easy task to state with some confidence that the organisational knowledge structure has changed, i.e. the agency has learned something. We can observe changes in the practice of development aid. We will, however, have a hard time to establish whether these changes were driven by increased knowledge and accumulated experience, or whether agencies were simply reacting to external changes to the best of their ability.

The process of learning in development co-operation is a process where several organisations, geographically separated, are dependent on each other for effective learning. Knowledge is generated and learning takes place in parallel processes in the aid agency and in the organisations in the recipient country. These processes have to be married at some point if the parties are to be able to work together and learn from each other. The ultimate point of marriage often takes the form of negotiating an agreement at the project, sector or country level.

In the ideal learning situation there is a substantial amount of information created on both sides. This information should be made available and used for learning purposes. Information is often scattered among different sources, which does not make it easy to access it and obtain a good overview. The information needs to be aggregated and synthesised in order to provide a comprehensible and available picture of the current situation. It is during this process that political considerations can, and should, be brought into the analysis.

Prevailing sector and country strategies, on both sides, are confronted with such information as well as current political objectives for

development aid. The relevance of strategies is through this process continuously questioned and changed.

In this learning scenario, the parties bring their knowledge, experience and interpretations of reality into the discussions. Ideally, the aid relationship should allow for open and equal negotiations about the purpose and tasks of aid. Strategies need to be tried and tested against each other and any conflicts have to be solved in productive ways. Local "ownership" of aid interventions is important for aid effectiveness. It is therefore vital that solutions are not being superimposed on any recipient partner.

In summary, some people learn, and thereby create conditions for organisations to learn. They learn different things, and some do not learn at all. This is also what can be expected, but from the point of view of development co-operation it raises some questions regarding the effectiveness of learning.

Factors which make learning difficult

The contributors to this book identify a wide range of factors that in their experience influence learning in development co-operation. From the rich material it is possible to pick out five factors that seem to be particularly prominent.

- Political constraints.
- The unequal nature of the aid relationship.
- Problems internal to the organisation of the aid agency.
- The organisations and capacities on the recipient side.
- Sources of knowledge and the quality of information.

Let us discuss each of them below in some detail.

1. Political constraints

Development aid is a public activity, whose objectives and guidelines are the result of a political debate, where different stakeholders participate and try to bring out their concerns and issues. We would like to point out that this is a highly legitimate process, that should result in a political consensus about the official objectives of development aid. International interaction, for example within the United Nations, the European Union and the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, also has an important impact on national debates and objectives.

Political objectives and guidelines are, however, frequently changed. The aid agency is also continuously subjected to strong outside pressures trying to influence what should be done, how it should be done and where it should be done. The official objectives are subject to re-interpretation by outside actors. To some extent this is a consequence of the fact that official objectives are broad and all-embracing. They are not specific, which immediately opens up for outside actors to try to re-interpret them in such a way that their own specific interests are taken into account. Aid agencies are constantly approached by various lobby groups, political parties, industry etc. to serve their interests and concerns.

There is also the issue of incompatibility with other national interests. In the current jargon this is referred to as "coherence". Foreign policy is one such area. For many countries aid is one important foreign policy instrument. Even if aid is not openly and directly serving foreign policy interests, it should at least not work against them. That aid and trade are closely linked together is well known. Trade, as well as agricultural, policies very often work against the major objectives of aid. It is also well-known what tied aid might lead to in terms of corrupting the objectives of aid.

It is difficult to dispute the need for broad-based political support of aid policies and procedures (Lintonen). It is equally important to have a coherence between different government policies. However, when external political pressures become too strong and incompatible objectives are being introduced, then the result is confusion. A case in point is the existence (often informal) of "disbursement targets". Budget allocations have to be spent irrespective of whether there are useful things to spend the money on or not. Spending money becomes a proxy indicator of action in organisations where there are no other simple and straightforward indicators of achievement.

Therefore staff members in aid agencies and co-operating partners receive quite mixed signals about what it is that really matters. Such confusion about the purpose of aid will eventually have a negative impact on aid effectiveness (Berg, Edgren, Hallak, and Mkandawire).

2. The unequal nature of the aid relationship

Many of the authors in this book point out that aid is quite far removed from any notion of an equal partnership. Rather it is a relationship that is determined by unequal access to various kinds of resources. Too often the recipient country is more or less totally dependent on the resources provided by the donor country. Such a dependence entails important consequences for the nature of the relationship, for learning and the

effectiveness of aid (Matos, Wapenhans).

First of all, the dependence makes it difficult for the recipient party to challenge the views and analysis of the donor - "you don't bite the hand that feeds you". This means that the critical dialogue, which is so important for learning rarely takes place (Edgren). Contributing to the lack of dialogue is the lack of autonomous, independent organisations in the recipient country (Berg). Typically there are few organisations around at all, and even fewer that are autonomous and independent from the aid network. "Good" local organisations soon become "captured" into the aid relationship and develop a dependence which makes their role as a critical partner towards the donor rather questionable.

Second, aid is, and has always been, based on the idea of transferring knowledge from the developed to the developing countries. In some of the contributions to this book it is pointed out that donors, and their technical experts, too often show little interest, and sometimes outright disregard, for locally based knowledge (Box, Cheng, Grape, and Wieslander). There is a devaluation of local knowledge by donor, as well as by recipient country technocrats, scientists etc.

The reporting requirements of donors, to exemplify the information bias further, often require recipient country organisations to provide information about project activities which primarily serve the administrative and programming needs of donor bureaucracies. Needless to say it would have been a more cost-effective use of scarce recipient country resources if they were used for providing information mainly relevant to them and not primarily to a donor agency (Matos). Thus, we would like to conclude that the biased nature of the aid relationship also determines "whose knowledge counts".

3. Problems internal to the organisation of the aid agency

There are important constraints to learning in all organisations. The aid agency is no exception to this rule and the nature of development work introduces its own complications. The wide experience of the authors from working within aid agencies offers a wealth of evidence as to how an organisation such as an aid agency can create barriers to learning (Berg, Edgren, King, E. and P. Schiefelbein, Suhrke, Suzuki, Wapenhans, and Wieslander).

One constraint has to do with the nature of development work, which makes performance measures difficult to establish. Hence, it is difficult for staff members and the organisation to actually know when the right things have been done, in the right place and at the right cost. The

argument would run as follows. The purpose of an aid agency is to facilitate development in another country, through the disbursement of public money. Since donors deal with the development of societies where their impact is made unclear by a range of other factors, success in terms of the impact of aid on development is difficult to establish. Furthermore, development aid operates with a long term perspective which makes feedback even more complicated. A single project will require some three years before any feedback is possible. Larger, integrated programmes and sector-wide approaches may require time frames of 10–15 years.

Learning is also made difficult if there is not a clear and focussed sense of mission. When people are uncertain of objectives, mandates and missions, learning becomes weak. One aspect of this is the quality of the contacts between the operational and policy-making levels in the organisation. The closer the integration, the faster information will flow about policy changes and their motivation and relevance (Wapenhans). Another aspect is the multi-faceted nature of development aid. An aid agency today resembles the old-fashioned department store, catering to every human need imaginable. Swedish aid, for example, has taken upon itself to assist developing countries in reducing their poverty. It shall, furthermore, work towards stimulating economic growth, a socially acceptable distribution of incomes, gender equality, protect the environment and contribute to a development of democracy and a respect for human rights. With such a mass of diverse and grand objectives gaining an idea of how well the job is being done becomes very difficult and hence so does learning for the staff and the organisation (Edgren).

Another constraint is that learning becomes difficult when there is a high centralisation of management. The more power at the level of the programme officer, the better the prospects for good learning. Small organisational units are more conducive to learning than larger ones. A structure which allows for contact and interaction across jobs, professions etc. facilitates learning much better than a structure which follows formal channels and where exchange of communication across formal boundaries is difficult (Hallak).

An example of such weak feedback systems is the procedures for de-briefing of returning technical assistance personnel. The knowledge and experience of returning experts is rarely made the most of and distributed within the organisation (Wieslander).

Furthermore, the output of an aid agency seldom requires co-operation and integration across the whole organisation (Berg, Suzuki). The main

output – a project or a programme – is largely individually managed, or dealt with by a smaller unit within a specialised department. This is linked to a narrow definition of jobs. People are often specialised within their areas. Learning is not facilitated when jobs are defined narrowly rather than broadly. Conditions for learning are established when people have a range of skills to use and tasks to perform which give them a view of the whole organisation, and involve co-operation with people possessing other specialities.

Individual learning, and hence organisational learning, suffers from the in-built resistance of people to learning (Argyris, 1994). People tend to avoid information that may lead them to challenge basic assumptions. They have a need for stability and are therefore not easily prepared to change their knowledge structures and thereby upset their world view. They rather seek information that confirms what they already know, i.e. that increases the stability of their world view. This is what Berg calls the "It worked in Peru" syndrome (Berg).

Resistance to change is also fuelled by the existence of vested interests in development aid (Edgren). The interests of influential stakeholders, inside and outside the aid agency, are intimately tied to an existing order and way of doing things. This, for example, prevented the UNHCR from preparing itself for a massive and politically visible "mega crisis". One main reason for the limited ambitions was undoubtedly anticipated resistance from donors and other agencies. When UNHCR a few years later, in connection with UN reforms, appeared to make a bid to be the primary UN department for humanitarian emergencies, this was indeed rebuffed by the others (Suhrke).

Change will mean challenging these interests and this is generally an unhealthy thing to do, unless you possess the necessary political clout.

4. The organisations and capacities on the recipient side

The nature of the aid relationship, as discussed above, does impose the most serious constraints on the participation of recipient country stakeholders in development aid. There are, however, a range of other local factors that affect learning (Berg, Edgren, E. and P. Schiefelbein).

Local organisations are few and they are often weak in terms of human and financial resources (Matos). As with the aid agencies, there is often a large turnover of staff. Within ministries and other public bodies, people are constantly moved around from one professional area to the other. This means that when a person has acquired certain knowledge, he/she can rarely put it into practice because he/she is now working in a place

where the knowledge is no longer relevant.

This is compounded by the fact that communication between different local organisations is often weak. A good example is the flow of information in the hierarchy of the public administration. Most information tends to remain at the central level, while people working in the districts become marginalised in terms of information, the search for knowledge and in terms of participation in decision-making. District authorities are often the final receivers of aid, with little influence on the whole process of developing an assistance package (Saasa and Carlsson, 1996).

Compared to the situation in the early 1960s, there is nowadays a cadre of professionally capable people in most recipient countries. Yet it is difficult for recipient country governments to make full use of them. There are several reasons for this situation. First, there is a resistance against using local expertise (Mkandawire). Foreign experts have often been preferred by both the donor and the recipient. In the 1960s and 1970s this could be justified by differences in professional qualities. Today the differences have narrowed and the bias towards using foreign experts has become a systemic problem.

Second, local professionals are often not really available, particularly at the remuneration levels offered by public service. University graduates and other well trained persons are being absorbed by the private sector and particularly the growing consultancy industry, which is largely fuelled by donors' demands for feasibility studies, evaluations etc. It is hard for recipient country governments to compete on this market and the only way they can access the competence of their own professionals is through donor contracted studies and reports.

Another reason for the lack of availability is brain-drain. Especially the poorest countries have difficulties in providing attractive working conditions, whereby they lose their qualified people. The brain-drain is no longer only a North-South phenomenon, and we are witnessing a growing flow from the poorest to the richest countries in the South.

The nature of the education system as it exists in most recipient countries adds to the problem of making good use of local professionals. It is questionable if the education system as it exists today prepares its students for a process of life-long learning as required in a developmental state. The challenge to individuals today is to achieve and maintain their employability. In a rapidly changing world this can only be done through a never-ending learning process. The formal education system has to adapt and serve the needs of individuals for life-long learning (Hallack, E. and P. Schiefelbein).

5. Sources of knowledge and the quality of information

Let us start by pointing out that in terms of quantity there is generally not a lack of information on what aid does. Evaluations, research studies etc. are produced in overwhelming numbers by bilateral aid agencies themselves, multilateral institutions, universities etc. The quality of this information is, of course, a key factor for providing new knowledge and learning. Several of the contributors to this volume point out that for many of the partners in development co-operation, information is, for a range of reasons, not relevant. Information is often (a) vague, (b) unclear, (c) inconsistent, (d) incongruent and (e) scattered.

The critique can be summarised in the following major points (Berg, Carlsson, and Edgren):

- Evaluations are "donor-centric" and are too often used to advance/further the donor's view on how things should be done.
- Evaluations are not easily available, particularly for local stakeholders who often never see the report.
- Evaluations rarely provide information about impact and aid effectiveness. Furthermore, they are often methodologically weak and can seldom fulfil basic scientific criteria.
- The recommendations of evaluations are general, woolly and sometimes difficult to act upon because of their lack of concreteness.
- There is a lack of baseline data.

The critique focuses on the process by which it is decided what is relevant knowledge. The heart of the matter is the power dimension that exists in the aid relationship, which is transferred and replicated in the way we search for knowledge. There is a strong dominance of donor preferences at the expense of local priorities and knowledge.

Samset *et al.* (1993), make the useful distinction between learning by involvement and learning by communication. The first is characterised by people taking part in evaluations and developing knowledge together with others. The advantage is that it can easily be co-ordinated by decision-making. It is also likely that it will be used in decision-making. However, only a few people will be concerned. Learning by communication is a more passive mode, where knowledge is served from

somebody else. Evaluations are a dominant source of information in this mode. People learn by reading or listening, not by doing and active problem-solving. The positive aspect is that many can be reached at a low cost. Knowledge will also be less specific to individual needs.

The information bias observed by many of the contributors to this book is strengthened by the current trend in aid administration which favours a focus on learning by communication. Formal evaluations are highly regarded as the primary mode of gathering new information. There is evidence to show, however, that the non-formal aspects of an evaluation are just as important a source of learning as the written report. There are many other more process oriented ways of acquiring information that are equally important and valuable: field visits, informal discussions with colleagues, professional journals, external expertise, direct participation in evaluations.

Good organisational learning presupposes the co-existence of both types of learning in a mix that suits organisational needs. Failure to recognise that different modes of learning need to co-exist, as do different sources of information, will reduce the potential for learning.

Learning is possible

Development co-operation has changed considerably in terms of policy and practice over the last 15 years. In some cases change is a result of lessons learned and in other cases it is a result of agencies reacting to external changes to the best of their ability. It emerged from the case studies in this book that learning does take place and is indeed possible, but clearly not always to the extent we would have liked. Although we cannot offer a set of detailed recommendations as to how learning can be improved, the articles in this book point to some actions that can be taken in the short to medium term.

- Politics sets the conditions for aid by defining the objectives and guidelines thereof. But too frequent changes and micro-management of the aid relationship by politicians should be avoided. Furthermore, there has to be a coherence between various government policies and their objectives. Otherwise the result is confusion about the purpose of aid, which will make effective learning difficult.
- The unequal nature of the aid relationship is an issue which runs through most of the studies presented in this book and emerges as one of the major constraints for learning in development co-

operation. What will be required is a major re-thinking of the current mode of operation of aid, a process which needs to incorporate partners in developing countries much more than has been the case up to now, i.e. a quest for *real* partnership relations.

- The organisation of the aid agency needs to be modified in several important aspects. The objectives, mandate and mission must be clearly understood by the staff. Furthermore, the incentive structure of the organisation should be changed to reflect, as much as possible, the objectives of the projects and programmes they are handling. Learning across the organisation is also facilitated with a decentralised management structure. If job descriptions are broadly, rather than narrowly, defined this is another factor that will increase learning. Finally, it is important to realise that there are no quick fixes in development aid, but a need for flexibility, humility and a long-term perspective.

- The organisations and capacities on the recipient side possess several weaknesses. There are many reasons for this situation and some of them can be addressed in the short- and medium term. We would like to point out though, that recipient organisations need to consider much more carefully the impact of aid interventions on institution and capacity building. One important factor here is to retain the services of the qualified personnel that are already available and who, if disregarded, can easily leave the organisation, as well as the country.

- Sources of knowledge and the quality of the information system were pinpointed by many contributors as factors which did not facilitate learning. Evaluations must be made more "recipient-centric" and local knowledge must be given much more recognition. This can be remedied if recipient organisations are given the opportunity to take the initiative to make their own evaluations. Further, evaluations analysing impact and aid effectiveness should be made more common than they are today.

- Finally, there should be a stronger emphasis placed on the evaluation process as a source of learning, rather than on the final product – the evaluation report.

In sum, it is a difficult, but not an impossible, task to improve learning in development co-operation. In this book we have identified a set of critical, sometimes structural, problems in development aid that need to be overcome, if learning is to become more effective than it is today.

About the contributions

Since the authors were given a free hand to address the subject of learning, there were no immediate criteria for organising their contributions. We have chosen to present their contributions in a straightforward alphabetical order, (Part III). However, to allow the reader to benefit from a broader orientation of the problems surrounding organisational learning in development co-operation the four contributions by Berg, Edgren, Suhrke and Suzuki, which all have a slightly broader approach to these questions, have been chosen to form an introductory block, (Part II), following this introductory chapter (Part I).

Elliot Berg focuses his article on diagnosis and the identification of blockages to organisational learning. It is especially concerned with inadequate responses to failure, which explains why learning from mistakes is so imperfect. The author explains these responses by: the nature of the external reform environment; shortcomings in evaluations, and; internal organisational factors. Most of the examples are chosen from World Bank experience with institutional development.

Gus Edgren's contribution discusses to what extent obstacles to learning exist in development co-operation agencies. Such obstacles can be institutional such as the structure and working culture of the organisation. Obstacles to learning can also be psychological in nature. His example is general purpose development agencies such as Sida.

Astri Suhrke examines organisational learning in the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). She looks at the response of UNHCR to two fairly similar crisis situations – Northern Iraq in 1991 and Kosovo in 1999. She asks whether weaknesses in the agency's response to the first crisis had been reduced in the second crisis. If so, what was the cause of the change. She emphasises that no situation equals another and that an organisation easily falls into the trap of wishful thinking.

Naoki Suzuki examines the difficulties and opportunities that confront development practitioners and organisations in the process of learning and in implementing necessary changes, in order to improve their daily work. He discusses the learning process of three groups: the intended beneficiaries, the staff who work in the field and people in management positions in the development organisations. Although his examples are taken from Japanese aid, his findings are of a general nature.

Louk Box uses the case of a farmer, Virgilio, in the Dominican Republic to argue that aid rarely listens to and tries to learn from the accumulated

experience of the grassroots. Among poor cultivators there exists a wealth of knowledge, while among the great scientists in the same countries, there often exists only a limited knowledge about the same crops. He discusses the possibility of bridging this gap through knowledge networks and international co-operation.

Jerker Carlsson discusses the usefulness of evaluations for stakeholders in development aid, and the relevance of evaluations for learning. He argues that since stakeholders in recipient countries seldom find donor initiated evaluations useful, one cannot expect any significant learning to take place in recipient countries. This article builds on a larger study of the usefulness of evaluations in some selected Swedish co-operation partners in Africa.

Kai-ming Cheng's point of departure is that development projects are successful only if there is a real understanding of the local need and problems in the local community. He uses examples from his experience from educational planning in China to show how learning is ultimately determined by a thorough understanding of local contexts. He also draws attention to problems in linking personal with organisational learning.

Margareta Grape introduces the fictional character of Mr. Olofsson to show the mental and cultural barriers to learning that exist among experts as well as those to be taught by the expert. He finds that the Chilean people's experience from the process of democratisation can offer Sweden many relevant lessons. The article raises the question of whether donors and recipient partners interpret a shared experience in the same way.

Jacques Hallack's article takes its point of departure in his experience from the education sector and especially from areas such as policy, planning and management. He uses his work experience from the International Institute of Education Planning (IIEP) to illustrate his discussion.

Kenneth King's reflection on learning is based on his wide experience from different learning environments. His topic is the current fascination with the role of knowledge in the development process and he raises questions about how this diverges from what went on before, and why this particular interest has arisen in the last few years of the Fourth Development Decade.

Kirsti Lintonen's article analyses changes in the policy and practice of Finnish development co-operation that took place during the 1990s. She addresses the question of whether change is driven by external events, or is the result of a long learning process.

Narciso Matos in his contribution departs from the standpoint that North-South relations are nowadays generally better than before, and that the lessons from the past are informing today's prevailing relationships. The article reflects upon the experience gained from university relationships between African institutions, in particular the University of Eduardo Mondlane, and European partners.

Thandika Mkandawire's contribution highlights the role of the African intellectual in African policy making. The article focuses on the systematic inability of African governments to establish a productive and organic rapport with their own intelligentsia. He sees this as a major obstacle for local learning from experiences in aid.

Ernesto and Paulina Schiefelbein's article is about learning in relation to outside support to formal systems of education in Latin America. It looks at the complex relationships that exist between knowing about the shortcomings of these systems and actually doing something to change the direction and modalities of outside financial and professional support.

Willi Wapenhans writes about the World Bank as a learning institution. As the Bank has been subjected to increasing demands for accountability, and improved development effectiveness, learning has become an increasingly important issue. How successful has the Bank been in learning lessons, identifying opportunities for change, advancing the development agenda etc.?

Anna Wieslander summarises how learning from technical assistance was experienced by herself and people on the recipient side in Swedish supported projects. She examines constraints among the technical experts themselves, within the donor agency, as well as within the co-operating partners in the recipient country.

Finally, the editors wish to express their great appreciation to the members of the reference group of the project (Ann Marie Fallenius, Ingemar Gustafsson, Stefan Molund and Bertil Odén) for their helpful and constructive comments on all chapters at the draft stage. Many thanks also to Ulrica Risso Engblom and Susan Lindvall for their copy-editing of the manuscript.

References

Argyris, C., 1994, *On Organisational Learning.* Massachusetts: Blackwell.

Bauer, P.T., 1992, *Equality, the Third World and Economic Delusion.* London: Methuen.

Berg, E., 1993, *Rethinking Technical Cooperation. Reforms for Capacity Building in Africa.* New York: UNDP.

Burnside, C. and Dollar, D., 1997, "Aid, Policies and Growth", Policy Research Working Paper no. 1777. Washington: World Bank.

Cassen, R. *et al.*, 1986, *Does Aid Work?* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Forss, K., Cracknell, B. and Stromquist, N., 1998, *Organisational Learning in Development Co-operation: How Knowledge is Generated and Used.* EGDI Working Paper 1998:3, Stockholm:. The Expert Group on Development Issues.

Mosley, P., 1987, *Overseas Aid. Its Defence and Reform.* Brighton: Wheatsheaf.

Riksrevisionsverket, 1988, *Lär sig Sida?* Stockholm: Riksrevisionsverket.

Saasa, O. and Carlsson, J., 1996, *The Aid Relationship in Zambia. A Conflict Scenario.* Uppsala: the Nordic Africa Institute.

Samset, K., Forss, K. and Hauglion, O., 1993, International Learning from Evaluations and Reviews. Evaluation Report, 1:93. Oslo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Part II

Why Aren't Aid Organizations Better Learners?

Elliot Berg

Organizations responsible for international development assistance have long been perceived to be slow learners. One of the main problems pinpointed in Cassen's 1986 study, *Does Aid Work?,* was that aid organizations do not seem to learn from their mistakes. The recent Swedish Foreign Ministry report (*Organizational Learning in Development Cooperation: How Knowledge is Generated and Used*, 1998) arrives at a similar, though more nuanced conclusion: that aid agencies learn, but "slowly and cautiously".

The African experience has been particularly well documented. A 1991 World Bank study of aid to African agriculture noted that sparse technology and limited local capacity had reduced the yield of donor investments, but pointed out also that aid effectiveness had been:

> limited by … narrowly defined project objectives, short time horizons, ambitious project targets, inadequate understanding of the broad policy and sector issues and their impact on project operation, and poor knowledge of the socio-cultural environment. In the evaluations commissioned by the donors themselves, these factors had already been identified as important constraints on smallholder growth. Yet this literature had little impact on donor behaviour.[2]

A 1996 study of aid to Africa has different notes but the same tune: "Attention has regularly been drawn to the excessive complexity of projects and the lack of realism of their demands on government capacity. Yet there is no evidence of a reduction in complexity in recent years."[3]

This paper focuses on diagnosis, on the identification of blockages to organizational learning. It is concerned especially with inadequate responses to failure, with explaining why learning from mistakes is so imperfect. Little is said directly about prescriptions, though most of these flow readily from the diagnoses. Examples of weak organizational response are drawn mainly from World Bank experience with institutional development, particularly public sector management reform. But much of the analysis is probably applicable to other aid organizations.

---

[2] Uma (ed.), 1991, p. 587.
[3] van de Walle and Johnston, 1996.

A word on definitions at the outset. The notion of "organizational learning" is full of ambiguities. Organizations do not learn, individuals do. A learning organization *absorbs* and *adapts* new knowledge or insights that are present in individual heads, and changes its behaviour accordingly. New knowledge is generated within the organization as its staff and management draws lessons from their activities. It is also generated outside, by practitioners in other organizations and by analysts, academic and other. Organizational learning is concerned with whether and how the new knowledge is translated into operational reality. Despite its ambiguities, it is convenient to use the term "organizational learning" as shorthand for the process by which organizations obtain and use knowledge to adapt old policies, programs and strategies, or to innovate more broadly.

Much Learning about Development Has Occurred

The past forty years have certainly seen a lot of learning about the nature of economic underdevelopment and poverty, and about good and bad strategies or policies for dealing with it. Examples abound. We know now that identification of market failures is not by itself enough to guide action; something also has to be known about public sector capabilities. We know that the relationship between investment and growth is a lot more complicated than is assumed in widely-used models. And that the relationship between growth and inequality can not be generalized as in the famous Kuznets curve: income inequality does not invariably rise in early stages of development and decline later. We know the limits of import substitution industrialization strategies, and the limits of trade liberalization and privatization. On more workaday matters, we know that introduction of cash crops often has negative effects on rural women, that small dams are almost always cheaper, more effective and more sustainable than big dams, and that on-the-job approaches to skill development tend to be more economic and more effective than traditional vocational school training. These are only illustrative examples; of course we know much more.

So there has certainly been learning about development, and much of it has led to changes in aid agency priorities, in the design of their projects and policies and in the way they work. But much individual learning remains unabsorbed, and many flawed approaches persist for a long time.

Aid Agencies Respond Slowly to Failure

Technical assistance (TA) provides one well-known example. "Hard" or "engineering" TA – help in designing a road, for example – has a good record, and TA in well-governed countries has also been satisfactory. But TA for institution- or capacity-building in the least developed countries has been long regarded as ineffective, a clear failure. This is confirmed in evaluation studies by all donors, which show very low success rates for TA projects aimed at institutional development.

The litany of deficiencies is all too familiar: hasty and poor design of TA projects, defects in implementation such as recruitment delays, selection of unsuitable consultants, perfunctory attention to training components, sparse supervision, poor coordination between donors, lack of good local counterparts, weak local ownership and management. Perhaps more basic is excessive reliance on the resident expatriate-local counterpart model, long recognized as being a highly imperfect instrument for transfer of know-how. Many other weaknesses are cited – among them, the high cost of TA personnel, lack of cost-consciousness on the recipient side, acceptance of personnel in order to get access to vehicles, equipment, supplies.

Most of these weaknesses have been known for twenty years or more. A report on the World Bank's TA in 1982 ("The Storey Report") catalogues most of them. There has been some change in recent years, such as reduced resort to expatriates, greater reliance on local consultants and, in the United Nations Development Program, reliance on so-called "National Execution". The World Bank is experimenting with flexible, non-blueprint-type instruments. But observation on the ground suggests that much remains unchanged and that TA effectiveness in institution building remains uncertain.

Public sector management reform is another broad area of persistent poor performance. Virtually all the major instruments devised by donors over the past 20 years to strengthen state capacity have turned out to be ineffective, and creative responses to these failures have been few. This is true for example of the standard approaches to civil service reform, public enterprise management, budget process strengthening.[4]

---

[4] See my paper, "Aid and Failed Reforms: The Case of Public Sector Management," in Finn Tarp, (ed.), forthcoming University of Copenhagen book on aid.

- The typical civil service reform programs have aimed at reinforcing personnel management, reducing employment, reducing the aggregate wage bill, raising real wage levels and "decompressing" structures—raising higher level staff salaries more than those of unskilled staff, to improve incentives. These programs were launched in many countries in the late 1970s and 1980s, with Sub-Saharan Africa the target of choice. However, mid-1990s evaluations found that few African countries had effective control over payroll systems, that in only a handful of countries were employment numbers or wage bills cut significantly, that salary differentials had become more not less compressed.

- Reform of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) aimed at increased management autonomy and efficiency, reduction of subsidies, divestiture. A major instrument was performance contracting, agreement between government and SOEs on objectives and mutual obligations. Almost 600 such contracts existed in the mid-1990s, in 32 countries, mainly in Africa and Asia. A 1995 World Bank study found that between the late 1970s and the early 1990s, public enterprise sectors did not shrink, and that while subsidies fell, they were often replaced by increased bank credit. Performance contracts were largely ineffective.[5]

- The World Bank financed 250 adjustment loans containing fiscal reforms to 80 countries between 1979 and 1994. A 1996 evaluation found no improvement in budget deficit situations among low income borrowers, and a poor record on budget process reform.[6] A major instrument of budget reform had been the rolling public investment program (PIP), which was introduced in many countries in the 1980s. In the 1998 *Public Expenditure Handbook* of the World Bank, PIPs are condemned: they are said to encourage dual budgeting and poor expenditure planning (neglect of recurrent costs for example). Although white elephants are fewer, this is due to general budget constraints; the PIPs have led to little improvement in the quality of investment decisions because of their looser screening compared to regular budgets.

---

[5] World Bank, 1995, A related paper stated: "(It) is clear that if the contracts in our sample are representative of the performance contracts in use; with natural monopolies worldwide, then considerable time and effort is being expended on an exercise with neither theoretical nor empirical justification." (Shirley and Colin Xu, 1997).

[6] World Bank, October 1996.

- Medium Term Expenditure Programs (MTEPs) and Public Expenditure Reviews (PERs) are follow-ons to PIPs. The investment programming effort was seen as too restricted, covering only a minor share of public expenditures. Donor (World Bank) staff, therefore urged that all budget resources be analyzed and programmed via MTEPs and monitored by PERs. The MTEPs are too recent to have much of a track record. But the PERs have been around for some years and are numerous; 113 of them were done between 1987 and 1993. A recent evaluation found little positive to say about their impact. It states that the PERs have rarely met the needs of any well-defined end-user, gave prescriptions that are dogmatic and recommendations that were "formulaic" and excessively general. They often omitted major issues and generally neglected institutional questions.

That these public sector management reforms have had so few successes is not surprising, and certainly not shameful. All institutional change is extremely difficult, and in the public sector management case novel instruments and intractable environments make it more so. The point is that the history of these reform efforts provides good illustrations of slow donor response to failure and limited capacity to adapt – that is, poor learning.

The weaknesses of most public sector management reform approaches were flagged early by World Bank staff and by others. The poor performance of performance contracts was underscored as early as 1989, and repeatedly thereafter. Yet the signing of such contracts continued to be the centerpiece of the conditionality in structural adjustment and public enterprise reform loans. And they are still used, even after their devastating critique by the authors of the 1995 *Bureaucrats in Business* study (see footnote 5). One of the main reasons given for cancellation in 1996 of a public enterprise reform credit in Guinea was failure to meet the conditionality on performance contracts.

The PIP experience is similar. Some management specialists and others sounded alarms about the dangers of dual budgeting and other deficiencies in the PIP approach as adopted throughout the 1980s. Yet rolling PIPs remained popular in World Bank and other donor reform programs in the least developed countries. Although depicted as a terrible idea in the Bank's latest *Public Expenditure Handbook*, limited observation suggests that many countries continue to produce PIPs.

Civil service reform efforts continued along more or less the same path for more than 15 years despite an almost unbroken record of disappointment – missed targets, patchy implementation, backsliding, persistent civil service disarray. The donor response has tended to emphasize the need to place civil service reform in the broader context of general public management reform. Some are turning to more sophisticated, decentralized approaches, drawn from industrial country experiences, and usually called "New Public Management".

Despite the limited yield from public expenditure reviews (PERs) in the poorest countries, the PER process and related institutional issues were little modified until the late 1990s. The glaring problem of lack of local ownership was neglected; in the 113 PERs completed up to 1993, only three included local members on the review team, not one in Africa where most were done and where the ownership problem was most acute. It was not until the late 1990s that more diversified approaches to PERs appeared, and more attention was given to problems of process and the cultivation of local ownership. In new emphases on aid pooling and general budget support the Public Expenditure Review is now being given a crucial role in expenditure monitoring. The belief remains strong in the World Bank and presumably among some other donors that this profoundly intrusive instrument can reconcile two objectives – provision of technical advice and independent assessment of public finances. This seems unlikely in the light of past experience.

Explaining Poor Aid Organization Responses to Failure

How can we explain slow and hesitant knowledge absorption in many aid organizations, and especially the sluggish response to program failures illustrated here by the technical assistance story and by the World Bank's experience with public sector management reform? Three sets of factors are at work. The first consists of learning-obstructing elements in aided country environments. The second relates to shortcomings in formal evaluations. The third concerns internal aid organization characteristics.

The Nature of the External Reform Environment

Effective aid interventions – those that are growth-inducing, poverty-reducing, capacity-enhancing and sustainable – are extremely difficult to conceive and implement in developing countries. Institution-building programs are especially complex. The technical problems to be attacked

are complicated; knowledge about how to deal with them is always incomplete. Social and political obstacles are formidable. Difficult judgements are required as to institutional readiness and political commitment. Program acceptability usually requires compromise and bargaining. All of this makes for hazy conceptions of what is right and what is wrong. It means that it is almost always difficult to extract clear "lessons" from failed projects and programs.

Along with the general complications due to the complexity of individual country situations, other lesson-diluting factors exist. The "market" for aid agencies is enormously *diverse*. It consists of countries at different stages of economic development, with vastly different histories and cultural endowments, different social and political conditions – countries therefore with very different capabilities to manage national resources and institutional change. Aside from making the development task generally more demanding, one learning-related implication of this diversity is that the transfer of experience is made more difficult. It is not easy to apply lessons from one part of the "market" to another because of the variability of basic conditions.

A former department director in the World Bank tells me that every year the Executive Board would ask: What is the Bank doing to see that the staff learns from the many "lessons" emanating from the reports of the Operations Evaluation Department? He would distribute relevant reports and have a meeting to discuss them. The staff would say: "None of this applies to me. The situations I confront are unique."

A related aspect of diversity, less noted, is that it makes intra-country capitalization of lessons more difficult. I call this the "It worked in Peru" phenomenon. My first developing country job was as planner/economic advisor in Liberia, heading a team of economists in that country's planning agency. One member of our team had worked in many other developing countries, among them Peru. He was a formidable advocate, technically strong, articulate and self-confident. In agency debates about proposed projects and policies, his voice carried heavy weight. In many cases, project ideas that seemed to others and me in the ministry to be completely inappropriate and wrong-headed were passed at his urging. Some of us would say, for example, of a cooperative irrigated rice growing scheme being proposed by the Ministry of Agriculture (with the FAO): "That can't work: relative costs and prices are wrong and the local people don't like working in water." He would say: "But it worked in Peru", where he had seen it. That argument, put forward aggressively, carried

the day. We approved a number of projects that way, most of which turned out to be losers, ill-adapted to Liberian realities. (And I have never found out whether they actually worked in Peru.)

In addition to their diversity, individual aid "markets" (aided countries) are also changing over time. More people graduate from schools, new roads and other infrastructure investments come on stream, administrative reforms are introduced, government revenues increase as export sectors develop. And decision-makers change: ministerial reshufflings lead to replacement of ministers and other top officials. Changes are always occurring also on the donor side, as staff turns over and priorities are reordered.

One result is that it is hard to kill failed ideas of the past. Some were implemented with bad results, others were shot down by screeners. But both often reappear. Donor and local project developers remember them or find them in old files, and rework them. They often say to those who are sceptical because of past experience: "Oh, that didn't work then (or was rejected) because we didn't have roads or access to electricity or trained people. Now we have more of those things, so it will work." New players also can (and often do) point to other reasons why past failure is a bad guide to present action. They say it was due to poor design, or to the incompetence of the previous decision-makers and implementers. Advocates say that they now have a better project and a more competent team. (In addition, usually, to promises of financing from some donor.)

Another result, perhaps more internal to aid agencies than external, is the adoption of ideas and approaches that have been made unsuitable by changes in the environment. Examples are the logical framework concept, which has been adopted by most donors in recent years, and donor "results orientation", emphasized for example in the US Agency for International Development. The use of the logical framework for project cycles has been touted as the greatest innovation in evaluation in many years. And spokesmen for USAID have extolled the effectiveness of their "reengineered" agency, with its focus on performance indicators and results. But these innovations are being adopted at a time of great change in developing country needs and development assistance priorities.

Higher priority now is being given to institutional change, capacity building, governance – areas of intervention for which the new aid approaches are least applicable. Blueprint approaches such as are incorporated in the logical framework concept are not right for these

new activities. Their objectives are more diffuse and softer, the paths to change are less well understood than, say, infrastructure projects. Performance indicators are fewer and more debatable. Present needs, then, are for more flexible, experimental approaches, not for refined logical framework concepts.

Similarly, results orientation may result in neglect of high priority but poorly-quantifiable objectives, as in the USAID results reports, where you can find out how many classrooms were built and the number of outpatient visits, but practically nothing about institutional reinforcement. Capacity building is almost never mentioned in these voluminous reports.

Two other aspects of aid "markets" have contributed to learning blockages. First, the poorest, most heavily aided countries have enjoyed excess supply of aid project money over most of the past two decades. And they have had access to a large number of donor agencies. It has been common for one donor to abandon a project that is going nowhere, only to have another donor take it over. Lessons about effectiveness are muted in those cases.

Secondly, there is a lack of autonomous intermediaries in heavily-aided countries.[7] Government agencies, universities, NGOs have come to rely on external financing. Donors spend much of their "dialogue" in discussion with captured institutions and officials who are direct beneficiaries. The emphasis on "partnerships" in recent years may have reduced the severity of this problem. But it is unclear how genuine many of these partnerships are, given the differences in power and knowledge between the aid donors and their local partners.

The result is that feedback has become distorted and often unreliable. The "true" nature of the demand for aid projects is harder to determine. Projects conceived and designed by donors sail through host country approval mechanisms without being seriously vetted. In the policy area, donor dialogue is mainly with core economic ministries, with officials whose views are closest to those of their donor partners but which often are not widely shared within government. What is most pertinent from the learning perspective is that genuinely critical dialogue, the best source of feedback, is rare, narrowing the information flow to donors about what is really happening.

---

[7] See Naudet, 1999, Chapter 7.

Evaluation Shortcomings

Formal evaluation should be a major instrument of organizational change. It should uncover failure and induce organizational response. It should be the provider of lessons learned from specific aid agency projects and programs. There is widespread agreement that in development assistance, evaluation has not performed these functions well, particularly with respect to institution-building activities.[8]

One problem for their lack of impact is their sheer number. Worldwide many thousands have been done in the past two decades. In the Sahel countries of West Africa alone, one count found more than a thousand. These are usually large documents. A visit to an aid agency office anywhere reveals desks groaning under the weight of these reports, and shelves piled high with them. Aid agencies do some syntheses of their own evaluations, but not many and not often.

Evaluations are read by few people. They are often regarded as confidential. Inter-donor circulation is slight. Local diffusion is also restricted, formally or informally; a copy may go to the government agency directly involved, and perhaps to core economic agencies. But often they are not distributed to beneficiaries at all. Rarely do they find their way to the press, research institutes, universities.

Evaluations are rarely subjected to serious debate. The beneficiary in World Bank projects is given the opportunity to comment on the completed draft report, and some do. However, the responses are usually perfunctory, unless the evaluation is critical of recipient performance. I have often presented critical evaluation reports to aid agencies, with little reaction.

The evaluation process has numerous objectives: to guide aid agency decision-making; to audit implementation and establish accountability; to draw lessons for future application; to provide a framework for dialogue, including with beneficiaries. In practice, the accountability, learning and dialogue objectives usually receive less attention, lower priority, than the objective of improving decision-making. This is evident in the lists of "lessons learned" appended to many aid agency project/ program evaluations. These are almost always banal, uninformative, so general as to apply to any project anywhere: don't overestimate government capability; make sure government is committed; choose TA personnel more carefully; consult with beneficiaries, etc.

---

[8] See Naudet, 1999, Chapter 8, and Picciotto and Weisner, 1998.

This is certainly understandable. The primary objective of a program evaluation should be to improve performance. This is especially so for mid-term evaluations, where the aim is to correct for mistakes or unforeseen changes that are reducing program impact. A contradiction is invariably present: the evaluator will be more effective in putting a faltering project (or its follow-on) on course if he minimizes or disguises his critical observations. There is thus no point in making a plain-speaking, hard-hitting evaluation, one that could be a useful piece of institutional memory, since that will be taken as an indictment of project designers, implementers and supervisors. It will make them, and the organization as a whole, defensive and less open to change. (If an outside consultant is doing the evaluation it could also threaten future business.) It is better to downplay past errors, use code words to suggest that they exist, and move on to the main task at hand: making the project work better. The consequence, however, is that the evaluation is not much use for learning how and why things are working well or badly. It is therefore not much of an addition to institutional memory.

A final reason why evaluation has not performed its learning function well is the scarcity of impact studies. Traditionally, donors do mid-term evaluations to make mid-stream adjustments where needed, and project completion reports, which are done shortly after final disbursements, to confirm whether inputs and "results" (road mileage or school buildings constructed, training courses provided, etc.) were as planned. Nowadays some donors, such as the World Bank, do country assistance reviews and sectoral assessments. But very few impact studies can be found – that is investigations three, five or ten years after project completion – which look at outcomes, expected or unexpected.

Internal Organizational Factors

These are presented in no particular order. Some seem to apply to aid organizations as a group, or even to bureaucracies in general. Some are much more specific to particular agencies. My main organization of reference is the World Bank.

Several important but well-known factors need little elaboration. One is the high rate of turnover of aid agency staff. One World Bank public enterprise reform project in Guinea had four task managers in two years. Task managers changed five times the first three years of a large and very complex public sector management project in Argentina.[9] One

---

[9] Buyck, December 1989.

reason is that job changes are a major path for promotion; average tenure in a post rarely exceeds three years. In the World Bank the two major restructuring exercises since 1987 have led to massive and frequent reshuffling of management posts.

A second much-commented-upon organizational feature is the sluggishness of horizontal information flows. Experience of each regional and functional/sectoral unit tends to circulate mainly within the unit, only slowly and partially seeping into other units. A rather less well-understood problem is the risk of clogged vertical information flows. Supervision is done by task managers of variable experience and competence. Their reports and evaluations provide (in the World Bank) the main input to organizational memory concerning project implementation. Anyone who has skimmed through project archives will testify that these reports are often uninformative and sometimes misleading.

If an organization has great competence in a particular line of activity or approach, it will be indisposed to move away from it, despite evidence of past ineffectiveness and the emergence of new demands arising from changed priorities. Several examples in the development assistance area are illustrative.

One is the attachment to blueprint approaches to project design and implementation; it is related to the logical framework point made earlier. Blueprint approaches are fine for projects with objectives that are narrow in scope and fairly precise in expected outcomes, and where the terrain is well-known and predictable. In many donor agencies, the World Bank for example, the tradition calls for clear definition of the problem and a precise statement of how it is to be resolved. But technical assistance projects and institutional development activities rarely have these characteristics. Especially in such areas as public sector management, the problems are complex, the objectives diffuse and often not measurable. The degree of uncertainty and likelihood of unforeseen change are high. The state of the art is thin.

In these circumstances, adaptive or process approaches are called for, but these have been introduced only in the last few years. Such approaches moreover require flexible structures and procedures, and a staff of motivated self-starters. But the kind of pragmatism and adaptability required are not abundant in most aid agencies. Moreover, adaptive approaches demand close and regular monitoring of evolving projects and lots of staff involvement. But traditionally, project identification and appraisal get much more attention than supervision. In the World Bank for example, appraisal gets two or three times as much effort as

supervision, which staff regard as a low-value, low-priority activity.

The priority given inside the Bank to analytic questions as opposed to matters of process is another example. Few observers fail to comment on the enormous amount of time and skill devoted to analysis in that organization. This has great benefits, but also risks producing distorted diagnoses of what has gone wrong in projects in assessing the organization's activities. The organizational inclination is to give too much weight to analytic shortcomings, too little to matters of process such as neglect of ownership and limits of local capacity.

One example, a 1996 evaluation of fiscal reform programs puts the blame for the modest achievements of those programs almost entirely on analytic shortcomings, as though the poor past results in fiscal reform derive from inadequate knowledge and technical ineptness.[10] But process deficiencies were almost certainly more important, and they receive little attention. The word "ownership" does not seem to be mentioned even once in this document. Moreover, the recommendations give little place to local participation, ownership and commitment. They call for expansion of reform scope and a deepening of supporting analysis.

The same flavor marks Bank reviews of PERs prior to 1998. Process and institutional issues received until very recently surprisingly little attention – a sentence or two on ownership here, a paragraph there about broader participation, perhaps a page or two on budget institutions and decision processes. The accent was clearly on technical deficiencies and the analytic shortcomings of the exercises: the inadequate theoretical basis in the reviews for intersectoral allocations, excessive focus on inputs and neglect of outcomes, failure to discuss the public-private mix, frequent lack of the most basic data, such as functional-economic classifications, and thin analytic approaches to integrating capital and current expenditures. Some operational weaknesses are mentioned, such as long lags between the departure of the PER missions and the appearance of the reports, and failure to follow up on recommendations. But analytic weaknesses are given pride of place, with ownership and institutional concerns a distant second.

Why despite innumerable warnings and exhortations do donors, in particular the World Bank, continue to overestimate local commitment and capacity, and continue to design overly complex projects? One reason is the enduring power of the pressure to spend, which inclines staff to

---

[10] World Bank, 1996.

take an optimistic view on these matters. Another is endemic hubris – a belief among many staff that all obstacles can be overcome with money, intelligence and effort, and that all of these will be forthcoming. A third is a Christmas tree propensity in project design, which is encouraged by the decision making system. Program designers find it hard to resist requests to add components, even when local commitment is uncertain and capacities (the Bank's and/or the recipient's) are limited. How can a rural development project not include a gender-oriented component? How can the designers of an economic management support project resist the pressures of the divisions concerned with governance to add a legal/judicial reform component, despite lukewarm recipient commitment and slender Bank capacity to supervise?

This is an example of internal processes driving the organization's programs, leading not infrequently to neglect of lessons of experience. Another example comes from the nature of top leadership. Agency heads are political appointees. They also have short tenure, at least in the World Bank case. To establish his credentials, to show his "leadership" and to make a splash on the development scene, the agency president is tempted to make new initiatives. Often these are not new and not good initiatives. President Wolfensohn's proposal to develop Comprehensive Development Frameworks is the best current example. This collage of old ideas ignores similar initiatives of national governments and other aid agencies and is vague as to objectives; it is not clear what problem it is mainly intended to resolve. The fact that it emerged at all is not only an indication of the strength of the "new initiative" impulse at the top, but indicative also of World Bank incapacity to bring its own staff knowledge to bear on decision-making, its inability to assure careful assessment of its own initiatives.

Political environments, internal incentive structures and divisions of labor are not conducive to learning from mistakes. It is not clear that anyone receives kudos for acknowledging error and addressing it. Indeed, to express open doubt about projects or strategic initiatives is usually unhealthy. Top leadership sees criticism as evidence of resistance to innovation; critics come to be regarded as part of the organization's problems. In some agencies this distrust of criticism is exacerbated by a hostile attitude towards foreign aid in the donor country's political environment, and a sensitivity to critics who are ready to decry waste and inefficiency. Within the organization criticism and exposure of errors can be regarded as traitorous. All of this obviously erodes the organization's capacity to benefit from experience, especially from mistakes.

New project generation, "innovation" and the volume of spending receive highest marks. Despite exhortation to the contrary and some improvement, moving money is still the best way for staff to move up the organizational ladder. With respect to division of labor, different people appraise, design, implement, supervise and evaluate. Everybody presides over someone else's project, which will be evaluated by a third person – an arrangement not conducive to effective learning.

There is, finally, the difficulty of customizing interventions to fit individual country circumstances. The developing country environments are so complex, and so diverse, the state of the art often so rudimentary and time available so short, that donor staff have to resort to off-the-shelf solutions, to current "best practices". These are often very general, with uncertain foundations and probably dated. But it is not clear where else to turn. Detailed knowledge of local institutional settings is too limited to permit starting from scratch, as it was. This has contributed to the overly standardized character of most projects.

In any event, sensitivity to country-specific institutional constraints has never been a strong point in World Bank operations, nor perhaps those of most donors. A 1994 survey found that one-third of Bank staff members working on privatization believed that the greatest weakness in Bank operations was inability to customize programs to country-specific needs.[11] The 1998 Bank evaluation of PERs hit similar themes, but also revealed some incongruities. It found that African PERs showed less awareness of institutional constraints than those in other regions, despite the generally higher level of institutional sensitivity among staff in that region. The Africa regional staff may thus know better what to do but appear less able to shape their interventions accordingly.

---

[11] World Bank, 1994.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed obstacles to aid organization learning due to complexity, diversity, and change in aid country environments; to deficiencies in evaluation; and to internal aid agency characteristics. Aid aimed at institutional development has been the primary functional concern, the failure to learn from mistakes the main form of learning considered, the World Bank the main source of organizational insights.

The analysis rests on personal experience, conversations with other practitioners, donor and other literature. It contains little that will surprise most practitioners, though it makes clear that organizational learning in the aid business is enormously difficult, far more so than for most other organizations. Few organizations have to deal with external environments so complex and so dynamic, with so much suspicion or hostility in their political environments, with so many anti-learning elements in their organizational culture.

Clearly describing the nature of the beast is of course only the first step, though a crucial one. The question of what to do remains. How can the identified obstacles be overcome, and aid agencies made more effective learning organizations?

At this point, I have little to add to the conventional wisdom on these questions. A lighter hand on program identification, more genuine partnership, more attention in general to process issues and ownership – donors have talked about these good ideas for almost a decade. Decentralization and better internal and external networking are also part of donor reform agendas. We can continue to exhort aid agencies to respond to lessons of poor performance – to design TA projects more slowly and more collaboratively, to hire staff more sensitive to institutional constraints, to do closer analysis of these institutional issues for all country strategies and projects, to more vigorously restrain overly ambitious programs and reward staff for prudence and for supervision, as well as for moving money. More impact studies would help clarify failures and successes. More use of outsiders for evaluation would probably increase their candor and hence their usefulness.

Many more suggestions of this kind are possible, are indeed already on the table in donor circles. To define them better and to assess their desirability and feasibility much more needs to be known about what has happened to recent donor reforms. After all, the 1990s have been marked by wider recognition of the problems catalogued in this paper

and moves by aid agencies to respond to them. The next step has to be to find out how many of the announced changes in donor approaches have actually been implemented and how they are working.

References

Berg, E., 2000, "Aid and failed Reforms: the Case of Public Sector Management" in Finn Tarp (ed.), *Foreign Aid and Development. Lessons Learnt and Directions for the Future,* Routledge Studies in Development Economics 17, London and New York: Routledge.

Buyck, B., December 1989, *The World Bank's Use of Technical Assistance for Institutional Development: A Review of Issues and Lessons of Experience*, paper prepared for the World Bank's Conference on Institutional Development.

Naudet, J.D. 1999, *Vingt ans d'aide au Sahel: Trouver des problemes aux solutions*, Club du Sahel, Paris: OECD.

Picciotto, R. and E. Weisner, 1998, *Evaluation and Development: The Institutional Dimension*, World Bank.

Shirley, Mary and I. Colin Xu, 1997, *Information, Incentives and Commitment: An Empirical Analysis of Contracts between Governments and State Enterprises*, World Bank.

Uma, L., (ed.), 1991, *Aid to African Agriculture. Lessons from Two Decades of Donors' Experience*, World Bank.

van der Walle, Nick and Timothy Johnston, 1996, *Improving Aid to Africa*, Washington: Overseas Development Council.

World Bank, 1994, *World Bank Assistance to Privatization*, Washington D.C.: Operations Evaluation Department.

World Bank, 1995, *Bureaucrats in Business. The Economics and Politics of Government Ownership*. Washington D.C.: World Bank.

World Bank, October 1996, *Fiscal Management In Adjustment Lending*. Washington D.C.: Operations Evaluation Department.

Fashions, Myths and Delusion: Obstacles to Organisational Learning in Aid Agencies

Gus Edgren[12]

Background

The discussion on organisational learning makes frequent references to the existence of learning blocks, mostly in the form of institutional or mental obstacles to learning. Such blocks can be caused by psychological factors, such as pride or trauma, or they can be caused by the structure and working culture of the organisation. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss to what extent such blocks exist in development cooperation agencies, and in particular in general-purpose agencies like Sida. It is of particular interest to find out what type of blocks may be common in such agencies, where they come from, and what consequences they may have for the effectiveness of the organisations. Ultimately, the question is if any form of organisational learning may be used to eliminate or neutralise the block.

The learning organisation

In the 90s, the most important distinction of an organisation is not whether it has cutting edge technology but whether it *learns*. If it has the ability to learn, it can solve all its problems, technology and cost effectiveness included, but if not, it will be unable to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Quoting Joseph Stiglitz (1987) "the frame of mind associated with asking 'how can this task be performed better?' is fundamentally different from the frame of mind which is associated with asking 'how am I supposed to perform this task?"

A frame of mind of the latter type may be found mainly in organisations whose purpose is to maintain adherence to regulations and norms. Aid organisations are in the business of bringing about change, in an environment which varies from one project to the other and may change very drastically over time. It is impossible to standardise development

---

cooperation through check-lists and forms. The programme officer of an aid agency does not ask the question "What is the correct way of solving this development problem?" but rather "How can we try out something which will work better?" So our presumption is that development cooperation agencies are eager to learn and that their distinction will indeed be determined by their ability to draw on past experience as well as new knowledge in a systematic way.

Even organisations which reward innovation and work in unstable environments may have problems in absorbing the lessons and the knowledge they come across. Individuals may learn but their organisations still have difficulties in absorbing the knowledge and adjusting to it. Forss *et al.* (1999) categorise the preconditions of learning as structural, process-related and cultural factors and find a number of instances where aid agencies have been slow to pick up knowledge and experience which could be useful to them. Structural factors may be a fragmented organisation, which requires that several units or agencies cooperate in order to solve a development problem. Cultural factors may flow from recruitment, or they could have their origin in a professional camaraderie which cultivates values which are different from those in the outside world. And the work process may be so complex or obscure that staff in different departments have difficulties in relating their own work to the total outcome.

Peter Senge (1990) provides a long list of learning blocks. One of his most famous parables, the one of the boiled frog, is very relevant to the aid industry. This parable suggests that if you drop a frog into a pot of boiling water it will jump out of the pot as quickly as it can. But if you drop it into luke-warm water and raise the temperature only gradually, it may find the pot a cosy place and fall asleep, only to be boiled when the temperature has risen high enough. Changes which occur slowly over a long period of time are often not registered by the organisation until it is too late to adjust to the situation. Senge has also examined a number of other learning blocks with reference to US corporate organisations and has developed models for team learning to neutralise them.

An ambitious attempt was made by the Swedish National Audit Office (RRV) in 1988 to examine Sida's capability for organisational learning. The report, "*Lär sig Sida?*" (Does Sida learn?), was based on extensive interviews with Sida staff as well as with other aid agencies.[13] It placed

---

[13] The present agency Sida was created in 1995 through a merger of four agencies, one of which had the same acronym but in upper-case letters. When there is a risk of confusion, I shall refer to them as "old Sida" and "new Sida".

emphasis on personnel policy for recruitment, promotions and rotation within the agency as a base for learning, and it also attached high importance to the leadership factors. An interesting aspect which RRV raised was that of consistency among the different objectives that politicians had laid down for Sida 's work. Inconsistencies, conflicts and obscurity among those objectives could lead to severe learning blocks and even to despair and cynicism within the staff.

It is worth pursuing these lines of analysis further with respect to existing development cooperation agencies. I have not been able to collect much hard data on some of the relevant factors, so the discussion will be largely conjectural. But it may still be sufficient for formulating some of the questions for a deeper and more scientific enquiry into the question, why aid agencies keep repeating the same mistakes, seemingly without learning from the past.

Structural obstacles to learning

The 'foreign aid industry' is a complex configuration, which has emerged through structures determined by donor interests rather than by recipient needs (see for instance Raffer and Singer, 1996). It is highly competitive but its success rate cannot be measured in quantitative terms, since the results register as different degrees of satisfaction among the owners of each aid agency – mostly politicians and high bureaucrats – rather than in terms of measurable development impact. Satisfaction is very often derived from inputs and activities rather than from verifiable results. In this industry it is possible for individual agencies to register full satisfaction with their own outcomes in a particular country or project while the result of the aid effort as a whole – taking into account the inputs from all donor agencies and NGOs – is commonly agreed to be a disaster.

Before we consider the entire aid industry as a system, let us first examine the *structure of individual agencies*. These are generally organised in departments and divisions, with a 'field' organisation of country offices. Departments are mostly either sectoral, functional or geographic. Within each organisational unit there are often occupational structures based on function or professional expertise. The general theory of learning blocks maintains that all such departmental and occupational borders are potential obstacles to organisational learning and that their impact must be counteracted.

It is as true of aid agencies as of other organisations that although the

organisational unit may be necessary for developing and maintaining expertise, departmental and professional divisions will also hamper the transfer of knowledge. The question we are asking here is if and how certain aid agencies may be better or worse than others. In this regard, there is a presumption that sectoral or 'specialised' agencies like FAO or ILO may have greater difficulties to absorb new findings outside their immediate area of responsibility than is the case with 'general' agencies like UNDP, the World Bank or Sida. General agencies have a freer flow of both personnel and ideas across department lines than you will normally find in a specialised agency. Horror stories circulate among development workers of the lack of broader vision shown by technical experts from some specialised UN agencies.

In the case of the former Swedish agency Sida, RRV's thorough study did not indicate any particularly serious structural problem, except that the agency's decision-making processes had become extremely long when all the different dimensions of the organisation had to participate. This might pose obstacles to learning for instance by making it easy for any unit participating in the process to blame other units for low efficiency or lack of success.

At the time when the RRV study was made, there were three other public aid agencies in Sweden apart from Sida, namely Sarec, BITS and SwedCorp. All those four agencies were merged to create the new Sida in 1995. It is an interesting question to what extent the organisational learning of all the four agencies was absorbed and fused together in the new Sida. This question has more to do with culture than with structure, however, and will be discussed under another heading.

As mentioned at the outset, the most serious structural problem hampering learning in the aid industry lies in *the way different agencies interact* (or refuse to interact). This is a result of governance and ownership rather than of bad management. The staff and management of each agency are accountable to their own parliaments or governing bodies, and deviations or withdrawal in the interest of a better development impact for the system as a whole are not always appreciated by their principals. In such a system, it is very convenient for an individual agency to blame the others for failed outcomes, resulting in a very serious learning block. If you work for the World Bank or Sida, you may not be ready to learn from the mistakes of FAO, and vice versa.

In recent years, the dysfunctions and transaction costs of aid agencies operating without coordination have prompted OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) as well as the UN's policy bodies to make

this unwieldy structure work for a common purpose. These efforts take as their starting point the recipient organisation's needs and management capability, and they strive for harmonisation of procedures as well as joint financing. Even in the field of disaster relief some soul-searching has taken place, after a series of examples of a very serious lack of coordination in emergencies like Somalia, Rwanda, Cambodia and former Yugoslavia (see for instance the Joint Evaluation of the Rwanda operation, NAI 1996).

Box 1. The Example of how National Execution was finally adopted by UNDP

One example of a self-perpetuating learning bloc in the UN system is given by Forss *et al.* (1998). For many years, developing member countries in the UN had been advocating project execution modality known as National Execution (NEX), which gives the responsibility for executing the projects to the Government or to a national institution rather than to a donor agency. Among the UN agencies it was commonly believed that institutions in developing countries were unable to carry out such responsibilities. And if they were capable of handling them, as in the case of the Government of India, the red tape surrounding a UN project was such that the substantive ministries would rather hand over execution to a UN agency than handle it themselves.

As late as in 1989, less than 10 per cent of UNDP's country programme in India was being nationally executed. An element of vested financial interest could quite easily be seen behind the failure to adopt NEX, since the Specialised Agencies of the UN were earning substantial revenues from the support cost compensation they were paid for implementing projects funded by UNDP, development banks or bilateral sources. Those revenues would be all but lost if the recipient countries were to choose NEX as their mode of execution.

The decisions of the UN General Assembly in 1989 and by UNDP's Governing Council in 1990 were a case where the owners – donor and recipient countries for once acting together – took decisive action against a systemic flaw. In a few years, NEX became the dominant mode of execution of UNDP-funded projects. The owners managed to explode the myth that NEX was unfeasible or unwanted, but the system as usual did not adjust to the new directives without certain 'transaction costs'. While execution through the Specialised Agencies fell sharply, UNDP implemented projects which were nationally executed by means of its own operational wing, UNOPS, so that some elements of agency execution were retained. At the same time, the Specialised Agencies managed to raise funding from development banks and bilateral agencies to maintain their project execution income. These 'transaction costs' were low, however, if one considers the effect that this reform had on the aid relationship.

The efforts at overcoming the systemic weaknesses of the foreign aid industry are still bogged down, and there are very few politicians or administrators who feel responsibility for how the system as a whole works, seen from the side of the host country. It is also unusual to find Swedish aid officials expressing an interest in finding out the experience of other agencies working in the same field. This is particularly lamentable in the case of multilateral aid organisations, which are specifically mandated to disseminate their experience and have a capacity to assist in organisational learning even at national level. Because of the political and bureaucratic constraints which hamper the effectiveness of many multilateral organisations, Swedish aid officials often overlook the usefulness of their extensive professional experience.

Work process and organisation culture

Like in most other organisations, learning in aid agencies mostly takes place through *work experience* and from discussion with colleagues and managers. Since those agencies work to a relatively large extent through committees, missions and teams with members representing different departments and professions, their opportunities for collective learning would be more frequent than in the case of agencies whose process is mainly built on individual case work. The committee or mission is usually charged with the task of designing, monitoring or evaluating a project or a sector programme, and team members prepare their specific tasks and review them together with their colleagues. When this process is well-defined and conclusions are transparent, team members will learn both through individual study and team learning and will also be able to improve the process over time.

More often than not, however, committee and mission work fails to make use of the opportunity for *team learning*. The committees and missions reflect the structure and hierarchy of the organisation and they rarely question its conventional wisdom or cultural lore. Senge suggests an important instrument for team learning called "deliberation", in which team members are not aiming to reach a decision or a specific output but simply to consider all aspects and options that have been raised by a problem they are confronted with. A session of deliberation could for instance follow a meeting of a project committee or a review mission. Other ways of bypassing hierarchy and organisational taboos are negotiating games or case exercises with groups representing different

interests or layers in the agency. Humour is an effective tool in dealing with the agency's contradictions and myths without running into a stone wall of officialdom (Weick and Wesley, 1996). Team learning tries to transcend passing on conventional wisdom to the inexperienced and move into a 'second loop' of learning in which questioning of this wisdom leads to new insights and ultimately to organisational change. Team members with long experience will learn from their less senior colleagues, for instance, to see their mandate and their working methods from a different angle.

RRV's study of Sida in 1988 reported frequent complaints among the staff that the senior managers did not have time to discuss all the options, aspects and policy inconsistencies which might be raised by a project, a study or a report. The constraining factor for such learning was the senior managers' time, which is another way of saying that team learning was no priority among senior managers. Even in the new Sida, there is widespread complaint that the pressure of time precludes much-needed discussions of questions like 'why' and 'how'. A recent enquiry found that slightly more than half of the staff found that their boss took an interest in their development.

RRV expressed worries that Sida 's increasing use of consultants for technical and analytical work would drain the agency of technical expertise and turn it into something like a mail order firm. This initiated a serious discussion in Sida about *the roles of different actors* in the process, in particular Sida-HQ sectoral expertise, field office staff, consultants and representatives of recipient organisations or ministries. The discussion was in itself an example of organisational learning, since it brought increased clarity about the role of consultants. The new Sida is still heavily dependent on consultants, and some of its divisions are well-known for giving its consultants a very free hand in interpreting and even in formulating their terms of reference. But on balance one must conclude that consultants are mostly well programmed and will be debriefed in a way which contributes to Sida's organisational learning. Particularly when it comes to learning *from* the recipient organisations, Sida would not have been able to gather so much information without the help of its consultants.

A current tendency among aid agencies is to *decentralise* an increasing part of decision-making to the field offices. UNICEF and UNDP pioneered these attempts from the very beginning, and several bilateral agencies, among them the Nordics, followed in the late 70s and more deliberately in the 90s. Even the World Bank has recently taken very

decisive steps towards delegating both analytical work and programme management to its country offices. This will facilitate learning in the sense that it shortens the line of decision-making and brings it closer to the action. It will be easier for all parties involved – the donor field office and headquarters, and the different interested parties on the recipient side – to see the impact of their interventions, and to adjust them when drawing from their own observations.

But decentralisation also raises problems of institutional memory, which is an important source of organisational learning. Field offices are typically staffed with expatriate programme officers who will stay three or four years before they are transferred to another country or to headquarters. As RRV points out, the only institutional memory in such a situation will be the donor's consultants, who normally have a much longer shelf life than programme officers. The multilateral agencies have tried to solve this problem by establishing a separate scheme of service for 'national programme officers' (NPOs), a cadre of professionals whose career is based mainly in their home countries. In agencies like UNICEF and UNDP, national programme officers provide a good deal of the agencies' continuity and institutional memory in the country and take part in the organisation's staff training and policy discussion together with international staff.

Sida is also trying to make use of NPOs to provide a continuity platform for decentralisation, but there is still a long way to go before its NPOs can regard themselves as regular staff members of the agency. Changes must be undertaken in the work process at the level of the embassies, to give NPOs more responsible tasks. Sida's internal staff training programmes will have to be opened to NPOs and working material must be produced in other languages than Swedish. And the staff rules applying to local embassy staff regarding, for instance, access to information sources will have to be eased in order to integrate the NPOs in the working team.

The institutional memory is also supported by different kinds of archives and by more or less formal networks of people who have worked on a project or in a country. Those who have worked with archival material in aid agencies are often struck by the fact that the only parts which are reliable relate to the spending of money and the transfer of staff and goods. Programme information is sketchy at best. In the age of new information technology it may be possible to bridge those serious gaps in our collective memory by building up electronic networks of people

who have been working on a topic, a project or a country, so that future evaluators and researchers do not end up in the same quandary.

The *incentive system*, covering recruitment, salary levels, promotions and other forms of encouragement, has its influence on whether and how an organisation learns. Enquiries among staff of Swedish aid agencies, in recent years as well as in the one undertaken by RRV in 1988, show that staff generally believes that people get promoted because of competitive behaviour rather than by being good team players. This type of impression is fairly common everywhere and need not indicate a bias in Sida's recruitment and promotion policies but it must be noted as a potential disincentive. RRV raised a number of questions regarding the very high internal turnover in the old Sida, some 30 per cent per year, and believed that this was in itself an obstacle to learning. It is difficult to accept the notion that the effect of occupational mobility on collective learning capability would be negative. Even in the new Sida the internal mobility is high, although limited by policy guidelines on the frequency of rotation.

The *staff composition* of the agency has its effects on learning ability. The age distribution of old Sida, for instance, was seen as a problem by the RRV report, although Sida's age distribution was very much the same as that of the Swedish civil service as a whole. Figure 1 shows the age distribution of three agencies, old Sida in 1981 and 1987 and new Sida in 1997. The modal age group in all the three cases remains the one born during the 40s, and the diagram shows it moving one step higher every decade. The arithmetic mean increases from 40 in 1981 to 44 in 1987 in the case of old Sida and rises to 47 in 1997 in the new Sida. A peculiar feature of the age distribution of new Sida is the very low number of staff in the age groups below the modal one, i.e. 35-45 years. It is believed that this was caused by a civil service recruitment freeze during the 80s.

This age distribution offers certain challenges from the point of view of organisational learning. First, RRV warned that the dominance of older and very experienced staff members in old Sida was intimidating to newcomers and made them feel excluded. New Sida has introduced a system of mentors to overcome such problems, but it is not easy to handle the generation problem in an organisation with such an age distribution. The age groups which are younger than the modal 50-60 group are known to be frustrated by the dominance of the "elders" and may be reluctant to learn from them, for reasons mentioned below under 'culture'.

The gender distribution is another relevant factor. Around 55 per cent

Figure 1. Age Distribution

Age Distribution of three agencies
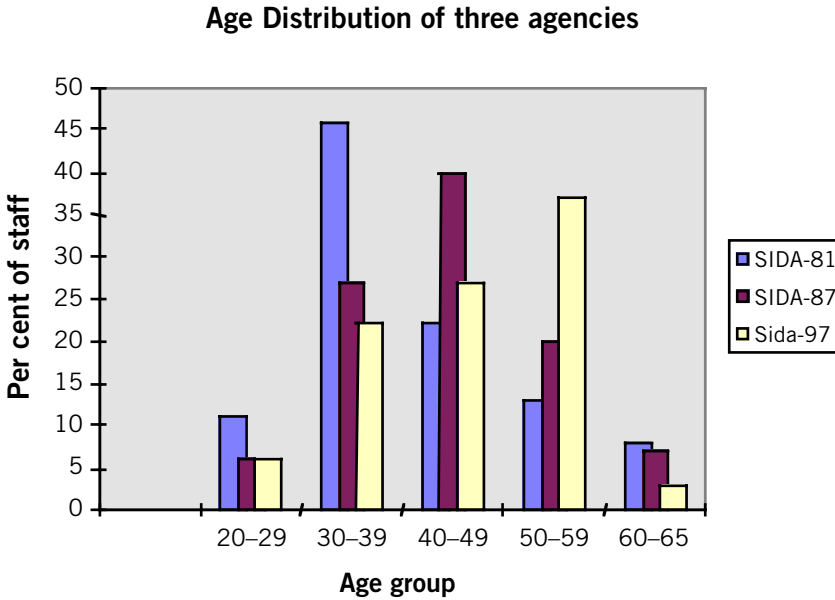
of Sida's staff are women. Their age distribution is virtually the same as that of the men, which means that the modal group is the 51-55 age group. Among Sida's 80-odd managers and directors, 40 per cent are women. This means that 8.6 per cent of Sida's women have managerial posts, while 17.2 per cent or exactly twice the proportion of Sida's men have reached such positions. It is very likely that this situation combined with the age distribution has made some female staff members sceptical to the value of organisational learning.

There is a complex relationship between the objectives of an organisation, its recruitment of staff and the *culture* that develops in the organisation. 'Culture' is used here to signify a set of values and attitudes that are shared in the organisation (Forss *et al.*, 1998). Those values may set the organisation apart from other agencies, and they may be strong enough to exclude or suppress experience and information which contradicts the basic values and beliefs held by the majority of staff. Many aid agencies (UNICEF is one example) were at the outset regarded as having a culture which was strongly based on ideals and solidarity with poor people in developing countries. Their organisational learning in the 60s and 70s was sharply focussed on operationalising these ideals, which meant that information that ran counter to their basic beliefs was

difficult to absorb. An example of such information was the increasingly alarming reports on the effects of a failed macroeconomic policy environment on the outcome of poverty alleviation projects.

When the old Sida was created in 1965, its was regarded by many outsiders as a haven for leftwing radicals and bleeding hearts striving to overturn an unfair 'Old World Order'. Although this view was highly exaggerated, it is true that the language and the focus of attention were very much on solidarity with the poor and emancipating them from oppression. Cost effectiveness and financial discipline were not high on the agenda, although they did figure for instance in the infrastructure and industry sector departments.

RRV tried in its 1988 study of Sida to explore Sida's organisational culture and suggested that the difference between Sida's solidarity-based values and the policies laid down by parliament and government for development aid widened during the 80s. During that decade, donor agencies increasingly adopted the view that macroeconomic stability was necessary (though not sufficient) for successful development cooperation. Another lesson that was learned from earlier periods was that aid projects should aim at financial sustainability. It is conceivable that this philosophy was not a hundred per cent absorbed by the 40s generation in Sida.

Meanwhile, rather different organisational cultures developed in the smaller agencies which were established in the 70s and 80s, namely the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing countries (Sarec) created in 1975, the Swedish Agency for Technical Cooperation (BITS) established in 1980 and SwedCorp in 1992. It is hard to believe that those cultures and cooperation approaches could have been developed within the old Sida. Sarec's concept of creating research capabilities in developing countries, for instance, and BITS' approach to funding technical cooperation projects executed by Swedish enterprises were not in line with Sida's thinking, and some of the projects supported by the smaller agencies were regarded by Sida staff as inferior to 'pure' development aid.

A question which is interesting from the point of view of collective learning is to what extent the smaller agencies' cultures have survived and developed after the merger into the new Sida in 1995. A 'fusion' of the original cultures could produce new interesting products and operational approaches, which would benefit the organisation as a whole. To begin with, it appears clear that some of the original cultures of the

smaller organisations did survive and are doing surprisingly well in the new superstructure. A very promising and dynamic fusion seems to have taken place within the industrial and infrastructural department (INEC) which incorporated the old BITS and SwedCorp. And the BITS model has been successfully utilised by Sida's Department for Cooperation with Eastern Europe, a department established in 1995 and largely with staff recruited from outside the four constituent agencies. But apart from this, infusion of ideas from the smaller agencies, for instance through the introduction of the BITS model for technical cooperation, has been slow to appear in the other sectoral or regional departments. A certain mobility of staff is taking place between departments, however, and it is still possible that those models and approaches may gradually be transferred between departments.

Leadership is a crucial factor in organisational learning. Leaders should provide a vision which inspires the organisation to change and should also create conditions which facilitate learning to move in the direction of this vision. It is typical of the aid industry that leaders are recruited more for their vision than for a known ability for effective implementation. This is one of the factors behind the well-known shifts of fads and fashions in the international development cooperation business. New leaders want to launch new directions and metaphors for solving development problems, and their ideas are often launched in a way which leaves staff members little alternative but to accept the new message

The problem with this type of 'paradigm shift' or fashion change which occurs quite often for instance in the World Bank and UNDP is that the new fashions are more often based on metaphors and slogans than on the experience of the organisations. For the staff members, who have been through such changes many times before, it is more rational to treat the change as a short-lived fashion rather than as the final truth. They have learned how to change the labels and the terminology to suit the fashion of the day without changing the way they work. The new visions therefore often have limited effect on the outcome of the organisations' work.

The RRV study of old Sida noted a similar tendency for leaders to announce policies which were never adequately followed up. It is unclear to what extent this tendency was caused by resistance and learning blocks among staff. In many cases, the initiatives were not followed up by management and they soon sank into oblivion. The new Sida has provided

for more staff training on working methods and introduced an ambitious system of audit and evaluation to make sure that policies and experiences will be assimilated. A lack of discipline both in issuing and in monitoring new policies is a common weakness of 'ideological' organisations like aid agencies, however, and leaders have to maintain strict discipline to avoid confusion and indifference.

The trend of the 90s towards organisational learning has also advanced agency leaders in taking an active part in opening up their organisations towards various forms of collective learning as part of managing organisational change. In many cases, however, responsibility for organisational learning has been passed on further down the hierarchy when its gloss of newness has worn off.

An acute learning block may appear in an agency when it comes under attack from the outside, in particular when the attack is made by powerful mass media. In such cases, all staff members will rally around their leader and a virtual *siege mentality* will prevail. In this situation, which can last for several months or years, no criticism will be accepted and no knowledge absorbed if it suggests that the agency has made mistakes. Senge refers to this learning block under the heading "The Enemy is Outside" and shows that it is present even in everyday relations between departments or agencies. In the late 80s and early 90s when public opinion was shifting against foreign aid, media attacks on aid programmes appeared both in the US and in Europe, resulting in shorter or longer periods when many agencies refused to accept any criticism at all. Avoiding such blackouts is primarily a question of leadership.

Unclear or conflicting objectives

As mentioned in connection with leadership, if the guiding objectives laid down for the organisation are obscure or inconsistent, this will create difficulties for the members of the organisation to understand, let alone fulfil, the objectives and it will also create problems for management in monitoring whether the goals and directives are followed. Problems of inconsistency and goal conflict are inherent in aid agencies, as indeed in all public bodies concerned with social and economic change. A certain degree of goal conflict and trade-off is not only inevitable but sometimes useful for a dialectic thought process which leads to change But when the conflict becomes too intense or the purpose too difficult to grasp, the practitioner learns nothing more than trying to keep out of trouble. If

this uncertainty prevails for a long time, it leads to a culture of 'anything goes', and to cynicism.[14]

The RRV study of 1988 insisted that such goal conflicts, or "paradoxes" as they were called, constituted major obstacles to learning in the Swedish aid organisation. The first one of those paradoxes was the one between *disbursements and quality*, which seemed to be the cause of severe schizophrenia in Sida. Managers were supposed to spend the funds allocated to their programmes and to their countries, but too often it was impossible to spend the money fast if it was supposed to achieve the programme goals, whether they were reaching the poor or building sustainable institutions. They were forced to spend money on badly prepared or ill-conceived projects in order to avoid being criticised and seeing their budgets cut in coming years.

The pressure to disburse development funds is not peculiar to Sida. Until very recently promotions of loan officers in the World Bank were based on an assessment including the number of project agreements they signed, and UNDP Resident Representatives were measured by what was known as "delivery", meaning the proportion of allocations that were spent. The whole culture in the aid industry is heavily biased towards measuring agencies and managers in terms of the amount of money they can dispose of. In the UN and in DAC, donors are praised or criticised because of the amounts of money they spend and not always because of the quality of work. The Swedish aid programme originally grew out of a declared goal that one per cent of GDP should be allocated to the Government's budget for foreign aid. We are dealing with an organisation culture where the scale of expenditure is very important for everyone involved. It is also well known that the disbursement pressure has led to a deterioration of the aid relationship and to serious cases of aid dependency (Sida, 1997). But to what extent does disbursement pressure cause a conflict with the officially sanctioned development objectives?

From the point of view of the programme manager, budget allocations are seen as a restriction on the manager's ability to reach the programme goal. When the funds are short, which is the most common case in public expenditure, the programme manager will have to seek a second-best alternative, within the scope of the objectives that govern the programme. The same thing happens when the programme manager is asked to spend more money than he/she finds optimal: the manager finds a second-best

---

[14] In this context, 'cynicism' can be defined as not knowing or caring about the difference between what is good or bad. A 'cynic' is someone who sneers at attempts to distinguish between the two.

option *while using the objectives applicable to the programme.*

The complaint from programme managers in UNDP, World Bank or Sida working under disbursement pressure has not been that programme objectives have had to be abandoned or that they can no longer make any distinction between good and bad projects. The complaint is that good programmes have had to absorb large amounts of money faster than they could effectively be used, which has produced negative results. In many cases, programme managers have met disbursement pressure with passive resistance, which has shown up in growing unspent balances in countries which could not absorb the allocated amounts. So, it is a question that is still open to debate whether the professed quantity/quality trade-off could be a serious *obstacle to learning*, except perhaps in a few extreme cases where quality was thrown overboard entirely.

Another, and for aid agencies potentially more explosive goal conflict, is the one between *growth and redistribution*. Most of the agencies have formulated programmes which emphasise that no conflict exists between these two goals, and what is needed is simply growth of a type which reduces poverty. Nevertheless, there are deep differences between organisational cultures both within and between aid agencies. The World Bank economists are generally regarded as a bastion of the opinion that economic growth is the overriding objective and that almost all growth will ultimately benefit the poor. A diametrically opposite view can be found among humanitarian NGOs and among social workers and anthropologists in many of the bilateral agencies. The contrary views are by no means uniform but they generally maintain that growth very often has negative consequences and that it very rarely brings sustainable improvements of the living conditions of the poor.

What makes these differences more than just another academic debate is that they have strongly influenced the organisational culture of many aid agencies and NGOs. Whether you believe in one development model or the other depends on your socio-political 'archetype' more than on experience and learning, and it will influence your interpretation of new phenomena and hence also your ability to absorb new knowledge. Since experience seldom comes in a form which beyond any doubt supports or rejects either model; it is possible to interpret a given piece of information in very different ways. An interesting example occurred when the new Sida was to elaborate and adopt a common programme for reducing poverty. Members of the working group coming from BITS and SwedCorp emphasised that economic growth was necessary for solving poverty problems, while those coming from old Sida's units dealing with

social and rural development felt that most of the new agency's resources should be directly targeted to poor people. These were dyed in the wool views of the old agencies and were so strong that efforts at team learning seemed to do very little to reduce them. It is conceivable that similar 'archetypal' differences exist between professional groups in most of the larger aid agencies.

The objective of *targeting the poor* is particularly loaded with psychological and political explosives. It is important for practically all aid agencies not only to alleviate poverty but also *to be seen* to do this. Great efforts are made to inform the public and the taxpayers that their money will actually benefit people who are poor. In the 90s, the objective of poverty reduction, or in UN-ese poverty *elimination*, has been adopted as the overriding goal of most aid agencies.

As has been demonstrated by innumerable studies and evaluation reports, unless there is a policy and institutional environment which enables the poor to make those resources grow, resources which are transferred directly to them will soon disappear from their hands. The macroeconomic environment must be favourable for employment and income growth, and institutions should be in place to protect the rights of the poor. These conditions are very rarely fulfilled, but aid agencies still insist on launching new projects of this type even in the most unserviceable environments. One cannot avoid the impression, that the political principals of those agencies *want to be deluded* into believing that they are in the business of eradicating poverty. If this is so, it represents a serious learning block on the part of those principals, which could make even the lower ranks of the agency lose their orientation.

The same can be said about the attitude among politicians towards *targeting poor countries*. For a long time, politicians have been under pressure from their constituencies to direct public aid flows to the poorest countries, and to humanitarian emergencies which often occur in these countries. Academics and aid evaluators have documented beyond any doubt, that an unsuitable policy environment; rampant corruption or an excess of aid resources makes it impossible to use large sums of aid money effectively in a number of those countries. The quantity culture mentioned earlier, which associates high priority with large amounts of money, together with the poverty alleviation delusion mentioned above, has led political bodies to increase their allocations to poor countries even when they know they are throwing good money after bad. There are some signs that the aid constituency has become more discriminating in recent years, in pace with falling global aid allocations, which may in

due course remove the mental block from this very central area of development education.

Three examples of lessons that fail to be learned

Learning blocks can become very difficult to remove or even to detect when some of these factors interact, or when the vested interests of different 'stake-holders' in a cooperation project combine to protect the *status quo*. I shall give three examples from Swedish bilateral aid of frequently recurring failures which may be at least partly caused by learning blocks. They are (1) the lack of exit strategies, (2) the low success rate of institution-building projects and (3) failure to learn from experience in rural development projects targeting the poor.

Weak or non-existent exit strategies
Swedish bilateral programmes have long been noted for being virtually unlimited in time (Karlström, 1991). It is in the nature of development cooperation that it takes time to change societies and institutions, and the old Sida was known for staying on until the job was done, even if this took several decades. If the project went well, none of the parties wanted to terminate a successful joint undertaking. If the project went very badly, Sida wanted to put it on an even keel before leaving it. Whatever the outcome, the preference was always to continue. Very often, the content of the programme changed even though the cooperating partners were the same. Projects which started as a limited operation expanded into sectoral programmes and went on for decades with no serious discussion between the parties as to how and when the external resource inputs should be phased out.

The lack of an agreed exit strategy leaves the donor open to the syndrome Senge has illustrated with the parable of the boiled frog. If the donor goes on paying even when the expected results do not materialise, it will eventually be apparent that so much money has been spent on the project that it is no longer possible to pull out, at least not without a final event that can be dressed up as a success. When enough good money has been thrown after the bad, the frog is finally boiled and the donor has no other option but to stay indefinitely. This situation is typical of a number of country programmes in Africa as well as of some misconceived projects which drag on for years with no substantial results in sight.

A well-documented and thought-provoking study of this problem has

been undertaken by Catterson and Lindahl (1999) regarding Swedish aid to Tanzania. The role and function of exit strategies are examined in the context of sustainability, i.e. whether or not the activity can and will continue when external funding finally ceases. The study examined twelve Swedish-funded projects, eight of which had been phased out and four of which were still going on. Many of these projects were in operation more than twenty years after their inception. Only two of the projects had a phase-out strategy which was well-balanced and only two or three of them were potentially sustainable. A notable feature was that where projects had eventually been phased out, the exit had been hurried and unplanned and was driven by budget problems on the Swedish side rather than by an agreed exit strategy.

The main factors behind this sad state of affairs were found both on the donor and recipient sides, as well as with the implementing consultants and experts. Tanzania having an extremely aid-dependent economy, the incentives motivating civil servants were heavily stacked against donor disengagement. Tanzanian officials were expected by their principals to find external funding, not to design models for raising domestic financing for the activities. Swedish consultants were not the main culprits in delaying a phase-out. The study found no evidence that they controlled the time frame, but it blamed them instead for frustrating local ownership. One way of undermining domestic ownership was by introducing too many of the new fads and fashions that donor agencies are fond of. Finally, disbursement pressure on the donor agency combined with the lack of an agreed exit strategy made the continuation of projects automatic. It also eroded the concern for cost effectiveness.

Tanzania may be an extreme case of aid dependence, but it is irrefutable that exit strategies are rare in most of the country programmes funded by Sweden (see for example Hedlund, 1994). A question that lurks in the background of the Catterson-Lindahl study is whether aid dependence actually works both ways, so that both donor and recipient have in fact become dependent on this mode of operation. After several decades of building institutions dependent on donor financing, neither the donor nor the recipient seems to be able to envision institutions which can be financially sustained by domestic resources. Yet, such institutions do exist in other poor countries, and there are useful examples to be studied of countries which have temporarily or permanently managed to reduce their aid dependence (e.g. South Korea, Botswana, India, Vietnam). The kind of learning blocks that this example illustrates are mostly related to process (the advantage of continuing over terminating

and starting new projects) and culture (nobody knows as yet how old a Swedish project can be).

The new Swedish policy for *Partnership with Africa* (1997) takes note of the dependency problem and makes some very specific recommendations, for instance, that each programme or project should have a final date and that the Swedish contribution should decrease over time in pace with the African partner taking over. It will take a deliberate effort at organisational learning to 'unlearn' the experience of thirty years with no end in sight.

Technical cooperation: The activity is the objective

During the 70s and 80s, growing dissatisfaction with the conventional methods of technical cooperation was registered both by host agencies and by donors (Forss *et al.*, 1987; World Bank, 1991; Berg, 1993). For a variety of reasons, the old 'colonial' approach of expatriates working side by side with local counterparts failed to build sustainable capacity in government agencies or parastatal enterprises. The expatriate experts very rarely managed to bring about the desired transfer of knowledge and they often became expensive substitutes for domestic professionals.

To remedy these defects, UNDP, the World Bank and major bilateral donors tried to introduce new approaches built on the concept of building *capacity* for performing specified tasks and functions in a way that is financially and organisationally sustainable. The approaches required careful prior analysis of the institution's policy environment and its potential for competence development and financial sustainability. Project design should specify which type of capability would be achieved at the end – technical, managerial, or organisational – and the host organisation should assume ownership in order to transform the project from initially a *transfer* of knowledge to eventually *development* of knowledge (cf. Moore, 1995; Andersson and Winai, 1997).

In spite of these hard-won insights, technical cooperation continues to show the same old weaknesses, including lack of a clear vision of what capabilities should be created and lack of local ownership. A recent review of 28 capacity-building projects completed and evaluated by Sida (Sassarsson Cameron, 1998) makes disappointing reading.[15] Even though most of these projects are presented as aiming to build institutions or capacity, there are very few instances where the need for increased

---

[15] This disappointing outcome is not only typical of Sida but of practically all major agencies involved in capacity building. See Watson, 1996.

capacity is analysed. Distinction is very rarely made between developing the capacity of the institution in the long term or enabling it to cope with current operational tasks. Delivery of short-term technical and operational inputs seems to have been favoured both by the host organisations and by Sida's consultants. Transfer of knowledge took place in most cases, but apart from a couple of instances in Eastern Europe, indigenised *knowledge development* did not occur.

Two approaches have become increasingly prominent in Sida's capacity building projects. One is twinning of the host institution with a similar institution in Sweden, in a way which engages the Swedish twin as a consultant to assist the host institution in carrying out a specific work programme. The other approach is 'process consulting', which means that the project starts from the definition of the problem but without a specific list of inputs and expected results. Specific goals, targets and inputs will be formulated as part of a process, the length of which is not normally determined at the outset.

A problem with the twinning approach is that the transfer of knowledge will be limited to what the Swedish twin has to offer. Swedish institutions working under twinning arrangements very rarely subcontract missing expertise from other sources. On the other hand, one might have expected that the Swedish partner should feel an 'institutional' responsibility for leaving a measurable and sustainable impact on its twin, but such outcomes are rare. Once the consultancy services have been delivered, there is no factory guarantee of the result. The conclusion of many evaluations is that Sida must be more specific in formulating the objectives of these consultancies, and must hold the cooperating twins to specific outcomes, not only to the inputs.

Process consulting has the advantage of allowing greater flexibility in finding solutions which were not available or apparent at the beginning of the project. In many cases, the first analysis of the development problem will be modified as more knowledge is gathered. It is of course easier to adapt to such findings if you are not bound by a strict schedule for project implementation. The problem with this approach is that in order to know where the project is going; both Sida and the host agency must be very actively engaged at each phase of this process. In some cases it seems that Sida did not know the outcome until the final evaluation report was received. A general impression is that in many capacity-building projects, the input has been treated as the objective of the project.

It is quite clear that many people involved in this type of activity do not see any problem in calling the activity institution- or capacity-building even when it has no specific objective related to capacity or institutional development. This is a long-term process which is affected by many factors outside the control of the project, and as long as visiting experts, seminars or study tours do no harm to the main function of the host institution, they are welcomed by those institutions as a window to the outside world. Political leaders in host countries are pleased to see a continuous exchange of expertise as part of what we may call 'development diplomacy'. And many consultants, of course, do not mind taking part in these activities even if the objectives are vague. So why should Sida bother?

Sida faces two alternatives in answering this question. Either it could decide to introduce stricter rules for projects which explicitly aim to build capacity, following the principles mentioned above. Or it could give up the lofty ambition of sustainable impact and declare that international exchange of expertise is an objective in itself and that its projects in this field serve the purpose of promoting an international exchange of experience. Such a position would not in itself be dishonourable and does in fact correspond to the level of ambition which applies to Sida's support for ad hoc courses and advisory services (inherited from the old BITS). A combination of the two is also possible, through which certain projects are designated as capacity-builders and are made subject to stricter scrutiny as regards the analytical framework, objectives and follow-up.

If this distinction is not made, however, there is great risk that a new generation of programme officers will grow up in Sida believing that capacity building is an activity which should be judged on the basis of inputs rather than results. Since building indigenous capacity is a crucial element in development, such beliefs could constitute a serious obstacle to understanding the essence of development cooperation.

The learning blocks which were shown in this example are both structural (Sida in relation to consultants) and process-related (how to manage process consulting). There is also an open question as regards the formulation of objectives (sustainable capacity or development diplomacy).

Area development projects targeting the poor

From the very beginning, development cooperation agencies have been attracted to the area development model for raising the living standards of the rural poor. By limiting interventions to a small geographic area it is possible to combine inputs in several sectors like infrastructure, agriculture, health and education in a manner which provides a 'big push' for investment and incomes. If these interventions are directed at the immediate causes of poverty in the area, it is possible to significantly improve living standards of the poor who live there. Some interventions will be directly targeted at specific poverty groups, like squatters, small farmers, female-headed households etc.

Over the years, the area development model has encountered many problems. First, income-generating investment naturally benefited more advanced farmers while gradually marginalising the poorest groups. In many cases, this was due to insufficient analysis of the causes of poverty and to the macroeconomic and institutional preconditions for reducing it. Second, to produce visible results, the projects were tempted to invest money on a scale which would be impossible to replicate elsewhere in the country. Third, the projects created institutional structures and economic incentives which were not sustainable when external funding was withdrawn. Many of the first generation of area development projects from the 70s were maintained at great cost for decades before they were finally allowed to scale down and shrink back to local standards of performance.

The new Sida has launched nine or ten projects within this category, but none of them have been in operation long enough to have been evaluated in their present form.[16] Since the budget of each one of these projects exceeded SEK 30 million, they were reviewed in Sida's central Project Committee before being submitted to the Director-General for approval. In the absence of evaluation reports on these projects, I have tried to glean from the documents submitted to the Project Committee to what extent preparations and design reflect learning from past experience. It is possible and indeed likely that project preparations produced a lot more evidence than was presented to the Committee, but it is also relevant that these were the actual documents on which Sida based its decision to approve the projects.

---

[16] Some of these projects are actually the final phase of old Sida projects, although design and decisions were made after 1995 by the new Sida.

The nine projects which meet the broad criteria of being area-based and poverty-targeted projects with a multi-sectoral approach are listed below.[17] Space does not allow me to present a detailed assessment here, only the summing up. For each project, I have tried to assess the quality of analysis regarding problems and risks, the realism in formulating targets and target groups and whether the design foresees an exit under sustainable conditions.

First, it is very encouraging to note that virtually all project proposals have analysed the poverty problems in sufficient depth to make it credible that their authors know what they are up against. Even the links of the macro policy environment to the micro level, a dimension which was missing in many projects of earlier generations, are in most cases very well covered. All the projects without exception draw on the experiences from other projects in the area or in other countries, which is another good example of organisational learning.

Second, the target groups have generally been given a very wide definition, often based on an explicit assumption that 'everyone in the area is poor'. Experience shows, however, that infrastructural and income-generating investment in an area inhabited by poor people tends to benefit the most resourceful among the poor and may over time marginalise groups that are less well endowed. None of the projects have foreseen any such problems, which suggests a certain immunity to learning. One of the projects (CARERE) has defined its target group as the rural administration rather than the poor, which makes it much more likely to reach its target.

Third, almost half of the project proposals are based on a process rather than a project completion approach, which means that specific targets and work plans will emerge during implementation. While this may be an adaptive approach which enables experimentation and search for new dimensions of the problems, it also requires a high degree of ownership in the host country and close participation of both funding and host agencies. It also raises a question as to the quality of Sida's

---

[17] List of Area-based Projects Approved by Sida in 1995-99: Rural employment sector programme, Bangladesh, Phase III; Support for UNICEF's social development programme in Bolivia; Rural development programme in Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia; Cambodia area rehabilitation and regeneration project (CARERE), UNDP; Support for the development of infrastructure in Niassa Province, Mozambique; Support to local management of natural resources in Tanzania (LAMP); Rural water, health and sanitation programme in Tanzania (HESAWA), Phase four; Support for urban development in Guatemala; Mountain rural development programme (MRDP), Vietnam.

central decision-making based on such loosely conceived proposals. Maybe the Project Committee should have a second look at the project after a couple of years when more precise contours of targets and objectives have begun to emerge.

Fourth, the risk analysis is generally up to the mark in one sense, namely that it identifies all major risks that may threaten the success of the projects. But only in a few cases does it go as far as to try and assess the *probability* that any of those risks materialises. Risk analysis is a complex task which requires high professional competence, and weaknesses in that area have been noticeable in the past in all aid agencies, even the development banks. Although the risk analysis could have been taken further, this batch of new projects marks a welcome improvement for Sida.

Fifth, a serious weakness persists as regards the exit strategy. Very few of the project proposals include triggers through which implementation will be modified or terminated if any of the risk factors should turn into reality. A large number of the proposals appear to ignore or trivialise the risk of failing financial sustainability, even the two which propose a final phase of programmes that have gone on for twenty years. With one or two notable exceptions (such as LAMP), exit strategies are weak or non-existent. In the case of the four 'process' type projects, exit is supposed to be discussed as and when that matter arises. As I read these proposals, a very important dimension of the partnership concept is missing in most of the cases.

The two examples of apparent learning blocks which can be drawn from this exercise are first lack of concern for the polarising effects of economic interventions in rural communities and second, lack of a strategy for transferring responsibility for the activity to the host organisation. These are both fundamental elements of sustainable poverty reduction, whose effects have been documented in numerous development studies and project evaluations. It is not altogether credible that the authors of those projects could be ignorant of these risks and problems, and as in the case of our first example, one suspects a hidden agenda.

In the case of targeting the poor, the answer may be as simple as mentioned under 'conflicting objectives', namely that the donor *wants to be seen* to target the poor. In actual fact, all the nine projects may be targeting the counterpart administration rather than the poor, but the managers feel obliged to show that they support activities which benefit the poor *directly*. If this pretence could be discarded, it would be easier to absorb experience and to interpret results. By adorning the project

with an unattainable goal, the authors in fact contribute to undermining respect for the poverty reduction objective.

When it comes to the exit strategy, it is most likely that the authors are aware that their project design is unsustainable, and that they count on the funding agency to continue supporting the project for decades before any serious thought is given to the question of terminating the support. Their assumption is based on long empirical study of donor behaviour and it could hence be said that it is the result of organisational learning. Swedish aid policy wants to change this practice, as mentioned with reference to *Partnership with Africa.* The learning block behind all this is eminently cultural. A period of deliberate 'unlearning' will be necessary before financial sustainability becomes part of the project culture in Sida.

Concluding remarks

The 'foreign aid industry' is functioning in a world which is changing rapidly. Conventional long-term development cooperation is shrinking, and various forms of humanitarian disaster relief may eventually become more important in quantitative terms. It is also conceivable that in the next decade financial and political stabilisation at global level will emerge as the predominant objective for official assistance, which will call for different approaches altogether. As has been seen in the cooperation with emerging economies during the 90s, a number of new approaches and applications of foreign assistance have appeared, calling for new analytical and operational skills among the practitioners of the industry.

Practitioners have on the whole been quick to adopt new knowledge and to make use of it for new purposes. Development agencies work in ways which generally stimulate learning and adaptation, and they are keen observers of the world around them. It is questionable, however, whether the agencies learn as quickly as their staff members do. Simple obstacles caused by the structure of the agency or the process used to take decisions may in due course be overcome by the dynamic forces around them, but more complex ones will require forceful interventions from owners and leaders.

In some cases, conditions and vested interests are very heavily stacked against absorbing new knowledge. One particularly complex case is the malfunctioning of the aid industry as a system, seen from the point of view of the recipient The learning blocks may also be caused by a

combination of unrealistic political targets, strong commercial interests among consultants or other enterprises and bureaucratic inertia on either side of the partnership, which join forces to resist a proposed innovation. Such resistance is often rationalised by means of an official myth, which is supposed to explain why changes would be impossible or undesirable. Exploding these myths is a key precondition for organisational learning.

In this chapter, I have dealt specifically with three myths or conventional wisdom which either inhibit learning or hide unresolved contradictions that block the absorption of new knowledge:

- the idea that having a long-term perspective makes it less urgent to safeguard financial sustainability
- the notion that training courses, study tours, seminars etc. will by themselves result in institution or capacity building
- the belief that resources which are transferred directly to the hands of poor people are the most effective means of reducing poverty

There are many other myths and conventional wisdom which have been created to protect the interests of professional groups, NGOs, private enterprises and political movements involved in development cooperation. This brief review will hopefully have made it clear, however, that each myth will have to be examined in its proper context of stake-holders, objectives and institutional framework.

Some ways and means to eliminate or at least control the effects of the learning blocks that have been mentioned here are quite obvious. In addition to what has already been suggested, I would like to propose the following:

1) Sida's age, gender and occupation structure may pose certain obstacles to organisational learning. It is important to study the attitudes among different groups to find out what and from whom they want to learn, and how team learning approaches can be used to involve women and men in different age groups and occupations in a way which allows 'double-loop' learning. Already existing committees and missions should allow time for more open-ended deliberation regarding policies and practices.

2) The experience of other bilateral and multilateral agencies should be more systematically exploited through joint learning exercises and sharing of materials. Comparison of experience, for instance in poverty reduction and institution development, should be

included. Particular attention should be given to developing training courses in risk analysis and financial sustainability.

3) A study should be made of the possibilities for and obstacles to making better use of National Programme Officers (NPOs) in decentralised aid management. NPOs should be given training in analytical work and in the skills and crafts of the profession. Their use as a source of institutional memory should also be developed.

4) Thematic evaluations should be made a subject of team learning. For instance, the new generation of area development projects should be studied and discussed with regard to the effectiveness of different types of interventions in reaching their development objectives.

5) Efforts should be made in Sida's analytical work to examine together with other partners the systemic aspects of development cooperation in some countries and sectors, in order to promote better understanding of the need for integration and coordination of activities and inputs.

References

Andersson, G. and Winai, P., 1997, *Diagnosis of Organisations in Development Cooperation.* Stockholm: Sida-DESA.

Berg, E., 1993, *Rethinking Technical Cooperation, Reforms for Capacity Building in Africa*. New York: UNDP.

Catterson, J. and Lindahl, C., 1999, *The Sustainability Enigma, Aid Dependency and the Phasing out of Projects. The Case of Swedish Aid to Tanzania.* EGDI Study 1999:1, Stockholm: The Expert Group on Development Issues.

Forss, K., Cracknell, B., Strömquist, N., 1998,*Organisational Learning in Development Cooperation: How Knowledge is Generated.* EGDI Working paper 1998:3, Stockholm: The Expert Group on Development Issues.

Forss, K. *et al.*, 1987, *Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Technical Assistance Personnel Financed by the Nordic Countries.* Sida, DANIDA, NORAD.

Hedlund, H., 1994, *The phasing out of aid programmes: experiences and guidelines.* Stockholm University: Department of Social Anthropology.

Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, March 1996, *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*. Copenhagen.

Karlström, B, 1991, *Det omöjliga biståndet,* första upplagan. Stockholm: SNS.

Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1997, *Partnership with Africa, Proposals for a New Swedish Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa.* Stockholm: Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Moore, M., 1995, *Institution building as a development assistance method: a review of literature and ideas.* Stockholm: Sida.

Raffer, K. and Singer, H.W., 1996, *The Foreign Aid Business: Economic Assistance and Development Cooperation.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Riksrevisionsverket (RRV), 1988, *Lär sig* Sida*? (Does* Sida *Learn?),* Dnr 1986:858. Stockholm: Riksrevisionsverket.

Sassarsson Cameron, P., November 1998, *Genomgång av Sida utvärderingar och rapporter som avser kompetens- och institutionsutveckling i projekt och program.* Stockholm: Sida-DESA.

Senge, P., 1990, *The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization.* New York: Doubleday.

Stiglitz, J., 1987, *Learning to Learn, localized learning and technological progress.* Princeton N.J.: Department of Economics, Princeton University.

Swedish International Development Cooperation Authority (Sida), 1997, *Aid Dependency: Symptoms, Causes, Remedies.* Stockholm: Sida.

Watson, D., 1996, S*ynthesis Study on Public Sector Institutional Strengthening.* Paris: DAC's Expert Group on Aid Evaluation.

Weick, K.E. and Westley, F., 1996, "Organizational Learning: Affirming an Oxymoron", in Clegg, Hardy and Nord (eds.), *Handbook of Organization Studies.* London: Sage.

World Bank, 1991, *Managing Technical Assistance in the 1990s,* Report of the Technical Assistance Task Force. Washington: The World Bank Group.

From One Crisis to Another: Organisational Learning in UNHCR

Astri Suhrke

In what surely must be a forerunner of today's evaluations and "lessons learned", the high priests of antiquity kept ledgers of transactions with the gods where significant events – drought, plague, victories, defeat – were noted next to the appropriate rite performed. That way, "the efficacy of any formula would jump to the eye," as the historian, G.J. Renier has noted.[18]

Since then, faith in the ability to learn from history has hardly diminished, although learning procedures have come to reflect the rationalism and secular outlook of the modern world. "Being rational," a contemporary scholar noted, "entails being guided in a particular fashion by past experience."[19]

Concepts of learning

What does it mean "to learn"? In what sense do policy-makers learn, and how do we identify the extent of their learning? As commonly understood in the social sciences, learning entails "development of new beliefs, skills or procedures as a result of the observation and interpretation of experience."[20] This definition by Jack Levy differs from some others by excluding related change of behaviour. Only by separating understanding and doing as two distinct steps of learning, Levy persuasively argues, can we examine the impact of new knowledge on behaviour. In some cases, new beliefs or skills do not produce changes in policy. The reasons can be assessed through empirical research, but only if we initially recognise the two distinct phases of learning.[21]

Similarly, it is useful to distinguish between right and wrong learning.

---

[18] Renier, 1965, p. 21.
[19] Ayer, 1947, p. 50, cited in Renier, 1965, p. 17.
[20] Levy, Spring 1994, p. 283.
[21] By contrast, one of the leading scholars of organisational behaviour, Ernst B. Haas, views learning as a composite of both belief and behaviour. "Behaviour changes as actors question original implicit theories underlying programs and examine their original values." He sees this as different from "adaptation" which is a non-reasoned change of behaviour as new activities are added, or old ones dropped, "without examining the implicit theories underlying their program." 1990, p. 3. For the purposes of the present case study, the leaner definition by Levy is more useful.

Wrong learning occurs when a situation is mistakenly diagnosed, when inferences are incorrectly drawn, or when lessons are applied in a non-comparable situation.[22] To identify these processes – as well as correct learning mechanisms – it is useful to initially define learning as a neutral concept.

Organisations can be said to learn if knowledge based on past experience is incorporated in organisational skills, procedures or cultures. But since organisations are not like individuals – and should not be anthropomorphised – they "learn" through processes that reflect organisational interests, structures, functions and decision-making context.[23]

This chapter will examine one small tip of the iceberg of organisational learning. We shall look at the response of a UN organisation – the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – to two fairly similar crisis situations that occurred a few years apart. We shall ask whether weaknesses in the agency's response to the first crisis had been reduced in the second crisis, and, if so, whether this was due to a change in beliefs, skills and procedures that at least partly reflected the earlier experiences.

The two situations are, first, the Northern Iraq crisis in early 1991, which erupted in the wake of the Gulf crisis, and, second, the massive population outflow from Kosovo in early 1999 following NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia. Both were major refugee emergencies where UNHCR was called upon to play a leading role. As the first massive refugee emergency in the post-Cold War period, the Northern Iraq crisis appeared as a marker and a precedent for both UNHCR and the UN system as a whole. Both emergencies were immediately followed by official evaluations of the agency's response. The first was an internal evaluation undertaken by UNHCR staff, the second was commissioned by the agency from a team of external experts, led by myself.[24] By permitting a comparison of responses to two fairly similar refugee crises, the reports are excellent sources for tracing organisational learning.

Evaluations are explicit tools of organisational learning. They are designed to assess what was right and what went wrong, and to recommend changes in procedures and practices accordingly. An internal

---

[22] This is often discussed in relation to concepts of the accuracy and efficiency of learning. See Levy, Spring 1994.

[23] Argyris, 1992.

[24] Crisp *et al.*, March 1992, hereafter referred to as the Gulf evaluation, and *The Kosovo Refugee Crisis:* an independent evaluation of UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response, by Astri Suhrke *et al.*, February 2000, hereafter referred to as the Kosovo evaluation.

report that critically examines the past and specifies desirable adjustments is a first step in the two-phase learning process identified by Levy. In this sense, the internal evaluation of UNHCR's response to the Iraqi crisis in itself signifies some change in beliefs. The detailed evaluation of the Kosovo crisis eight years later shows whether or not these views had been accepted in the form of new procedures, whether these were implemented, and with what results. In other words, had the agency learned and applied the right lessons, the wrong ones, or none at all?

Perhaps the most common form of incorrect learning is to apply the lessons of the past in an inappropriate situation. In the Greek and Roman sense, it would be performing the wrong rite for a given event – a rain ritual to obtain a victory in war. In contemporary history, generals are often accused of fighting the current war with the strategies of the last, whether they fit or not. In the annals of UN interventions, a classic case of incorrect learning of this kind is the application of the lessons from the Somali civil war to the genocide in Rwanda even though the two situations genuinely differed.

Mistaken responses of this kind may reflect a failure of analysis, or a failure – for whatever reason – to implement the technically correct procedure. In either case, the problem of unpredictability is a given. Unlike (most of) the gods of antiquity, social events are highly unpredictable. The difficulty of assessing likely developments in a complex historical situation, to which organisations have to respond, is very considerable. Organisational learning therefore typically entails changes to enhance predictability, e.g. improved information and analysis, strengthened contingency planning, etc.

Miscalculations or mistaken responses usually produce unexpected and unwanted outcomes. If the mismatch between policy and outcome persists, it may produce fundamental change in structure or function, either through a reasoned learning process, as noted by Ernst Haas, or as a result of a non-deliberate, mechanical adaptation.[25]

The case study of UNHCR that follows focuses on beliefs and procedures relating to two central aspects of the agency's emergency functions – early warning and preparedness. This includes political analysis of an evolving crisis, contingency planning, stockpiling of materials, and deployment of emergency staff. As we shall see, there was considerable learning from the first to the second crisis, but also some unexpected and unwanted outcomes.

---

[25] Haas, 1990.

Northern Iraq

The emergency

The Gulf crisis in 1990-91 produced three distinct population outflows. First, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 triggered a massive flight of foreign workers, mostly into neighbouring Jordan. Assisted by international agencies, most were rapidly transported to their homelands. Second, there was a much smaller outflow in January-February 1991 when an UN-authorised and US-led offensive drove Iraqi forces back. Third, in the immediate aftermath of the Iraqi defeat, and with at least tacit US encouragement, Iraqi Kurds in the North and Shi'ites in the South rebelled. Both rebellions were repressed by government forces, and an exodus followed. In early April, about 1.5 million refugees from the North fled towards Iran and Turkey; in the South, a much smaller number, some tens of thousands, fled to Iran. A massive emergency developed in the North when Turkey closed the border and almost half a million persons were stranded in the inhospitable mountainous region. By the end of May, however, virtually all the displaced persons had returned to Northern Iraq under the protective cover of US and allied forces.

UNHCR's main role was in relation to the movement of Kurdish refugees. The emergency presented major protection and assistance challenges, and the agency's response was controversial. One point of criticism was that it reacted slowly – and had inadequate contingency planning.

Early warning

At the time, the joint UN machinery for early warning and contingency planning was rudimentary and fragmented. UNHCR was only one of several agencies responsible for assessing the need for assistance and issuing financial appeals, the others included UNDP, the UN's emergency disaster relief office (UNDRO), and the special envoy of the Secretary-General (the Executive Delegate) who was appointed in September 1990. The joint contingency plans and common appeals that emerged were orchestrated through the Inter-Agency Working Group in Geneva, and to that extent reflected some common agency responsibility.

The UN system had considerable early warning of the US-led offensive against Iraqi forces. Operation Desert Storm was prepared with much publicity for nearly two months before it was launched on 17 January 1991. Even the date itself had been fixed by the UN Security Council as the deadline for Iraqi troop withdrawal from Kuwait.[26] Not

unreasonably, the humanitarians prepared for a "worst case" scenario, anticipating that some 400,000 would flee from the war into Syria and Jordan. The large estimate reflected the experience of the previous months when Iraq's invasion of Kuwait had made about one million persons, mainly migrant workers, flee. On the eve of Operation Desert Storm, UNHCR sent preparatory missions to both Syria and Jordan, and the initial appeal by the UN envisaged pre-positioning relief items sufficient to assist 100,000 persons for 90 days in Iran, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. When donors proved reluctant to finance pre-positioning of relief, the Inter-Agency Working Group in Geneva scaled down its ambitions and planned for limited pre-positioning in Jordan only.

In the event, nowhere near the 400,000 came. During both the initial air war and subsequent ground fighting, civilian travel by roads was hazardous and petrol scarce. The Syrian and Turkish borders were closed. Thousands of remaining migrant workers were not given exit visas by Iraqi forces who controlled the main routes to Jordan. All in all, only some 65,000 were believed to have fled during Operation Desert Storm and its aftermath in the South.[27]

With the apparent defeat of the Iraqi forces – and the anticipated refugee flow not having materialised – the donors and the UN community turned their attention elsewhere. As a result, the international community was largely unprepared for the massive refugee flow that occurred only a month later, in early April, as 700,000 persons – later to exceed one million – mostly Kurds, streamed towards Iran and around 400,000 made their way towards Turkey.

Widespread failure to anticipate the conflict between Kurdish rebels and Iraqi forces was in some respects remarkable. The rebellion was encouraged by the U.S., yet previous history suggested the U.S. would not come to the rescue if the Kurds failed. Moreover, it seemed self-evident that a failed rebellion would produce massive refugee outflows. Only a few years earlier, in 1988, the conflict between Iraqi forces and the Kurdish minority in the northern region had made some 60,000 persons flee to neighbouring countries.

[26] On 29 November 1990, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 678 which authorised the use of military force against Iraq unless its troops had withdrawn from Kuwait by 15 January 1991. The UN authorised offensive started on 17 January (Iraqi time), and lasted 42 days, until the end of February.

[27] The 65,000 figure is from the UNHCR evaluation report (p.28). Although not specified, a detailed assessment from the US Committee for Refugees suggests that it must include Shi'ite refugees from the South who fled into Iran after the failed southern rebellion. US Committee for Refugees, 1992, *World Refugee Survey*, pp.98-99.

On the other hand, donors were weary and the humanitarian leadership cautious. It seemed as if the UN humanitarians had just "cried wolf" by mistakenly predicting that Operation Desert Storm would produce hundreds of thousands of refugees. Moreover, evidence could reasonably be produced in support of a "best case" scenario. Iraqi forces had been decimated in the withdrawal from Kuwait and seemed unable to effectively repress uprisings among restive minorities, especially if these occurred simultaneously. And even if Kurds were to seek refuge in Turkey and Iran, the UN humanitarians had little opportunity to pre-plan assistance.

The Turkish government had made clear it did not want a large Kurdish refugee presence. Turkey did not recognize Kurds as refugees, and treated poorly those few who had managed to enter the country earlier.[28] The government had in fact turned down international offers of 14 million dollars to improve conditions for the refugees in the border region. In view of this, planning for a massive inflow that involved essentials such as pre-positioning of stockpiles and site planning for camps in Turkey was impossible. In the other likely host state – revolutionary Iran – UN relief agencies had limited access and experience. UNHCR had established some contact with the government so as to assist the large presence of Afghan refugees in Iran, but the refugees were mostly supported by national authorities, if at all. On-the-ground contingency planning in Iran was thus not much easier than in Turkey.

Faced with few options and a plausible scenario for "the best case", donors and agency leaders were disinclined to listen to scattered voices which warned that the end of the Gulf war might be followed by violence between the Iraqi forces and the Kurdish minority. These voices included UNHCR's representative in Turkey and staff in the agency's Middle East Regional Bureau at headquarters. The former warned of "an exodus of unknown proportions into Turkey".[29]

When the crisis in Northern Iraq struck, donors and the humanitarian agencies had scaled down their preparedness for further refugees. Like most other actors, UNHCR was taken by surprise by the new outflows, but was particularly vulnerable to criticism because it had a mandate to protect and assist refugees.

---

[28] Turkey's accession to the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees has a qualifier which only extends refugee status to persons who have fled as a result of events in Europe before 1951. See *World Refugee Survey*, 1992, p.81.

[29] The Gulf evaluation, cited in paragraph 103.

Preparedness

The failure of early warning was matched by poor preparedness. The agency had no system for having ready reserves of relief items stockpiled. Proposals for reserves had been discussed – on the pattern of UNHCR's revolving Emergency Fund that can be drawn upon in an emergency and is replenished afterwards – but had not been implemented. Appeals to donors to finance stockpiles during the Gulf war had not been met, as noted above. The result was that when the Kurdish crisis occurred, UNHCR had to spend considerable time shifting small stockpiles from Jordan and Syria, negotiating with the Pakistani government for release of items stockpiled for Afghan refugees in that country, and engaging in lengthy procurement procedures to get new supplies. The process was predictably inadequate. About three weeks into the emergency, UNHCR could provide only about ten per cent of the relief items needed by some 1 million Iraqi refugees.[30]

Given the political salience and high media visibility of the crisis, the shortfall was made up by a large outpouring of bilateral aid from donors and other organisations that wanted to demonstrate their presence. While the refugees thus did not suffer, the agency evaluation took the view that UNHCR ought to be able to play a leading role in refugee emergencies but had performed below this standard.

Similar problems occurred with respect to deployment of emergency teams. Individuals were deployed late, often in inadequate numbers and without proper training. Personnel that had completed a recently instituted emergency training course in the U.S. were not all posted to the field. A main reason was the small size of the agency's staff dedicated solely to emergency work. This meant that individuals deployed to a particular crisis had to be released from their current position elsewhere in the organisation. The reassignment had to be negotiated with the head of the unit involved, which was time consuming and at times unsuccessful, particularly in the case of valuable staff needed elsewhere. Negotiating staff reassignment for the Iraqi crisis was especially difficult due to recent budget cuts and retrenchment that had produced intense intra-agency competition for staff.[31]

The internal competition for resources in turn reflected the multiple functions of the agency. UNHCR's three broad functions – protecting

---

[30] The Gulf evaluation, paragraph 215.
[31] The Gulf evaluation called the financial crisis and retrenchment "unprecedented". See paragraph 141.

and assisting refugees, and promoting durable solutions – cover a variety of quite different tasks, e.g. advising on individual asylum cases, promoting international refugee law, facilitating repatriation, assisting in local settlements, etc. Emergency response is only one of several functions that must compete for much of the same staff. Hence, several emergencies do not even have to coincide in order to produce acute competition for resources.[32]

Finally, the slow deployment was related to a fundamental hesitancy within the organisation about what its proper response to the crisis should be. Turkey's decision to close the border, which effectively denied asylum to hundreds of thousands of refugees, was supported by Turkey's major allies. The allies chose instead to use military force to establish a "security zone" inside northern Iraq. This strategy fundamentally violated the principle of asylum, which was central to UNHCR's mandate. For the agency this was not only a matter of precedent and states' obligations under international law, but particularly important in this case because it was uncertain how safe the "security zone" inside Iraq really was. A strongly held view inside the organisation claimed that as the UN refugee agency, UNHCR could not associate itself with a policy that accommodated the unwillingness of a state to grant asylum – possibly at the expense of the safety of refugees.

In the end, the agency nevertheless sidetracked principle to coalesce around the pragmatic option of a "security zone". It was decided to co-operate with other organisations and UN agencies to help refugees stranded on the Turkish border to return to the demarcated zone inside Iraq. But that was only two weeks after the return movement had started, and when other agencies and organisations had already been busy providing assistance. Rather than a major UN humanitarian agency, UNHCR appeared a hesitant latecomer.

Lessons learned

What lessons were drawn from this? The internal evaluation report lists several recommendations, equivalent to the "new beliefs, skills or procedures" cited by Levy as the first step in a learning process.

Several recommendations deal with issues not discussed in this study,

---

[32] It is debatable whether the agency has the capacity to respond to more than one major emergency at a time. This is not surprising, even major states typically have the capacity to fight only one large war at a time. The Gulf crisis came on the heels of an emergency in Liberia, for which UNHCR's human resources division was still struggling to find staff in early 1991.

including co-ordination. Those concerned with early warning and preparedness, concluded that, first, more resources should be devoted to early warning. While problems of predicting events were recognised, the agency nevertheless should strengthen its skills of political analysis. Agreements should be concluded with governments of crisis-prone countries so as to facilitate contingency planning. Second, a formal emergency mechanism should be established. When invoked, this mechanism would permit senior management to mobilise human and material resources for quick deployment to the field. Better training and more systematic use of emergency personnel were necessary, including rosters of qualified persons on stand-by for deployment. Third, steps should be taken to stockpile key relief items, including their pre-positioning in countries of expected refugee inflows, and arrangements for quick procurement of additional supplies should be established.

The recommendations were followed by a list of steps that the agency had already taken immediately after the emergency. Most were designed to enhance preparedness by rapid deployment of personnel and access to relief items, and suggested that "Step One" of organisational learning had indeed taken place in this area. The measures included:

- enlarging the dedicated staff of emergency officers with five persons;
- establishing a roster of 20 persons with emergency skills to be on stand-by for emergency deployment in their current positions, and an additional roster of 50 staff that could be rapidly deployed;
- developing stand-by agreements with the Nordic countries and the UN for rapid secondment of field personnel in an emergency;
- developing a central emergency stockpile of relief items with the assistance of the Swedish Rescue Services Board.

Kosovo

Reviewing UNHCR's response to the Kosovo refugee crisis eight years later, the evaluation team was struck by a strong sense of *déjà vu*. We found marked similarities in the conflict situation, the response, and the problems identified in the response. UNHCR was heavily criticised for being taken by surprise, for having inadequate contingency planning, and for deploying emergency staff too sparingly and too late.

Yet, by the time of the Kosovo crisis, there had been substantial

improvements in UNHCR's preparedness. In fact, most of the lessons drawn from the Gulf crisis had been incorporated in new organisational procedures and were in fact implemented during the Kosovo emergency. Thus "Step Two" of organisational learning had taken place as well. A formal emergency mechanism had been established and was invoked. The agency had rosters of trained staff on stand-by who were deployed to the emergency. Professionals were seconded from the Nordic countries and the UN under stand-by agreements. Joint contingency planning with the rest of the UN system had taken place. Substantial stockpiles had been established in the form of central reserves of relief items, and these were promptly sent to the field. What, then, went wrong?

The emergency

A few days after NATO started the air war against Yugoslavia on 24 March 1999, the exodus of refugees from Kosovo commenced. In the annals of refugee history, it was an unusually sudden and concentrated movement – half a million persons arrived in neighbouring areas in the course of about two weeks. A few weeks later the total was over 850,000. The exodus was a combination of organised expulsion of Kosovo Albanians by Serb forces, militia and federal troops – a massive ethnic cleansing triggered by the escalating conflict – as well as generalised fear among the victim populations of violence to come. Almost all the refugees went to Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. A similarly large and concentrated outflow had only been seen previously during the Gulf war and the Rwanda crisis in 1994. The situation presented the aid agencies with extraordinary challenges.

In Albania, the refugees were welcomed by the authorities and the problem was mainly how to accommodate the sudden inflow under conditions of local poverty and poor infrastructure, especially in the inaccessible border region. In Macedonia, the initial refusal of the government to admit refugees created a serious protection problem. This was only solved when the U.S. and other allies agreed to lighten the asylum burden on Macedonia by taking in a share of the refugees themselves.

The refugee emergency lasted only eleven weeks. By mid-June a framework for peace was established and the repatriation started.

As in the Gulf war, the refugee crisis was of particular concern to the Western states, and in media terms it was a highly visible emergency. As a result, any shortfall in assistance due to late or limited UNHCR presence was more than compensated for by the concern to be present of other aid actors. In fact, our evaluation found that the intense bilateralism and

competition among donors and NGOs, which characterised the aid picture, made it difficult for UNHCR to function effectively.

Early warning

Unlike in the early 1990s, by the end of the decade "early warning" had become a central concept in the United Nations. All the major UN agencies had what they called an early warning function. These were more or less well developed and co-ordinated by OCHA, the UN successor to the Department of Humanitarian Affairs in the Secretariat that had been established in the wake of the Gulf crisis to improve co-ordination.[33] In institutional terms, "early warning" meant identifying areas at risk of violent conflict. Once identified, the efforts shifted to contingency planning involving the relevant agencies in an inter-agency process.

Easily identified as a conflict area, Kosovo had since mid-decade moved from the early warning phase to become a subject of inter-agency contingency planning for humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, the term "early warning" will be used here more loosely to cover assessments made in UNHCR about the likelihood that a major refugee crisis would develop.

As during the Gulf war, there were plenty of warnings from mid-1998 and onwards that NATO was preparing for air strikes against what remained of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. At the same time, there were diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict between the Kosovo Albanian population and the Serb-dominated authorities on the state and federal level. For a time, the peace talks at Rambouillet seemed to promise a settlement and there was an air of optimism. In February 1999, for instance, donor states and the UN agencies met twice to discuss plans for reconstruction and rehabilitation of the province. Only when the Rambouillet talks broke down, on 18-19 March, was it clear that NATO would launch air strikes, and that these would commence within days.

Unambiguous warnings of war thus came late. But what would the escalation mean? The predominant expectation among the humanitarian agencies was that the air strikes would not produce a massive refugee crisis. Virtually all donors, UN humanitarian agencies and NGOs expressed surprise and lack of preparedness when the massive refugee exodus occurred. While ethnic cleansing was not unknown in the region,

---

[33] The early warning functions are assessed in vol. 8 of the evaluation of Danish humanitarian assistance, Ofstad *et al.*, 1999.

it was evidently not anticipated that Serbs would respond to the air strikes by expelling Kosovo Albanians.

It seems the humanitarians had come to share the official NATO position to the effect that the air strikes on the whole would be a solution rather than a problem, and that the Milosevic government would soon back down and accept the terms of Rambouillet. The top leadership in UNHCR generally took this view. Although some feared that the air strikes would be followed by intensified violence on the ground, there was considerable expectation that NATO air strikes would rapidly end the conflict, as appeared to have happened in Bosnia. The powerful memory of Bosnia, where the agency had long been centrally involved, was particularly relevant, although, as it turned out, misleading.

The incorrect assessment of the likely effects of NATO air strikes in the Kosovo case was only partly due to the institutional weaknesses of political analysis. UNHCR had since 1992 been the designated UN lead agency for humanitarian assistance in the former and remaining Yugoslavia. It had strong staff representation in Belgrade, Sarajevo and Kosovo, and a field-based Special Envoy was based in Sarajevo. Since the agency was assisting some 200–250,000 internally displaced persons inside Kosovo, the High Commissioner herself had been actively involved in the humanitarian diplomacy towards the conflict.

On the other hand, the agency had weak representation in the neighbouring countries (Albania and Macedonia), which would be the principal areas of operation if a massive refugee crisis developed. As a result, the offices with a specific responsibility to prepare for refugee scenarios from the Kosovo conflict had a weak voice within the agency. Moreover, UNHCR had not built up a specific early warning function, as the Gulf crisis evaluation had recommended. Rather, the research and analysis function had been temporarily expanded in the aftermath of the 1991 crisis, only to become victim of the general budget cuts and staff retrenchment that – just as in the Gulf case – had taken place shortly before the Kosovo emergency occurred.

Nevertheless, our evaluation found that even a stronger, specific early warning function in the agency would probably not have concluded that the NATO bombing would trigger a massive refugee exodus. The conventional wisdom to the effect that the NATO strikes would rapidly succeed seemed too strong. The conventional view was not openly and authoritatively challenged within the UN system, by major donors with which UNHCR had regular contact. Any additional political analysts in the agency would have had to rely on the same sources, and face the

weight of the confidently asserted NATO position during the months before the air strikes commenced.

There were further and more subtle reasons for the humanitarians to reach for "the best case" rather than "the worst case" scenario. As during the Gulf war, they could only undertake limited on-the-ground preparation for a massive refugee outflow. Macedonia, like Turkey, had clearly stated in advance it would not welcome this particular refugee population. Albania did welcome their ethnic kin from Kosovo, but near anarchy in the border region made it difficult to pre-position relief items and plan for shelter.[34] It seems an element of wishful thinking was at work – since it would be difficult to effectively assist a massive refugee outflow, there was a tendency to marshal the evidence in favour of the more manageable scenarios.[35] Similarly, if there were no readily acceptable alternatives to air strikes, it was tempting to discount the possibility that disastrous consequences would follow from them.[36]

Politically it would of course have been difficult for the High Commissioner to publicly ask donors to be prepared for a refugee disaster following the NATO air strikes. It would be tantamount to a vote of no-confidence in NATO's policy. But the point here is that such requests were not even considered or informally made because UNHCR's leadership had come to share the predominant NATO assessment of the situation.

Preparedness

Unlike during the Gulf crisis, this time the contingency planning process was elaborate and exemplary. All the UN agencies concerned and the main NGOs in the region met regularly to plan for refugee inflows into Albania and Macedonia. The process started in the early 1990s, and a major regional planning process took place in early 1998 when the Kosovo conflict intensified. The contingency plans for Albania and

---

[34] In 1998, UNHCR's warehouses in Northern Albania had twice been looted and the local agency office had closed down after shooting incidents. As part of its contingency planning, UNHCR tried to develop a shelter programme, but unclear ownership of land and conflicting lines of authority in the North after the civil war in 1997 made for slow progress.

[35] This tendency is of course well known and documented among individuals and in policy-making situations. See e.g. Jervis, 1976. In this case, it can be argued that there was an element of wishful thinking in NATO's hopeful position that the air strikes would rapidly succeed. The alliance had carefully escalated its threat articulation against Milosevic since September 1998. When the Rambouillet talks failed, the NATO Council could not easily reverse its threat strategy without undermining its credibility – particularly, perhaps, when preparing for the 50th anniversary celebrations of the alliance. If there were no easy alternatives to the air strikes, it was but a short jump to conclude that the strategy *had to* succeed.

[36] The Kosovo evaluation, p. 21.

Macedonia operated with minimum and maximum estimates, division of labour among the agencies concerned, and a detailed plan of action in case of an influx.

It would have worked perfectly well, it seems, if the refugee inflows had been smaller or less intimately connected to the high politics of the most powerful states in the world. The contingency plan for Albania had a minimum estimate of 20,000 and a maximum estimate of 100,000 (and about half these during the winter months when the mountain passes were difficult to cross). The figures reflected past inflows in the area, as well as the general tendency of refugee flows to develop gradually and thereby give agencies some time to respond. For Macedonia, the equivalent figures were much less, only 20,000, which reflected the government's stated limit as to how many Kosovo Albanians it would accept. These contingency plans were reviewed on the eve of the air strikes and found adequate.

As it turned out, the maximum estimates were shattered within a couple of days in both countries. The planned division of labour among agencies and organisations was rendered totally irrelevant. There were no slots in the contingency plan for some 250 NGOs that were soon operative in Albania and Macedonia, nor for a sizeable NATO military force deployed to Albania with a purely humanitarian mandate (AFOR), the twelve national military contingents that carried out humanitarian tasks, and so on.

In other aspects as well, UNHCR was better prepared than during the Gulf crisis, but it did not match the magnitude and speed of this emergency. In response to both the Gulf crisis and later the Rwanda emergency, the agency had greatly improved its system for rapidly mobilising relief items. Stockpiles of central reserves were kept in Copenhagen and Amsterdam, and procedures had been established for contracting airlifts to fly out supplies. In addition, there were regional stockpiles in or near expected crisis areas, as well as agreements with contractors for quick delivery of items that did not lend themselves to long-term stockpiling.

The targets for reserves of stockpiles were routinely reviewed. At the time of the Kosovo crisis the target called for non-food relief items for 250,000 persons to be immediately available. In practice, the agency was not far behind this. The reserves were low on some key items, and bottlenecks arose in resupplying from contractors, but relief items reached Northern Albania only a few days after the refugees had arrived. While not quite meeting its own standards for immediate supplies, the agency

would have had a reasonable performance if the caseload had not exceeded 250,000.

The agency had also incorporated other main lessons from the Gulf crisis to enhance its preparedness. A roster of trained staff for emergency employment contained 30 persons on stand-by, who in theory could be deployed within 72 hours. Subsequent deployment still had to be painstakingly negotiated in a context of intra-agency competition for staff release. But the activation of the emergency roster, as well as the use of central reserve stockpiles, was triggered by a decision of the senior management to declare an emergency. In other words, the formal emergency mechanism recommended by the Gulf crisis was in place.

It worked – almost. The emergency roster was activated and the staff deployed within 72 hours. However, the decision to invoke the formal emergency mechanism itself was taken 1-2 days later than it arguably could and should have been, with the result that both deployment and supplies got a late start. In a refugee crisis of less interest to the Western world and UNHCR's major donors, the delay might not have been noticed much. With the world's spotlight focused on NATO's military action over the Kosovo conflict, and with intense political concern to minimise the humanitarian costs of the action, the relative tardiness of UNHCR's response was both noticed and criticised.

Deployment of subsequent staff was also a slow process, largely due to the same structural restraints that had operated during the Gulf crisis. As in 1991, the headquarters unit that co-ordinated the emergency response had to engage in lengthy and time-consuming internal negotiations to obtain release of needed staff.

Protection issues bore some similarities to the 1991 crisis as well. The difficult refugee situation on the border between Kosovo and Macedonia posed what was viewed by the agency as a conflict between principles and pragmatism. When Macedonia initially denied first asylum to the Kosovo Albanians, the immediate reaction within UNHCR was to stay firm on principle and demand unconditional asylum. When it became apparent that this was untenable, and only prolonged the suffering of thousands of refugees trapped at the border crossing, the agency moved towards the more pragmatic solution of shifting refugees elsewhere. The hesitancy this time was brief – only a couple of days compared to nearly two weeks of decision-making paralysis in the Iraq crisis. But the tension between the two views persisted and made it more difficult for the agency to recapture the policy initiative vis-à-vis powerful states and other actors.

One of the most significant weaknesses in the agency's response to

the Kosovo crisis was lack of immediate senior representation in the neighbouring countries receiving refugees. The sudden and massive inflow created problems that were political and diplomatic in nature; these could not be adequately addressed by the technically skilled emergency staff deployed from headquarters. Rather, given the politically charged nature of the crisis, and the high-level attention from the major powers as well as NATO, UNHCR needed more senior "humanitarian diplomats" in place. It is questionable if this lesson could have been learned from the Gulf crisis, where the diplomatic issues were somewhat different, but it clearly emerged as a lesson from the Kosovo crisis.

Learning lessons

Reviewing the two cases it is evident that the organisation had learned several lessons from the first crisis. These were incorporated in standard emergency procedures, and, as implemented, helped the agency respond much more effectively than it otherwise would have done to the second crisis. In this sense, there was a real element of learning involved. Other lessons had been learned but not implemented, and some had hardly been learned at all.

More specifically:
- lessons regarding technical aspects of emergency preparedness that had an obvious effectiveness rationale, and did not require major organisational adjustments, were learned in the sense that new procedures were recognised as desirable and implemented (central reserves of stockpiles, emergency rosters, emergency mechanism);
- lessons that would require structural change in the organisation were recognised in principle but not implemented (intra-agency competition for staff resources during emergencies was recognised as a problem, but no concrete proposals for change were made and no change occurred);
- lessons relating to principles concerning the essence of the organisation were recognised and partial adjustments made (initial paralysis over protection dilemmas was modified);
- lessons regarding early warning were recognised in principle, but behaviour remained constrained by cognitive and political factors and did not change.

Although the agency did learn some important lessons in preparedness, and implemented them during the second crisis, this was not sufficient to meet the demands of the day. In a sense, the lessons were applied to an inappropriate situation, or, more accurately, the lessons were mainly applicable to what we may call a "normal" refugee crisis – not the sudden, massive and politically visible "mega-crisis". The latter entails refugee flows of a speed and magnitude that are historically rare and require unusual responses. Most mega-crises become politically visible; when they in addition are related to NATO military action, they become politically charged in ways that create particular challenges for the UN humanitarian agencies.

Even without the particular challenges of NATO's presence, it is clear that UNHCR could not undertake the main operational response for a massive refugee crisis of the Kosovo kind. Nor was this a part of the agency's objectives. Although the Gulf crisis had also been a "mega-crisis", UNHCR's leadership had chosen not to interpret the lessons by developing an in-house operational capacity to respond to events of this magnitude. There was no suggestion of building up stockpiles for half a million refugees or more, or having a dedicated in-house emergency capacity of several dozen persons.

One main reason for the limited ambitions was undoubtedly the anticipated resistance from donors and other agencies. When UNHCR in the mid-1990s, and especially in connection with the UN reforms, appeared to make a bid to be the primary UN department for humanitarian emergencies, this was in fact rebuffed. As a result, the agency never developed decision-making structures or resources for an in-house operational response to deal with massive crises of the Kosovo kind. In a sense, the organisation had learned, rather than simply adapted, in Haas' terms.[37]

Some of the criticism of the agency's response to the Kosovo crisis appeared to implicitly judge its operations against the demands of the "mega-crisis", rather than the more modest objectives the agency had set itself. Our evaluation called on both the agency and its critics to recognise the constraints on what UNHCR can realistically be expected to do given its structure and resources. At the same time, we pointed out that the response could clearly be improved.

There are major lessons to be learned from the Kosovo crisis that do not require fundamental changes in the agency's structure, functions or

---

[37] In Haas' words, this is a model of organisational change where "the re-examination of purposes is brought about by knowledge-mediated decision-making dynamics". Haas, 1990, p. 4.

decision-making processes. These changes relate to all phases of the emergency, including aspects that are not discussed in this chapter.[38] The agency could also improve its early warning and contingency planning in ways to enhance its preparedness for a wide range of crises.

Both the Kosovo and the Gulf refugee crises show a tendency for organisations to select a best rather than worst case scenario, and to plan accordingly. To correct for this tendency requires institutional routines that encourage planning for the unlikely, but momentous and worst case. Such planning requires unconventional thinking – "thinking outside the box". It involves institutional and cognitive efforts that differ from the contingency planning focused on the more likely scenarios.

For UNHCR, planning for the worst case would rely heavily on stand-by capacities from other institutions, both civilian and military, that could be rapidly mobilised. It would not involve a dramatic increase of in-house emergency capacity. Nor would it mean a drastic change in procedure. The agency had in fact strengthened this element in its planning as a direct response to the experience of the Great Lakes emergency in 1994. At that time, national service packages were introduced as a swift way of meeting the immediate needs of a massive refugee flow. The package became part of a broader contingency planning process within the agency's emergency response division. Based on a modular concept and relying heavily on planned external contributions, the process did include worst case scenarios of massive refugee flows. For reasons that are unclear, this planning process was discontinued during the second half of the 1990s, and was not reactivated in the 1998-99 period when the Kosovo conflict escalated. It was, in effect, an instance of un-learning.

Reintroducing this form of contingency planning would be a form of re-learning. It could not, of course, guarantee that the external contributions would be delivered as planned. States and other organisations may decide to commit contributions or not, or to deploy under national flags rather than a multilateral UN umbrella, as the tendency was in Kosovo. However, as the Greeks and Romans knew, no rite is foolproof – the gods may not be listening. Nevertheless, performing the correct procedure arguably promises a higher probability of positive results than otherwise. This applies to organisations as well, and is the underlying premise of learning.

---

[38] With respect to management and co-ordination, the agency performed below its own standards that were applicable to the "mega-crisis" of Kosovo as well as more "normal" crises, and for reasons relating in part to factors under its own control.

References

Argyris, C., 1992, *On Organizational Learning*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Ayer, A. .J., 1947, "Language Truth and Logic", in Renier, G.J., (ed.), 1965, *History. Its Purpose and Method*. New York: Harper.

Crisp, Jeff *et al.*, March 1992, *Review of UNHCR emergency preparedness and response in the Persian Gulf Crisis*, Geneva: UNHCR.

Haas, E. B., 1990, *When Knowledge Is Power*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jervis, R., 1976, *Perception and Misperception in International Relations*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Levy, J. S. "Learning and foreign policy: sweeping a conceptual minefield," *International Organization* 48, 2 (Spring 1994).

Ofstad, A. *et al.*, 1999, *UN and International Organisations*, Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute.

Renier, G.J., (ed.), 1965, *History. Its Purpose and Method*. New York: Harper.

Suhrke, A. *et al.*, February 2000, *The Kosovo Refugee Crisis: an independent evaluation of UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response*, Geneva: UNHCR.

US Committee for Refugees, 1992, *World Refugee Survey*.

What Prevents Development Organizations from Learning?
The Difficulties in Learning to Be Learners

Naoki Suzuki

Introduction

This paper examines the difficulties and opportunities that confront development practitioners and organizations in the process of learning and changing in order to improve their daily work.[39] Because learning is what human development is all about, it is a major concern in international development efforts, the bottom line of which is to improve the quality of human lives. Without learning, no development is possible.

Fashionable terms in international development such as "participation," "sustainability" and "empowerment" all imply that learning is key to the success of development efforts. First, because learning is not a good that one can obtain instantly but rather is a process that entails changes in oneself, participation is a necessary condition for learning. Second, as learning takes place within an individual, constituting internal changes within the learner, it can be sustained without interventions from outside. Third, learning constitutes empowerment, for it develops one's capacity. These links between learning and key concepts in development indicate its centrality to development efforts.

In international development, beneficiaries in the field are obviously the initial targets of learning. Development practitioners plan and implement projects so that beneficiaries can learn. However, learning on the part of practitioners is just as important. Practitioners cannot deal with beneficiaries in the same way that they approach such tasks as constructing dams, airports, roads, schools, hospitals and other infrastructural components. Beneficiaries and the contexts within which they operate are dynamic, complex, diverse and sophisticated. When

---

[39] Originating with Dewey's instrumental and pragmatic application of knowledge to action, learning has been recognized as a change in practical activity. Some scholars, however, have challenged this instrumental view of learning. Schein, 1999, promotes mutual learning rather than a more traditional educator-learner separation. Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1978, 1996, concentrate on changes in the practitioner's analytical framework that relate to his or her understandings, values and beliefs.

practitioners work with people in the field, they need to understand what those people's concerns, worries, interests and stakes are. Moreover, practitioners also need to anticipate that these are not static but rather change in relation to the dynamic contexts in which beneficiaries live and work. Thus, to maintain their effectiveness and efficiency, practitioners must consistently learn from people in the field so that they can adapt themselves to changing environments and concerns. The quality of their performance depends on their learning.

Learning is usually conceived of as an individual phenomenon, and it is true that beneficiaries and practitioners can learn as individuals. However, learning can take place on the part of organizations as well: ideally, organizations can learn to attune themselves to changing environments.[40] This is especially critical for international development organizations that attempt to address dynamic issues in changing and complex environments. If organizational learning does not take place, organizations cannot change and adapt to new circumstances as they develop. In this case, the individual learning that takes place is frustrated by organizational inertia and is thus squandered. To avoid this state of affairs, we need to explore ways to initiate, motivate, encourage and maintain our learning not only as individuals but also on the part of the organizations to which we belong. Before addressing this issue, however, we have to ask what prevents us from learning. In this paper, I address this question through my personal experiences and through research I conducted. To explore organizational learning, I focus on processes of organizing that individuals participate in, rather than on organizations as static entities.[41]

In the body of this paper, I present personal accounts from the field in order to convey a sense of what actually happens in development organizations. I then interpret these accounts and highlight issues associated with learning on the part of staff members of development organizations. Finally, I suggest several strategies that enhance learning both by individual practitioners and by organizations.

---

[40] Argyris and Schön, 1996, state that "organizational learning occurs when individuals within an organization experience a problematic situation and inquire into it on the organization's behalf," p. 16.

[41] See Weick, 1979, here, to avoid treating development organizations as normalized and static entities, I intentionally avoid describing and classifying organizational forms. Burrell, 1998.

Accounts from the Field

A gap between knowledge and learning

If our concern is to increase our effectiveness in our day-to-day development work, our learning should be more than mere acquisition of knowledge. Learning surely is related to knowledge, but if acquiring knowledge does not motivate us to change our practices, we lose a chance to learn, and we fail to be effective in dynamic environments.

A friend of mine who was sent by a Japanese ministry to study abroad wrote a Master's thesis that suggested a new model of development project planning. He based his argument on a model adopted by the ministry and tried to improve it. As I listened to my friend's argument, I understood that this model had the potential to improve the quality of the ministry's decision making and project planning. I said to him, "I understand that your thesis must be of interest to those who want to improve the quality of work in your ministry. Do you think your boss will welcome the argument you make in your thesis and explore the possibility of applying it when he makes decisions?" My friend then said, without a moment's hesitation, "No, no. He [the boss] does not care about that. He makes decisions based on his political environments, pressures, vested interests, and so forth. So, I think this thesis will go directly to storage without being referred to by anybody." Despite his two-year effort in studying how to improve development endeavours, he seemed to have already given up the hope of bringing about any change in the ministry. Was his study just for the sake of study? If so, what a waste of time, effort and knowledge! A wide, deep gap appeared to exist between knowledge and learning here.[42]

My friend might be too pessimistic in his estimate of how much room for learning there is in the ministry within which he works. In his case, his relationship with his boss would be one of the major factors that informs his expectations of his boss's behaviour. If a strong relationship based on trust existed between him and his boss, then he would have a different expectation of his boss's treatment of his thesis. In any case, his understanding, at least, suggests that knowledge *per se* can neither do well nor influence the work of development practitioners. There needs to be something more in order for learning to occur.

If his model were to have a chance to be adopted as a new analytical resource for decision making, two conditions would have to be satisfied:

---

[42] In this case, Dewey, 1980, would not validate the knowledge because verified knowledge helps actors solve problems at hand.

first, his boss and other concerned people in the ministry must be sufficiently motivated to try a new course of action; and second, they must have a deep trust in him and his abilities. The former condition suggests the importance of incentives that encourage the staff to change and improve the effectiveness of their organization. The latter condition implies that personal relationships among the staff must be developed in such a way as to induce not only individual learning but also organizational learning.[43] Because fulfilling these conditions is difficult, due to their complexity, dynamics and subtlety, the knowledge-learning gap persists. To relate knowledge and learning, the personal relationships between the people concerned, as well as the opportunities and risks facing them, must be addressed.

Despite the fact that the knowledge-learning gap severely hinders organizational performance, we usually do not ask ourselves why this gap exists and how it can be closed. We are interested in developing new theories, models and methodologies without concerning ourselves with the processes underlying the actions that we actually take to bring about change. We tend to be very naïve about the ways that we may better enact these findings in our daily work in the face of the opportunities, constraints, problems and challenges that we face as individuals and as organizations.

Whose learning?

In and around development work, learners divide roughly into three different groups, each of which experiences a specific learning process.[44] These groups include the intended beneficiaries, the staff who work in the field, and the people in positions of leadership who manage development organizations. Learning for the first group is usually considered the goal of development work, and much development literature, especially development education, is devoted to studying this group's education and learning. But the following accounts show that learning on the part of the staff and the leadership is just as important as learning on the part of beneficiaries, if development organizations are to

---

[43] "In the case of the collective,…the theory of action must include the rules for allocating tasks to individual members and for the mutual adjustment of individuals' actions, by which they maintain the cooperation and control on which their organization depends" Schön, 1983, p. 117.
[44] I acknowledge the danger of dividing learners into three different types as if these groups are defined and embedded in the organizational structure. Here, my intention is to shed light on learners inside organizations as opposed to beneficiaries in the field, and also to deal with differences within an organization.

maintain and improve the quality of their performance.

Because the nature of learning is such that it occurs within learners themselves, outsiders cannot force learners to learn. Development practitioners are, therefore, interested in how they can facilitate this intransitive learning from outside. As field situations differ from place to place, from time to time, and from person to person, development practitioners cannot depend solely on one particular facilitative method. A method that worked for one learner at one time is not guaranteed to work for the same person at another time, let alone for a different person in a different place or at a different time. For development practitioners to play an effective facilitative role, they must continuously learn from the field to be able to adjust themselves to changing situations.

Learning on the part of the staff is the concern not only of the staff but also of their bosses. A major task of the leadership of development organizations is to make sure that the staff in the field performs well. A country director of a development organization expresses the importance of the staff's learning this way:

> If we are hiring them and just saying, "Do it," and not enhancing their lives, nor stimulating them, promoting critical reflection, and asking them to think, then what can they do?... They are not going to ask people to think, they are just going to say, "Here is the money."

Learning on the part of the staff is not usually an explicit goal of development organizations because the organizations are normally founded to serve people outside, not inside, the organization. However, as the above account suggests, staff members' learning does influence the performance of the organization as a whole.

Learning on the part of development organizations' leadership can be distinguished from learning on the part of the staff, in the sense that leaders do not work directly in the field but rather work more with organizational issues such as missions and resources (both financial and human). The country director quoted above clearly recognizes the importance of the leadership's learning when he says, "How can we ask our staff to be involved in promoting development with beneficiaries if we are not doing it with them [the staff]?" His suggestion to the leadership is "to model the way we [the leadership] want them [the staff] to interact with people in the community."

Figure 1. Learning groups inside and outside development organizations

Outside Organizations	Inside Organizations	
Beneficiaries	Development practitioners	Development leadership

Of the three learning groups in Figure 1 – beneficiaries, practitioners and leaders – learning among the latter two groups occurs within development organizations, not in the field, and thus does not usually draw the attention of development scholars. Their learning remains a minor area of development studies, when it is not ignored altogether. However, the reality is that learning for these two groups significantly influences the quality of development activities. The performance of development organizations in the field, where situations are not only complex and dynamic but also uncertain and turbulent, depends to a considerable degree on how an organization can maintain its learning to adjust to changing contexts.

A former NGO project manager says:

> When I was a project manager, I used to go out to hold meetings with project staff. The meetings went on for two or three hours—very intensive meetings. We would go through and analyze in those meetings what we learned and what we did rather than pointing out things we thought were wrong. We found that an extremely valuable learning experience was for all of us to try to criticize not somebody else, but the processes. The staff greatly appreciated it. It's difficult to replicate it. I mean, you need somebody who is open to doing that. And often it takes very specific skills to analyze what's going on in these interactions. I did that at a project level. But I can't think of similar examples at the management level. Maybe I should think about this.

The account highlights several key issues. First, as I state above, within development organizations there are two distinctive learning groups: those who learn at the project level and those who learn at the management level.

Second, learning at the management level seems to be much harder than at project level. In fact, the above account suggests that we will rarely see learning at the management level.

Third, even at the project level, learning seemed possible only when the project manager made an extra effort and showed a strong interest in

learning. His openness and willingness appeared to be a primary condition for learning. In this sense, the organization's leadership does play a significant role in enabling learning to occur among the staff.

Fourth, the project manager's wisdom in criticizing not individuals but processes encouraged learning among the staff. The staff felt secure because they were not the targets of criticism. This sense of security among the staff encourages them to look critically at their working processes.

Fifth, focusing on processes rather than outcomes enabled them to analyze their work and provided opportunities to think of what and how they could improve their practices in concrete terms rather than simply at a conceptual level.

This account sheds light on the importance of the learning that must take place inside development organizations in order for those organizations to be able to perform well in their endeavours.[45] It also implies that learning at the managerial level is difficult, if not impossible, although the impact of learning at this level can significantly influence the entire organization.[46] The following section addresses the difficulties of learning at the management level.

Mistakes and learning

A development practitioner emphasizes the link between mistakes and learning when she says, "I have learned a lot because I made so many mistakes." This statement provides ample insight for people interested in learning. We learn much more from our mistakes than from our successes. But practically speaking, we normally do not plan to learn by making mistakes. Nobody makes a mistake on purpose. How, then, shall we understand the relationship between learning and mistakes? What practical conclusions can we draw from this relationship? An officer working at the headquarters of a development organization shares her understanding of learning:

---

[45] Friedmann, 1987, p.185, Actors are learners and vice versa.

[46] In changing an organization, top management personnel are the relevant actors. For example, Whyte, 1974 explains that a small number of people at the top played a critical role in the practices of China's revolution, although they relied heavily on a rhetoric of the "masses."

> We do learn well on the program side. (The programs) often reflect what we call lessons learned. We try to look at it in positive terms. That's seen as a very smart thing. Harder things are when you screw something up, which is going to have a long-term negative impact. I think we admit it when we have to, and we justify it some way. The mistake that is not accepted too easily is when you lose money, or something that financially hurts the organization. If that were the thing, then you would get fired. Administrative mistakes are harder to admit to. Those are kind of what we whisper (in a low voice with her finger to her lips). But that occurs.

Here, two different types of mistakes correspond to two different types of learning. Mistakes on the program side can be viewed in positive terms as lessons learned. On the administrative side, mistakes are viewed more seriously. People whisper and do not easily admit to such mistakes unless they have to. Even if they have to admit to them, they defend their positions as much as possible. Table 1 indicates how organizational responses to people who make mistakes are totally different depending on whether those who err are in the staff or the leadership of the organization.

As Figure 2 shows, the differences in treatment are not necessarily related to the person's position within the organization but rather are related to the impact of their mistake on the organization. If a mistake jeopardizes organizational maintenance, then those who make such a mistake should expect severe punishment. However, if the impact of the mistake is felt mainly by projects and beneficiaries, its consequences for organizational maintenance are not so serious. Although mistakes in the field hurt beneficiaries and hence should be avoided, such errors do not usually have an immediate, negative impact on the organization. Thus, the organization has the latitude to treat such mistakes as lessons learned.

Figure 2. Differences in action on mistakes

	Development practioners in the field	Leadership of development organizations
Areas of mistakes	programs	administration/ management
Point of impact	projects and benificiares	organizations
Treatment and action	lessons learned	dismissal, demotion

The contradiction between avoiding mistakes and making use of them as lessons learned constitutes an insightful analytical resource. Although we generally wish to avoid mistakes, they can sometimes be used as valuable resources that we can exploit for our learning. To understand this conflicting issue, we focus on actions, through which we understand mistakes, rather than directly dealing with mistakes themselves, because mistakes are the end results of actions.

When one considers taking a new course of action,[47] one anticipates its results and calculates the possibilities of errors that the new action might bring about. If one perceives that the impact of a potential mistake, if it happens, would not be so serious, then one would feel relatively comfortable trying the new course of action. However, if one perceives that the impact of a potential mistake would jeopardize one's own position, one would be discouraged from trying the new course of action and hence would be left with the status quo.[48] These relationships suggest that environments that allow the staff to try a new course of action without much fear can facilitate practitioners' learning.

As Table 1 indicates, managerial or administrative mistakes are likely to have a direct and negative impact on organizations. Thus, organizational leaders, because their activities significantly influence organizational maintenance and survival, are more likely to worry about the risks of mistakes than to expect to learn from them. Given the risks that administrative and managerial mistakes entail, organizational leaders are unlikely to entertain new courses of action because of the potential for unanticipated mistakes associated with change.

An important precondition for learning to take place within organizations is for practitioners to feel free to experiment with new approaches without fearing potential mistakes. If a mistake compromises organizational maintenance, those responsible for the organization must treat the mistake seriously, as a matter of organizational as well as personal survival. Lessons learned are worthwhile only to the extent that organizational maintenance is secured.

Because of the potential negative impact of mistakes they might make, organizational leaders tend to be risk averse. Their interest in making their organizational future more certain, secure, safe and manageable leads them to make organizational maintenance their primary goal. Unless

---

[47] Friedmann, 1987, p.45, argues that action refers not to established routine but to change. In his view, "action" inherently implies something new.

[48] See Sitkin, 1996.

they face a pressing need and/or problem that cannot be solved through routine work, their natural tendency is to follow rules and regulations. By doing so, they can avoid making judgements and thus avoid taking responsibility for their actions.

Following rules and regulations is the path of least resistance for leaders who worry about risks associated with making changes. Rules and regulations are a tool that leaders can use in several ways to defend their positions. First, as long as leaders follow organizational rules and regulations, the consequences of their actions are attributed to the organization, and the leaders themselves do not need to take responsibility for those consequences. Second, rules and regulations guide leaders' actions and relieve them of the burdens associated with making judgements. Third, rules and regulations are useful and reliable as a point of reference because they are developed, legitimated and tested during the long-term processes that cumulatively form an organization's history.

Two obstacles to taking action challenge leaders: the risk of losing their position and the temptation to follow rules and regulations. The risk of losing their position is what is at stake when leaders make changes, to the degree that those changes carry the potential for making serious mistakes. Leaders wish to retain their positions; hence they avoid making changes that might entail the potential for making serious mistakes. Leaders are tempted to follow rules and regulations because doing so constitutes the least risky means of getting their jobs done. Both of these obstacles discourage leaders from taking action and push them to follow established routines. But in order for leaders to be able to learn, they need to have enough incentive and a sufficient sense of security to take a new course of action and exercise their judgement. Learning is inherently a process of taking risks. At the same time, learning is both difficult to bring about and difficult to maintain, as the following section argues.

The vulnerability of learning

Learning is not a one-time event but is rather a continuous, dynamic process. Today's learning does not guarantee tomorrow's learning. Furthermore, a lesson we seem to learn through a past mistake that had a tremendous negative impact on us might still be insufficient to change our actions when we face a similar situation in the future. Learning is not something we can promise. The following account by a staff member of an international organization shows how organizational learning is vulnerable in the face of power:

> In 1982 and '83, we had such a huge income because of boat people out of Vietnam and because of Cambodia opening up. We were flooded by it. We had tons of money flowing in, tons of opportunities, and no people, no infrastructure. We had a thirty percent income growth in one year. So we said, "We are not gonna make that mistake again." We did a five-year plan. We built into that five-year plan thirty percent growth every single year. Of course the following year, all the donors forgot about the boat people, about Cambodia, and our income, instead of going up thirty percent, dropped by a large amount. We were devastated. It was a very tight time. We finally recovered from that and income was growing again when Ethiopia hit. You would think that we would not make the same mistake again, we would not plan for all this growth, hire tons of new people, buy all kinds of new equipment. But we did. Then people lost interest in Ethiopia and famine in Africa. Suddenly, we had all kinds of people that we couldn't afford, and all kinds of equipment. We suffered. We haven't learned the lesson.

The staff of the organization realized after that devastation that income growth for relief did not last for a long time. This appears to have been a lesson for which the organization paid a high price. The sacrifice that the organization had to make to recover from the devastation would seem sufficient to ensure that the mistake would not be repeated. However, the organization actually failed to learn the lesson and consequently made the same mistake again.

This account offers critical insight into the way that the power of money nullified the lesson. The staff not only recognized that the budget expansion did not last long but also experienced the devastation when the ensuing budget cut was larger than they could have dreamed. However, the experience and the lesson they learned were still not sufficient for them to act on that lesson when faced with the power of money. The validity of our learning does not depend solely on conditions internal to us or our organizations. Rather, this account suggests that it depends significantly on the external context in which we operate. Whether we can put our learning into practice or not is a matter of the dynamic relationship between our environment and us as individuals and as organizations. This account implies that our learning is vulnerable in the face of money's power. However, we often fail to grasp that our learning is vulnerable to our environment, and instead treat it as though it is independent of context.

Obstacles to Learning

The above accounts illustrate the following obstacles to learning faced by development organizations and development practitioners:

1) Confusion between knowledge and learning. Acquiring knowledge per se is not learning. But we often treat them as the same thing and assume that simply exposing ourselves or our organizations to pieces of information is sufficient.[49]

2) Lack of practical knowledge. One of the major causes of the gap between knowledge and learning is that we do not pay enough attention to how we can put our knowledge into practice. This practical aspect that links knowledge and action has not been examined sufficiently. One reason is that the concept of "practical knowledge" can easily be confused with applied sciences such as engineering. Practical knowledge that puts knowledge into action in our real world, however, is much more sophisticated than engineering. It involves a number of considerations such as timing, power, politics, processes, resources, information and so forth.

3) Instrumentality of practical knowledge. The link between knowledge and action can function in different ways: while knowledge can inform action and thus cause learning to occur, it can also be exploited in a non-learning context. That is, knowledge is inherently instrumental in the sense that it lies at the root of purposive action, but this fact can have both negative and positive implications, from the perspective of development organizations. The practical knowledge that informs action can be used as an effective instrument by vested interests who seek to exploit that knowledge for their own purposes, even to the detriment of development efforts. In this case, knowledge is an object to be exploited. Alternatively, knowledge can be viewed as a subject, an active force that influences our actions. In this case, knowledge is active, teaching us rather than being exploited by us.

4) Knowledge de-linked from the reality. Knowledge, which is often taken as fact, is often de-linked from the context in which it was constructed.[50] Once it is removed from its original context, the knowledge loses its social, cultural, political and historical implications. Knowledge is then separated from our daily life, and

---

[49] See Freire's, 1970, discussion of banking education for details.
[50] See Berman, 1995 and Latour, 1987.

learning can hardly occur when we fail to situate our knowledge in context.

5) No action, no learning. In the social learning tradition, action plays the central role.[51] It is the beginning and the end of learning. Here action refers not to routine work but activity with purpose. Without purposeful activity, an individual does not have an opportunity to engage with the issues at hand. And without engagement, one cannot experience the learning process of action and reflection.

6) Beneficiaries as learners, staff as trainers. In international development, beneficiaries are the ones who learn. Because the staff members of an organization play the role of trainers, people do not treat them as learners. The staff members might go for further studies to develop their abilities and capacity. But when the staff work in the field, they tend neither to feel the need for learning nor to recognize themselves as learners.

7) Staff members' learning as a luxury. Some organizational leaders understand that staff members' learning is important for improving the quality of work in the field. However, in the face of budgetary pressure, organizations typically choose to spend their money in the field in order to be accountable to their donors, and do not encourage the staff to spend resources to educate themselves.

8) Risk averse behaviour for the sake of maintaining the organization. Learning often involves risk taking because it entails a departure from routine work. Leaders fear such departures because the outcome is not only uncertain but also potentially risky for the organization.

9) Little incentive for organizational leadership to be proactive. Leaders, of course, need to direct the organization. However, most of their daily work involves administrative business, which can easily be routinized. Once the leadership is accustomed to a daily routine, it is difficult for them to alter their actions unless the routine ceases to function well or, more seriously, actually harms the organization.

10) Acceptable and unacceptable mistakes. Mistakes can become part of the learning process. Mistakes in the field can be treated positively as lessons learned. But once a mistake hurts the organization, mistakes are less likely to be seen as acceptable. As a result, the staff is discouraged from making changes in the hope of improving organizational effectiveness if they think that doing so can result in a serious mistake. Yet in the absence of change, the opportunity for learning is lost.

---

[51] See Friedmann, 1987.

11) Vulnerability of learning. Learning is dynamic rather than static, and people-centered rather than capital-intensive. Learning takes place within individuals, not outside of them. And learning requires a longer-term perspective rather than a shorter-term one. These characteristics, which are almost the same as the characteristics of people-centered development, suggest that learning is vulnerable. The action that involves dynamic, people-centered, intransitive and long-term perspectives is very difficult to manage. When we try to control and manage learning, we can end up destroying its very value. The conditions that make learning valuable also make it intrinsically vulnerable.

Conclusion: The Challenge of Becoming Learners

This paper has presented accounts from the field to illustrate some of the multidimensional difficulties associated with learning in international development organizations. Most of them point to the major underlying obstacle that prevents learning from occurring: the disincentives that discourage change and new action.

In order for an international development organization to learn, learning on the part of the staff members must of course be taken seriously. Even more important, however, is learning that takes place on the part of the organization's leaders, because of their significant influence on the organization. The paradox is that their learning is the most difficult to bring about among the three learning groups (beneficiaries, staff members and leaders). Learning on the part of the leadership is severely constrained by virtually all the obstacles enumerated above. In order for leaders to learn, they must depart from the safety of their routines, exercise their judgment and adopt a new course of action.

Rules and regulations encourage the leaders to follow established routines and inhibit activity in fresh directions. Exercising judgement involves risks because it also requires taking responsibility.

An understanding of these obstacles to learning suggests possible strategies for addressing them. International organizations can improve their learning capacity if they welcome mistakes as lessons, if they appreciate risk-taking activities, if they value processes as well as products, and if they encourage leaders to exercise their judgement. In any case, the parties concerned are the ones who must learn; outsiders can only facilitate their learning by providing them with suitable

environments in which learning can occur. This is what development is all about. We need to understand that, regardless of our positions and without exception, we are all learners.

References

Argyris, C. and D. A. Schön, 1974, *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Argyris, C. and D. A. Schön, 1978, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Argyris, C. and D. A. Schön, 1996, *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Berman, M., 1995, "Science after Deconstruction: A Second Look at the Sociology of Knowledge." pp. 2-9 in *Cooperative Inquiry*. Bath: Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, University of Bath.

Burrell, G., 1998, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Organizational Analysis: The Contribution of Michel Foucault." pp. 14-28 in McKinlay, A. and K. Starkey, (eds.), *Foucault, Management and Organizational Theory: From Panopticon to Technologies of the Self*. London: Sage Publications.

Dewey, J., 1980, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge to Action*. New York: Perigree Books.

Freire, P., 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.

Friedmann, J., 1987, *Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University.

Latour, B., 1987, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Schein, E., 1999, *Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Schön, D. A., 1983, "Organizational Learning." pp. 114-128 in Morgan, G., (ed.), *Beyond Method: Strategies for Social Research*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Sitkin, S. B., 1996, "Learning Through Failure: The Strategy of Small Losses." pp. 541-577 in Cohen, M. D. and L. S. Sproull, (eds.), *Organizational Learning*, *Organizational Science*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Weick, K. E., 1979, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Whyte, M. K., 1974, *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Part III

The Toils and the Spoils: Agricultural Knowledge Networks, Professionals and Practitioners

Louk Box[52]

The subject of this paper is knowledge networks and their relevance for institutionalised learning. In particular it focuses on the issue of the value of knowledge networks operative in international co-operation. Influenced as we are by the automation of our world-view, we immediately associate this with computers, the Internet and that discovery of the past century: the World Wide Web. I shall return to this at the end of the paper. Let me start with an anecdote to illustrate the argument that formal scientific knowledge can be informed by informal cultivator experiments.

Soils of Knowledge

Imagine fallow. Imagine standing on the borderline between a cassava field and the first trees or bush-fallow. The cassava field neatly laid out, with the pretty play of young green leaves on their red stems. The field, not very large, not very regular; it must be about an acre, the normal size that a man can work. Fields always have had sizes in terms of work and this one in the mountains of the Dominican Republic is no exception. Fields are human constructions.

And fallow? What does fallow mean? Think of what fallow looks like. First fallow looks uncared for, then fallow looks as if nature is taking over again, and ultimately fallow is forest, or beyond culture. Just imagine that you are there as a researcher speaking with the local road-sweeper, called Virgilio. Imagine that you have just asked him why he is growing cassava and where his varieties came from. Imagine that he asks you to take a step back – out of the Caribbean sun, into the cover of the forest. And finally imagine that he then asks you: why do you want to know?

You tell him about the study you are doing on how common crops are cultivated and you try to make a case for it. The man does not quite

believe your story because, as he says, "you are the scientist – you tell me how to raise this poor crop on these poor soils – you tell me what varieties to use". This, of course, is a common occurrence when one is doing this type of research and you are quite well prepared for it. You patiently explain to the guy and he recovers from his initial surprise. "In other words" he says " you say that you do not know; you say that you are ignorant?" Let us assume that you, the researcher, acknowledge ignorance.

In the meantime you follow Virgilio into the bush fallow, pushing the branches away, recovering an occasional bug which gets into your clothes. At a certain moment your guide stops. Sits down. Asks you: "What do you see here?" You don't see anything but branches, bush and once in a while a bit of bare soil. You tell him this. "No", he answers, "you see a *laboratorio* – and a secret laboratory at that". You sit down and wonder if your understanding of Spanish is good enough. What is the guy talking about? How did he know the word *laboratorio* anyway?

Then – the explanation. This little piece of bush was cultivated years ago by his father. That was in the time that people in the mountains had many varieties of cassavas, most of them now extinct. But here they remain, they grow as seedlings. No, they are not legitimate offspring, propagated by cuttings. They are seedlings, reproduced through true seed. You look with another eye at the small cassava plant, which he is sitting next to. The same green of the leaves, but lighter stems than those we have just seen. You walk a bit further and see more and more small plants, some big ones. You get the point: this *laboratorio* is a living museum, a nursery for bio-diversity, it provides the soil in which new knowledge grows.

Suppose you get excited at this discovery (not a discovery for the cultivator, but a discovery for you – the scientist). You ask him the obvious question: why keep this secret? He looks at you, marvelling at your ignorance. He chuckles and says: "You don't understand; well it's because of my neighbours here. They'll get mad at me if they know that I grow illegitimate varieties. The whole order of things might be upset if someone steals one of my seedlings here and mixes it up with legitimate cassava plants. We all depend on good quality cassava and suppose someone throws in a bitter root with some sweet ones. People might get poisoned you know?"

He is right. He adds: "but I keep messing around in my *laboratorio*. I may have types no one else has. As long as I live, I keep messing around,

simply because it is fun". He then showed me some promising varieties, one of which might find its way to the market and receive that greatest recognition of all: his name.[52b]

Why present this anecdote? For many reasons, but if there is one word to remember, it is: 'fun'. I try to make an argument that fun, or play, is an important factor in technological change. That is about as far-fetched as saying that markets can exist without competition, firms without capital, or universities without exams. Yet play or fun is far more important in the generation of knowledge than is often assumed.

The second reason for the anecdote: among poor cultivators of poor crops in poor countries, a wealth of knowledge exists. The negative corollary of this is that among great scientists in countries concerned with these crops, limited knowledge exists. None of my colleagues in the Dominican Republic (national or foreign) knew of these *laboratorios*. Few were willing to accept the thesis that the study of cassava cultivation needs to start at the base level: in cultivators' fields. Or rather, if the researcher is so fortunate as to find one: in the cultivator's laboratory. For successful technological innovations in the cultivation of these poor men's crops, can in many cases be traced back to well functioning knowledge networks linking the wealth of cultivator knowledge with the power of specialised scientific knowledge.

Knowledge for What?

When interviewing cultivators in rich countries (like the Netherlands) and poorer ones (like the Dominican Republic) I was struck by the fact that almost always other aims were involved in cultivator experimentation than strictly utilitarian ones. Utilitarian factors are for example yields (be it per unit of labour or of land), income, or food security. These certainly have their importance, but are only part of a much larger picture. Non-utilitarian factors were most often related to such things as personal taste (be it the taste of the product, or the liking of a certain plant architecture), and especially the fun of experimenting. This was clearly confirmed when students at Wageningen University analysed Dutch potato breeding processes. It was found that in the mid-80s breeding

---

[52b] Many cassava varieties in the Dominican Republic carry the name of the person who first cultivated or circulated it. In essence this is not much different from the system in formal science, by which the discoverer's name is attached to a particular species or variety.

firms still counted on the services of a group of 'selectors' or so-called 'hobby-breeders' who received sets of potato seedlings which needed to be evaluated on their qualities. In essence, the breeders did the same as cultivators have always done, only now in a co-ordinated manner through a firm, which could get a formal breeder's right to a particularly successful selection. Most of the hobby-breeders indicated that they enjoyed doing the selection; the lottery of an eventual income received from breeders' rights appealed, but could not have been the sole reason for engaging in the laborious trials. The same was found in a study among cattle-breeders in The Netherlands.[53]

Many of the cultivators interviewed indicated that they enjoyed doing the experimentation. Of course their livelihood was a prime concern, but almost no one ever said that he saw experimentation as a chore. On the contrary; experimentation is seen as a way of gently playing with nature. The reason we know so little about it, is that many experiments are not discussed either because they are secret, or because they are considered as 'play'.

Secrecy, for example, stopped one informant in the Dominican Republic for at least one year from telling me that a piece of fallow land was in fact stocked with varieties he had ... borrowed from an official plot he took care of. When it was suspected that a cassava disease had broken out on the trial plot, the research director had ordered all plants burned. My informant burned all, except for the ones he considered interesting for his own trials.

Play was exemplified by another informant who put cassava stakes upside down in the plant hole. When asked why, he answered: "My son must have planted them this way; it just goes to show that you have to check everything". Later, when we were investigating the effect of stake planting-positions, we found that he had done this trial before. He repented and said "I did not want to be ridiculed by my neighbours; it was just playfulness, you know".

These and the many other examples collected by researchers indicate that cultivator experimentation is a normal part of agricultural technology development.[54] The traditional peasant may only have existed in one place: in the scientist's head. Cultivator experimentation is a normal part

---

[53] van Reeuwijk, 1986.
[54] See Pretty, 1995, pp.180-188. See also for a classification of cultivator experimentation Millar, 'Experimenting farmers in northern Ghana' in Scoones and Thompson, 1994, pp.160-165.

of agrarian change and may be the larger part of it, especially for certain crops like cassava.

Since most small farmers still depend on poor persons' crops cultivated under poor conditions, there is every reason to take this process of local experimentation seriously. Since playfulness and other non-utilitarian cultural values do guide the process there is also reason to be sceptical of pre-set criteria, especially the utilitarian values operative among researchers, extensionists and agro-bureaucrats.

This argues in favour of a firm grounding of technological change, and for a model of linkage based on networks. This is not an argument against advanced agricultural research, on the contrary: more and more of it is needed, if only because agricultural research has shaped the world which many small producers in poor countries now face.[55] But let us never assume that the problem can just be solved by better agricultural research, or by better linkage through extension to farmers as was indeed done in most of the loans provided by the World Bank to poor countries in recent decades.

Instead of assuming farmers to be just end-users of technology, they may rightly be considered to stand at the very start of technological development. This means that researchers will need to be trained to listen to farmers. They will need to learn how to learn from the supposedly unlearned.

Knowledge Management: Chaos, System or Network?

The key question asked in this book is about knowledge management, or institutionalised learning. This question may be applied particularly to technology generation through North-South dialogue, which assumes knowledge creation through exchanges, by equal partners. In conventional science it is assumed that technology is developed by scientists in the North, and then transferred to the South through extension or capacity building. Although possibly true for the case of industrial technology, there are indications from the agricultural changes that the reverse process is just as important. Southern cultivators develop technologies, which could be transferred to scientists in the home country or even in the North.

---

[55] For a striking example of this linkage see van Oosterhout, 'Sorghum genetic resources of small-scale farmers in Zimbabwe' in de Boef *et al.*, 1993, pp. 89-95. This book contains a number of other examples of constructive linkage between cultivators' experimentation and traditional research.

That is like turning the world upside down; it could therefore be called reverse technology transfer. In agricultural technology development, the notion of North-South dialogue is being implemented. I shall argue that cultivators contribute to technology development – in some cases possibly even more than researchers. The quality of the knowledge networks linking experimenting cultivators to traditional scientists (reversing the usual adjectives) makes for successful technology management.

Referring to the road-sweeper/cassava-experimenter I have called this Virgilio's Theorem[56], which states that farmers or cultivators need to be seen as equal partners in technology development through dialogue.

One word about knowledge[57], learning and technology management. The question is: what models of knowledge management[58] do we employ? For the sake of brevity let me distinguish three, which each have their contribution to make: the chaos model, the systems model and the network model.

The chaos model starts from the premise that there is no order and that any order is likely to decrease due to external factors. Proponents would show that all actors have different perceptions of reality because they have different interests, and that certain conditions lead to increasing diversity. Convergence of values between these actors is not likely to occur and therefore different bodies of knowledge are likely to remain operative, or might even diversify further. Under the pressure of external conditions like impoverishment in Africa, such phenomena of marginalisation and de-linking are likely to become more important. The management implication: none of the actors is in a position to impose order, start from the premise that each body of knowledge is as relevant as another. In a way, this is an approach favoured by some anthropologists arguing the relevance of local knowledge to the solution of ecological problems.

The systems model starts from the premise that a hierarchy of order exists in which functions are oriented to a common purpose. Most of the literature on knowledge management is conceived in terms of systems. The systems approach has been dominant in both the applied sciences and in management approaches. In the field of agricultural technology it

[56] See Box, 1989, pp.61-67.
[57] I understand knowledge to refer to facts or ideas acquired by study, observation or experience and placed within a meaningful context.
[58] For an argument along similar lines see Marsden, 'Indigenous management and the management of indigenous knowledge' in Scoones and Thompson, 1994, pp.52-57.

has been applied rigorously, both in biological and social sciences. It is closely linked with the development of models, which are essentially an application of 'systems theory'.

Proponents show that parts are related to a whole, or are better analysed in terms of the whole. Formal institutions are seen as manifestations of hierarchical order, such as in the notion of National Agricultural Research Systems. Co-ordination is the key word, and the state is often seen as providing direction or convergence towards common values. In the 70s and 80s, this model seemed realistic, given the large amounts of money provided to states in poor countries. The management implication was (and is) one of ordering around formal institutions of research, extension, but also commerce and farmer interest groups, with a strong orientation to leading partners generally found in the state.

The network[59] model stands in between these two and starts from the premise that actors continuously engage in linkage to further their interest, be it through informal or formal institutions. No common purpose or order is assumed as in the systems approach, and neither is equivalence of values or bodies of knowledge as in the chaos approach. Rather, order and purpose is continuously constructed in dialogue[60] on the basis of diversity and trust.[61] Formulated in a political sense: not the one-party notion of order, nor the chaos of scores of parties, but coalitions of a few parties.[62]

Three propositions can now be made with regard to the management of knowledge:

1) The notion of system is a prescriptive one, assuming an order, which generally does not exist. It is better to think in terms of emerging networks and study the functioning of these.
2) On the old question: "Knowledge for what?" I would like to plead for a non-utilitarian approach to knowledge, including the notion of fun, or playfulness. In essence I argue that agrarian knowledge emerges through an interaction of play and utility, among cultivators and scientists.

[59] Box, 'Knowledge, networks and cultivators: cassava in the Dominican Republic' in Long, 1989, p.167.
[60] See van Dusseldorp and Box, 'Local and scientific knowledge: developing a dialogue' in de Boef et al., 1993, pp.20-26.
[61] On a review of the functions of the factor trust in social networks, see Buskens, 1999. pp.15-23. He concludes that empirical evidence is still limited and hard to obtain, p.220.
[62] On coalition building in knowledge management for international co-operation see the early work by SAREC and IDRC as in SAREC, 1992, pp.13-15.

3) Given the network approach to the structure of social relations and given the play-approach to the nature of the process of developing agrarian knowledge, I argue that the different management approaches are needed for this process. Because this is inadequately recognised my contention is that the pay-off to agricultural research in many countries is surprisingly low.

I do not pretend that these ideas are new. Yet I am surprised to see that the notion of system still has a hold over so many brilliant minds in the universities and beyond. I am aghast at the utilitarian nature of much scientific research, completely foregoing the play-element of discovery.[63]

My contention is that involving farmers in poor countries in knowledge networks on an egalitarian basis will increase both effectiveness and efficiency of agricultural technology development. I assume, that in such cases not only the toils but also the spoils can be shared, as Calestous Juma has cogently argued for the case of biotechnology.[64]

Knowledge Networks in Operation

In a study on knowledge networks in Costa Rica[65] it was argued that one way of studying agrarian knowledge was to describe and analyse the networks which cultivators and other actors construct. The line of argument goes briefly as follows.

One aspect of a social relationship is exchange of knowledge. Although social relations may be based on quite different motives, there are few that do not have this aspect latently or manifestly. Such social relations can be seen as long chains through which knowledge is exchanged or generated. Therefore, knowledge chains can be defined as those relatively stable patterns of interaction and communication by which knowledge is exchanged or generated. Knowledge networks are seen as sets of such chains, focused around one particular object of concern.[66]

The respective studies were limited to empirically verifiable understanding of interaction and communication between actors. They did not assume a common purpose of the entire set of actors, and were not limited to particular functions (such as generation, transmission and

---

[63] Box, 1999 (July) article.
[64] Juma, 1989, pp. 167-169.
[65] Box, 'Agrarian knowledge networks: a conceptualisation' in Box *et al.*, 1990, pp.1-7.
[66] Box *et al.*, 1990, pp. 1-2.

use of knowledge) which could be associated with certain formal organisations or categories of actors (researchers, extensionists and farmers).

In the Dominican Republic it was found[67] that both extension and research were at best irrelevant to most cassava growers, at worst they were a hazard. The irrelevance stemmed from the wrong research priorities.[68] The hazard could best be exemplified by wrong advice, for example to start growing high yielding varieties which proved unpalatable to the average consumer and could therefore not be sold. Involving cultivators' pressure groups in the setting of priorities seemed to be a necessary condition to correct the institutionalised ignorance existing in the research and extension establishments. The literature on the need for organised cultivator participation since then has shown ample cases to warrant this conclusion.[69]

The question is how to involve the farmers? It is at this point that the notion of networks[70] comes in. It became evident that involving farmers in researcher experiments and researchers in farmer experiments was inadequate, expensive and therefore unsustainable. It was good as a starter, to make researchers and cultivators aware of each other, but needed to be complemented by another approach to make it effective in the long run.

The adaptive approach followed[71] a methodology in which the field research is part of describing, analysing and extending the knowledge networks. The researcher is not just observer, but participant in these networks and thereby becomes aware of their operation. Different types of networks could be distinguished, depending on their degree of linkage between various categories of actors such as poor cultivators, better-off cultivators, extensionists, traders and researchers.

Banana production in Costa Rica proved to be a case in which networks were poorly articulated between researchers and cultivators, partially

---

[67] For a collection of all research reports see, L Box *et al.*, 1987, *Adaptive Agricultural Research Project, 1981-1985: The Dominican Republic*, Leiden Inter Documentation Company: Microform Publishers.

[68] Box, 'Knowledge, Networks and Cultivators: Cassava in the Dominican Republic' in Long, 1989: especially pp.172-176 for researchers' priorities and 176-178 for extensionists'.

[69] See for recent reviews Farrington *et al.*, 1993; the book by De Boef *et al*., 1993; Scoones & Thompson, 1994; Eyzaguirre & Iwanaga, 'Farmers' contribution to maintaining genetic diversity in crops, and its role within the total genetic resources system' in Eyzaguire & Iwanaga, 1996, pp. 9-18.

[70] For a review of the literature on networks and the transdisciplinary logic underlying network analysis, see Bakis, 1993.

[71] See Box in Long, 1989, pp.168-170; for a critique see Anderson, 1993, pp. 5-6; pp.63-66; 71; for another view see Schuthof, 1989, pp. 4-7; Botchway, 1988, especially p.80ff.

because knowledge was kept a company secret. Cacao showed a different picture, with some networks extending into both worlds.[72] The essence of the argument is: do not assume a system, but understand the network by becoming part of it. Probably the greatest error of international agencies has been to assume such a system. This was done by first coining the concept of National (Agricultural) Research System and then by prescribing an organisational structure on the basis of this concept without adequate regard for the existing networks operative in knowledge change.

Let us take stock of the argument thus far. I have argued that agrarian knowledge change is only partially dependent on formal institutions like research and extension. Two, that the process of informal change is dependent on cultivator experimentation, which appears to be widespread and increasingly recognised. Three, that informal knowledge networks complement the formal ones and are significant, especially in situations where those formal ones are little developed, irrelevant or in decline as in most poor countries. Four, that the model we use to analyse these phenomena should not assume order and purpose (as in the systems approach), but rather assume lack of order and no common values working toward synergy (as in the networking approach). Five, and this is the implication of the foregoing, that we should adapt our technology management structures to the chaotic phenomena described and the networking analysis just proposed. The problem is that agricultural research and technology management have worked with the wrong models as De Lattre has cogently argued for Senegal and Cameroon.[73]

How do we change that? How do we build competence among Northern researchers to learn from Southern practitioners?

The case of the Special Programme for African Agricultural Research may be instructive. This programme was started by the World Bank to promote donor co-ordination in African agricultural research. It aimed at providing better information on donor supported research projects, and at providing consolidated funding for such activities. Sub-Sahara Africa became one of the main recipients of aid in the 1980s, and this meant that an unknown number of projects were supported by the donors. Evaluations indicated that this donor-driven research was largely ineffective. It led to a multiplicity of unsustainable pet projects, which hardly contributed to technology development. An evaluation of SPAAR showed that it had not succeeded in effective donor co-ordination, and

---

[72] Box *et al.*, 1990, pp. 5-7.
[73] de Lattre, 1990: see pp. 271-274.

would not succeed in promoting technology development if it remained donor driven.[74]

After 1994 SPAAR has therefore made a number of changes. It has promoted national indicative plans on which regional cooperation in agricultural research could be based. It has strengthened regional organisations for agricultural research (SACCAR, ASARECA, CORAF, and ENSAH). It has promoted the establishment of an African Forum on Agricultural Research to which it can transfer most of its tasks. And it has thus created a voice for African agricultural research managers in their dialogue with donors and with the global agricultural research mechanism, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research. So far – so good.

The weakness remains in the linkage between the national researchers and their clientele: the farmers. In fact international centres in technology development have developed stronger links with farmers, by stressing the need for appropriate methodologies. Take the case of cassava again. The Colombia based Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT) is involved in a cassava biotechnology network. At one end of the spectrum stand the bio-technologists (mostly northern males) interested in for example genetic improvement. At the distant other end, stand individual cassava growers (in Africa, mostly females). The Cassava Biotechnology Network has successfully developed a case study methodology in Tanzania which links these two parties.[75] The CIAT case does not stand alone; work by Bunders *et al.*[76] shows that research priorities must and can be set in accordance with small farmer interests. Yet such examples at the national level in Africa are only too few. African cultivators are estimated to have lost billions of dollars worth of cassava, due to the African Mosaic Virus. Although tolerant varieties were identified in Nigeria in the 1960s, it has taken till 1996 to get the first varieties introduced among hard-hit Ugandan cultivators. Surely this period of transfer could have been reduced, had farmer groups been involved earlier in the process.

The distance between those who produce informal 'grass root' technology (the women farmers) and those who work in formal agricultural technology (the male researchers) has not been bridged. If bridges could be made, more effective forms of dialogue could be established. For a North-South dialogue to exist, an internal Southern dialogue has to exist

[74] See Mensah *et al.,* 1994.
[75] See Thro, 1995.
[76] Bunders, 1990.

first. Given the poor state of most farmers' organisations, which were either encapsulated or emasculated by African governments after independence, the first priority should lie (in Africa at least[77]) with the promotion of such national dialogue. At the same time it means that researchers and technologists in the North should be ready when the internal dialogue leads to research priorities. This means that competence for listening to Southern partners has to be created in Northern agencies.

Conclusion: Creative Listening for Knowledge Management

Technological development in poor countries will increasingly be dependent on local practitioners providing research priorities to local or Northern technologists.[78] This requires special brokerage capacities which are currently lacking in research organisations in both North and South.

Most development-oriented research has been highly supply-biased. This is true for the technology development in agriculture, in industry or for that matter in the social sciences. In certain cases this supply-bias has not hindered economic development. A case can be made that Indian, Indonesian or South Korean industrial development would have been impossible without research and training co-operation from the rich countries.[79] In those cases one notes a fair degree of continuity or sustainability.

The case of African agricultural research referred to above seems rather one of institutionalised discontinuity. It was discontinuous because most research programmes proved to depend exclusively on donor funding and relations with European or North-American research centres. It was institutionalised discontinuity because African research institutes started behaving as if it were normal to have research priorities determined by partners from the North. Research priorities, which could be proven to be both wrong[80] and continuously changing. What is needed is creative

---

[77] Gubbels 1994. On the contributions and limits of NGOs in agricultural technology development see Farrington and Bebbington, 1994. On community based approaches in Asia see Prain, 1996. On community based learning in Africa see Millar, 1996. On the role of local organisations see Malki, 1999.

[78] An extensive literature exists on this topic; see for example Röling, 1994; see also Bawden, 1994, and the work by Chambers, 1995, referred to previously.

[79] See, for example, Kannan, 1990; and Venkataraman, 1990.

[80] For a review of wrong assumptions underlying agricultural research see Chambers, 1995.

listening on both sides. For this, brokerage capacities need to be developed.[81] Brokers are people who mediate between two parties, assisting them in defining a common interest and acting in terms of such interest. If there is a first priority in Northern research institutes it is therefore to promote creative listening, or the capacity to translate Southern problems into research and training priorities in the North. Only when such institutional brokerage is developed, and with it the capacity to mediate, can we expect sustainable technological development. In other words: engineering the technological dialogue requires competence building among local and Northern researchers to learn from Southern practitioners.[82]

What can be the role of the electronic networks in this process? The role is probably quite limited, yet gaining increased importance since researchers have become increasingly dependent on them. The question then becomes: how can researchers be assured that relevant local knowledge is made available on the World Wide Web? A recent survey by Engelhard & Box[83] on research networks found that a significant number of them are already web-based. Examples include research networks (like AGREN for agricultural research and extension, CGIAR for global agricultural research, CORAF for West African agricultural research, EFTRN for tropical forestry, and Sugarnet for sugar cane technology). In addition they found web-based libraries or library networks (like ELAND the European library and development network).

The most significant contribution could be the rapid emergence of web-based think tanks. Ballantyne[84] has shown that emerging knowledge networks can be effectively served through the Internet. Through the building of trust among users, rapid expansion and circulation of relevant information can be promoted. It is noteworthy that the management of these web-based knowledge networks requires special skills, especially regarding quality control, involvement of relevant insiders and the linkage to significant outsiders.

Civil society organisations like Panos or Ileia, may claim to speak for otherwise voiceless cultivators. If there is one area to be carefully followed it is the development of such organisations. If they can provide the systematic brokerage between the informal knowledge of poor

---

[81] See Pretty & Chambers, 1994.
[82] For an application to the world of education see Kinyanjui, 1999.
[83] Engelhard & Box, 1999.
[84] Ballantyne, 1997. Euforic can be found under www.euforic.org; for other think tanks see www.oneworld.org especially the one on water management.

cultivators and the formal knowledge of researchers, a revolution in learning may take place.

New styles of knowledge management are then required, based on building sustainable linkages or coalitions among the interest groups involved and on the playful work of those who enjoy experiment in nature. This may give due recognition to those unknown experimenters in the periphery. It might even provide them with some of the spoils for all their toil.

References

Anderson, J. A., 1993, *Social networks and potatoes: a study into the social construction of potato production in the Uporioto mountains of Southwest Tanzania*, Wageningen: Agricultural University, Thesis, Department of Sociology of Rural Development.

Bakis, H., 1993, *Les réseaux et leurs enjeux sociaux*, Paris: PUF.

Ballantyne, P. 'Europe's Forum for International Co-operation (Euforic)', *New Review of Information Networking*, 1997 (3), pp.203-212.

Bawden, R., 'Creating learning systems: a metaphor for institutional reform for development', in Scoones, I. & Thompson, J., 1994, *Beyond Farmer First: Rural people's knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice,* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Botchway, J., 1988, *The lack of agricultural knowledge networks and institutional frameworks in rural development projects: the case of Weija Irrigation Project,* Wageningen: Agricultural University, (MSc Thesis MAKS).

Box, L. 'Virgilio's theorem: a method for adaptive agricultural research' in Chambers, R. *et al.,* (eds.) 1989, *Farmer First: Farmer innovation and agricultural research*, London: IT Publications.

Box, L., 1989, 'Knowledge, networks and cultivators: cassava in the Dominican Republic' in Long, N., (ed.) *Encounters at the interface: a perspective on social discontinuities in rural development,* Wageningen: Wageningse Sociologische Studies 27.

Box, L., 'Knowledge, Networks and Cultivators: Cassava in the Dominican Republic' in Long, N., (ed.), 1989, *Encounters at the interface: A perspective on social discontinuities in rural development*, Wageningen: Wageningse Sociologische Studies 27.

Box, L., 'Agrarian knowledge networks: a conceptualisation' in Box, L. *et al.*, 1990, *From common ignorance to shared knowledge: knowledge networks in the Atlantic Zone of Costa Rica*, Wageningen: Wageningse Sociologische Studies 28.

Box, L., 1999, 'For the fun of it', *Indigenous Knowledge*, (July).

Bunders, J. F. G., 1990, *Biotechnology for small farmers in developing countries: analysis and assessment procedures,* Amsterdam: VU University Press.

Buskens, V. W., 1999 *Social networks and trust*, Utrecht (Doctoral dissertation).

Chambers, R., 1995, "Why we were wrong" in *Whose reality counts? Putting the first last,* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

van Dusseldorp, D. and Box, L., 'Local and scientific knowledge: developing a dialogue' in de Boef, W. *et al.*, 1993, *Cultivating knowledge: Genetic diversity, farmer experimentation and crop research,* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Engelhard, R. & Box, L., 'Para que as redes Norte-Sul funcionem', *Democracia Viva* (6) agosto 1999, pp.43-52.

Eyzaguirre, P. & Iwanaga, M., 'Farmers' contribution to maintaining genetic diversity in crops, and its role within the total genetic resources system' in Eyzaguire & Iwanaga, 1996, *Participatory plant breeding,* Rome: International Plant Genetic Resources Institute.

Farrington, J. *et al.*, 1993, *Reluctant Partners? NGOs and the State in Sustainable Agricultural Development*, London: Routledge.

Farrington, J. and Bebbington, A. J., 'From research to innovation: getting the most from interaction with NGOs', in Scoones, I. & Thompson, J., 1994, *Beyond Farmer First: Rural people's knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice,* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Gubbels, P., 'Populist pipedream or practical paradigm? Farmer-driven research and the Project Agro-Forestier in Burkina Faso' in Scoones, I. & Thompson, J., 1994, *Beyond Farmer First: Rural people's knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice,* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Juma, C., 1989, *The gene hunters: biotechnology and the scramble for seeds*, London: Zed Books.

Kannan, K. P., 'Research in South Asia: strengths and weaknesses' in C. Schweigman and U T Bosma, 1990, *Research and development co-operation: the role of The Netherlands*, Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute.

Kinyanjui, P.E. 'Productive two-way collaboration between technologically developed and developing countries in new technologies for education' in Mitter, S. & Bastos, M-I., 1999, *Europe and developing countries in the globalised information economy: employment and distance education,* London & New York: Routledge.

de Lattre, M., 1990, *La gestion stratégique des relations des instituts de recherche avec leur environnement; Le cas des instituts de recherche agricole du Cameroun et du Sénégal*, Paris: Université de Paris X - Nanterre, (Thèse de doctorat).

Malki, M., 1999, *Rehumanizing the development process: On participation, local organisations and social learning as building blocks of an alternative development view in Algeria,* Wageningen (Dissertation).

Marsden, D., 'Indigenous management and the management of indigenous knowledge' in Scoones and Thompson, J., 1994, *Beyond Farmer First: Rural people's knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice,* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Mensah, M., *et al.* 1994, *External Policy Management Review of SPAAR*, Washington: SPAAR.

Millar, D., 'Experimenting farmers in northern Ghana' in Scoones, I. and Thompson, J., 1994, *Beyond Farmer First: Rural people's knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice,* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Millar, D., 1996, *Footprints in the mud: Re-constructing the diversities in rural people's learning processes,* Wageningen (Dissertation).

van Oosterhout, S., 'Sorghum genetic resources of small-scale farmers in Zimbabwe' in de Boef, W. *et al.*, 1993, *Cultivating knowledge: Generic diversity, farmer experimentation and crop research*, London: IT Publications.

Prain, G., 'Community-based research approach to conservation with development: preliminary lessons from the rootcrop sector in southern Philippines' in UPWARD, 1996, *Into Action Research: Partnerships in Asian rootcrop research and development,* Los Baños: Phil..: UPWARD.

Pretty, J. N. & Chambers, R., 'Towards a learning paradigm: new professionalism and institutions for a sustainable agriculture' in Scoones & Thompson, 1994, *Beyond Farmer First: Rural peoples' knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Pretty, J. N., 1995, *Regenerating agriculture: policies and practice for sustainability and self-reliance*, London: Earthscan.

van Reeuwijk, A., 1986 *Zwartbontfokkerij: boerenwijsheid en wetenschappelijke kennis - externalisatie van selektie kriteria in de Nederlandse rundveefokkerij*, Wageningen: Landbouwuniversiteit, Vakgroep Agrarische Sociologie NW.

Röling, N., 'Facilitating sustainable agriculture: turning policy models upside down' in Scoones, I. & Thompson, J., 1994, *Beyond Farmer First: Rural people's knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice,* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

SAREC, 1992, International co-operation *in science and technology for development*, Stockholm: SAREC Conference Report 1992:1.

Scoones, I. & Thompson, J., 1994, *Beyond Farmer First: Rural people's knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice,* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Schuthof, P., 1989, *Common wisdom and shared knowledge: knowledge networks among the Tonga of Mola chiefdom in Zimbabwe*, Wageningen: Agricultural University, Department of Rural Extension and Adult Education.

Thro, A-M ., 1995, *Tanzania Case Study*, Calif, Columbia: Cassava Biotechnology Network, CIAT.

Venkataraman, K. 'Biotechnology: high technology or appropriate technology?' C. Schweigman and U T Bosma, 1990, *Research and development co-operation: the role of The Netherlands*, Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute.

Learning from Evaluations

Jerker Carlsson

Introduction

Do people learn from evaluations? Evaluations are today commonplace in most organisations. They serve a current and immediate purpose as management instruments. In addition they are also seen as a major source of knowledge about whether an organisation is doing the right thing in the right place and at the right cost. These experiences are believed to be fed into the organisation "memory" and ought to result in fewer mistakes being made in the future. Thus, the organisation is expected to learn from its activities, correct them and develop new and better ways of doing what it is supposed to do.

> …evaluations give new knowledge and result in organisational learning rather than confirm what is already known. Evaluations are done from an independent perspective and with a new angle of approach.[85]

But are evaluations used for learning purposes? In their study of learning in the Norwegian aid administration Samset, *et al.* (1993) shows that evaluations are only one source of learning, and certainly not the most important one.[86] There are other sources which aid agency officials rank much higher. The Norwegian study was concerned with people working in the aid administration. But what about all the others with a stake in a project? How important are evaluations for the learning of stakeholders in recipient countries?

In this article I shall try to explore this issue a little further, by presenting the findings of a larger study on the use of evaluations in Swedish development co-operation.[87] What are evaluations used for? Furthermore, who uses them?

How can a study on the use of evaluations help us to understand to what extent evaluations are important sources of learning? A pre-condition for learning is that somebody finds new information in an evaluation that

---

[85] Levin, 1993, p. 22.
[86] Samset, K., Forss, K. and O. Hauglin, 1993.
[87] Carlsson, J. *et al.*, 1999.

can be put to use according to his/her interests and needs. If an evaluation provides such information it can be a potentially rich source of learning.

The question whether there is a link between use and learning can be reformulated in the following way: If I find a piece of information that can be put to use according to my own needs and interests, does this mean that I have learned something? The answer is that most probably I have. But what kind of learning has occurred is a different matter. Do people learn in the sense of dramatically changing the way they think about things, i.e. do their knowledge structures change? I shall not be able to answer this question here, but only indicate in what direction an answer might go.

Development co-operation is somewhat unique among public sector activities since it involves a relationship between organisations in two countries. This is not an easy relationship since it is influenced by different social and economic standards, as well as totally different cultural contexts. Within this complicated relationship the organisations, and their members, are expected to learn. Against this background the issue of learning and evaluation becomes particularly complicated. An evaluation has to serve many stakeholders with quite varied interests and expectations, and with barriers of communication among themselves.

Who are the people that can learn from an evaluation? The list can be made very long and include those only marginally touched by the project and its activities. A more limited listing would show the following core categories of stakeholders:

- The people in the organisation that finances the project.
- People in the co-operating local organisation(s) responsible for planning and monitoring the project.
- People in local organisations that are participating in the implementation of the project and its activities.
- Project management, which is the special unit established for supervising and co-ordinating the implementation process.
- Beneficiaries who are people/households supposed to benefit from the services provided by the project.
- The evaluators themselves.
- Other organisations and groups that compete with the project for available resources.
- Organisations, groups or individuals in the context surrounding the project.

The list is by no means all-inclusive, but it does give an indication of the number of potential learners resulting from an evaluation.

Types of use

An evaluation can be used in different ways. Learning is far from being the only way an evaluation can be useful for an organisation. In the evaluation literature we can find the following types of use:

- Instrumental use which refers to evaluations in which the operations are tried and tested and where the results from such a testing are fed back into the planning and implementation of the operations.
- Conceptual use which occurs when evaluation findings trickle down into an organisation and take the shape of new ideas, concepts and new ways of structuring the operations.
- An evaluation legitimises decisions and positions that have already been taken on other grounds. Often it is not the results, but the fact that an evaluation is done at all, which is important.
- Ritual use which sees an evaluation as a symbolic act. Initiating and implementing an evaluation shows desired qualities on behalf of the management and/or the organisation.
- An evaluation is not used at all. Potential users of the evaluation do not find anything of interest in the evaluation to develop their action or their thinking on the subject which the evaluation is analysing.

Learning is not necessarily limited to any particular type of use. But learning in the way discussed above is perhaps most likely to occur through either instrumental or conceptual use.

What kind of use predominates?

In the Swedish study mentioned above a sample of 9 evaluations was selected for further study. They were selected so as to represent Sweden's most important co-operating countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. The distribution between sectors was to be as even as possible. The evaluations took place from 1996 and onwards. For each evaluation we interviewed on average 20-25 stakeholder representatives. Scrutinising

the evaluation report and the mandatory "list of persons met" helped in identifying them. This means that only stakeholders who participated in the evaluation process were interviewed. Only in a very few cases were representatives of the beneficiaries met and interviewed.[88] Through semi-structured interviews the respondents were asked to give their views on how they saw their participation in the evaluation process and whether they found the evaluation and its findings useful to them. If so, they were asked to give examples of why they were useful and how they had made use of them in their work. On the basis of their answers, a picture of the patterns of use emerged.

The pattern of use that can be seen in table 1 shows a more complex situation than anticipated. An evaluation can be used in many different ways depending on who is the user – or non-user. The perhaps most striking thing is that many stakeholders are not in a position to use the evaluation findings at all. They had not seen the final report, nor had they received information on the evaluation findings from other sources. An exception was the evaluation of Sida/SAREC's support to building research capacity in Ethiopia. In this case almost all stakeholders had access to the report. The general pattern has been that the further away you are from the centre of decision making, the less information you get on an evaluation's recommendations and findings. This means that officers at Sida, and in most cases, the major co-operation partners have received the report. People working directly with implementation, seldom have access to evaluation findings. These stakeholders cannot make use of the evaluation in the expected sense – which is by reading, discussing and acting upon the report. This is particularly the case of, for example, those working at the district and community levels with project related activities. It is not often that evaluation findings are communicated to them. Needless to say, if you do not have access to information you will not be able to learn anything either.

Ritual use was found in one case – Village Water Supply in Botswana. The evaluation was undertaken some time after the water project had been completed. It also coincided with Sweden's decision to terminate Botswana's status as a programme country. The evaluation marked the end of 20 years of successful co-operation between Sweden and

---

[88] There is a distinction to be kept in mind between the target group and the beneficiaries. The beneficiaries are those who will benefit from the production of goods and services that the project eventually will contribute to. In a water project these are the consumers of clean water. The target group is the people in an organisation that in some way are responsible for producing the goods and the services. An example could be a district water authority.

Table 1. Types of use as found in the case studies

	Instrumental	Conceptual	Legitimising	Ritual	No use
Small business development in Namibia	Financier PMC				TG
Village water supply Botswana		CP PMC		Financier	LI, TG
Road safety in Botswana			Financier		PMC
Dodota water supply in Ethiopia		Financier	Financier		LI, CP, PMC
Research capacity in Ethiopia	LI, TG CP	CP Financier			PMC LI, TG
Education sector in Ethiopia			Financier		CP, LI PMC
Curriculum development in Ethiopia			Financier		CP, PMC
HESAWA water supply in Tanzania		LI PMC			TG
Soil conservation in Kenya		PMC	Financier		TG

Comments: Financier = Sida, Co-operating partner (CP) = The government agency which signs the contract with Sida, Project Management Central (PMC) = The organisation responsible for the management of the project, Local implementer (LI) = A unit that works with the implementation of the project on the local level, Target group (TG) = The beneficiaries of the support.

Botswana. The purpose of the evaluation was, interestingly enough, learning. It was an *ex post* evaluation that was to provide lessons learned for future water inventions not only in Botswana, but all over the world. It was never clarified, however, who should learn, what they should learn and how they should learn. It was assumed that it was up to anybody with an interest in water affairs to find something useful in the evaluation.

There were two cases of legitimising use. The evaluations were then primarily used for legitimising decisions already taken by Sida and the evaluation was used as a means for communicating these intentions to the

co-operating partners. The evaluation of the education sector in Ethiopia also offers some interesting insights on the interaction between the evaluator and the Sida staff that launched the evaluation. Sida had its position quite clear, although it was never made official – there was a need for a change in the support to the sector. The Ethiopian side, on the other hand, was quite happy with the current state of affairs. It is then interesting to find that the analysis of the evaluation led to recommendations that legitimised Sida's unofficial "new" position. It might be a coincidence that the evaluation came up with such strong support of one position, or it might have been that the intentions of Sida had been effectively communicated to the evaluator. The Ethiopians did not want the recommendations. What kind of learning occurred in this case? As one Ethiopian in the Ministry of Education remarked: "We learned the intentions of Sida".

The conventional model of instrumental use has not turned out to be very relevant or useful for understanding how an evaluation is used. The idea of instrumental use is that decision-makers, on the basis of new information in an evaluation, make direct and quite immediate decisions about changing programmes. Only in a few cases, and mostly on minor issues, did an evaluation provide new information to act upon. Change had already taken place, or would have happened anyway – without the evaluation. The changes had already been discussed and sometimes even decided upon.

The category of conceptual use was found in some evaluations. The information was not new, but the evaluators had conducted an analysis which opened up for different interpretations on the project as well as new solutions to the problems the project was working with. The HESAWA evaluation was one case, the evaluation of soil conservation in Kenya was another. What conceptual use can mean can be exemplified by the soil conservation evaluation. One of the major recommendations was that Sida should phase out its support. This was not a new issue, but had been raised before by previous evaluations and in a sector review. As one officer at a Branch office explained: "at the time of the evaluation we already knew that Sida was to withdraw… in fact we had already started to withdraw from certain areas such as nurseries". At the same time, the officer stressed that the evaluation pointed at the need for prioritisation. Similar comments came from other officers at the Branch. According to another officer the evaluation made them more "awake". It forced them to "face reality and think seriously on how to do the planning". In his view this was the major benefit of the evaluation.

Conceptual use starts to occur when the evaluation feeds into an intellectual process where people not only start to think about what they are doing, but are also prepared to re-think their established way of approaching things.

What conclusions can we draw about the role of evaluations for learning? For an evaluation to have an impact on learning it has to be grounded in the reality of the stakeholders. Stakeholders have to find something in the evaluation that they can put to use according to their own interests and need. To be useful, therefore, means that the evaluation and the question it is supposed to answer are felt to be relevant for the immediate reality of a stakeholder. Learning can only occur when somebody perceives information/knowledge as useful. What the case studies show is that local stakeholders, close to the ground where the work is carried out, are the least likely to find an evaluation useful. They are marginalised in terms of influencing the questions asked. The chances that they would learn something from an evaluation are small indeed.

Did any learning occur at all? The fact that one stakeholder may find an evaluation useless, does not mean that other stakeholders saw it as containing several very useful points. As Table 1 showed, there are many examples of use that indicate that stakeholders were in a good position to learn from the evaluation. What is worrying is that there is a predominance of Sida and its contractual partner among the learners. There is only one example of where a local implementing organisation found something of conceptual use in an evaluation. That was in the HESAWA evaluation. In this case the evaluation team had made a consistent effort to work with a participatory method, which may explain the outcome.

How can we improve the usefulness of evaluations for learning purposes?[89]

The intended users must be identified at the beginning of the evaluation process. From the moment stakeholders and evaluators begin conceptualising the evaluation, decisions should be made that will affect use. Evaluations should be planned and designed with utilisation in mind. There are many interests and expectations around an evaluation.

To be able to correctly focus the evaluation and make it user oriented these interests have to be identified. It will never be possible to satisfy everybody's interest, but it is necessary to involve as many as possible

---

[89] The discussion below is derived from Patton's nine basic premises for use. Patton, 1986.

in the process of formulating the questions that the evaluation should answer. Failure to do this will inevitably lead to a situation where some stakeholders lose interest from the beginning. The cases included in the study referred to here contain few examples of extensive consultation with stakeholders. Some stakeholders were consulted in the beginning of the process, often the contractual partner. None of them felt, however, that they had any particular influence on the process as such. Their participation was often limited to commenting upon the terms of reference. There is one significant exception to this pattern. The evaluation of Sida/SAREC's support to research capacity building in Ethiopia. Sida's co-operating partner – the Ethiopian Science and Technology Council (ESTC) – expressed a strong feeling of ownership and commitment to the evaluation. It was not at all referred to as a Sida evaluation. Yet, even this evaluation showed patterns of exclusion. The researchers in the various research projects supported by Sida through ESTC found themselves largely marginalised in the process. They submitted information, but their particular questions were never given much consideration. This is good evidence of how an evaluation becomes part of an existing power structure.

Most evaluations are characterised by "high-quantity" participation, rather than "high-quality" participation. Evaluators tend to concentrate on meeting as many people as possible during their stay in a country. The typical pattern is where the evaluators meet with an informant for about an hour for an interview. The evaluators seldom return to continue the discussion, or present any preliminary findings. There is often not time for this – since there are so many people to meet. In other words, most stakeholders are used as providers of information and are rarely involved in the whole evaluation process. It is generally a process that leaves most stakeholders unaware of what is going on.

In the case of the evaluation of the Soil and Water Conservation Programme in Kenya, the officers at the district and divisional levels were informed about the evaluation in a letter from the headquarters in Nairobi. The basic message in these letters was that they should arrange for field visits for the evaluators. One of the divisional soil conservation officers described the meeting with the evaluators in the following way: "the evaluators had a brief introduction at the office where they explained that they wanted to meet the catchment committees (i.e. the farmers)". Further, the meeting "was not a discussion where everybody had a chance to comment, it was only for facilitating the evaluation".

An important part of an evaluation is the recommendations. They can be described as the operational conclusions of the evaluation analysis. It should be remembered that an evaluation is different from a research task, in that it is supposed to feed into a decision making process, i.e. the recommendations need to be feasible. Thus, the quality of the recommendations is vital for determining the usefulness of an evaluation. All evaluations examined in the study contained many and often quite detailed recommendations. There is no doubt that the evaluators had the necessary knowledge and experience to give technically good recommendations. They were however lacking in other respects. First, it was sometimes unclear who should act on a recommendation. From a management point of view this made the necessary follow-up of the implementation of the recommendations difficult. Second, the recommendations were not always adapted to the situation of a local organisation. A recommendation could require either new policy decisions and/or access to financial resources. Both were often beyond the capacity of the local organisation. They did not have access to the necessary political channels. Most organisations in Sida's co-operating countries run their operations on a shoestring budget. They are rarely able to accommodate recommendations that require new investments, or an expansion in operational costs. It does not matter then how technically sound the recommendations are.

Finally, a major factor restricting the usefulness of an evaluation, and hence its potential for learning, is the fact that only a limited number of copies are distributed. It is difficult to escape the feeling that an evaluation is not made for any wider audience among the stakeholders. The readers are limited to a very small group at the core of the project. It is the programme officers at Sida and some of their colleagues and the top executives in the more important local counterpart organisations that receive, and presumably read the evaluation (or at least the Executive Summary).

Conclusion

The picture of how evaluations are used that emerged in this article is by no means unique. Samset *et al.* (1993) and Bajaj (1997) showed similar results from their studies. Evaluations are used in many ways and for many purposes. It is rare, however, for an evaluation to be of instrumental use, something that is often associated with evaluations. Other types of

use have proved to be more prominent and this suggests that evaluations are not "objective pieces of evidence". It is more likely that they form part of an already on-going process of organisational encounter which is so characteristic of the aid relationship. My previous research looking at different donors to one country (Zambia) has shown that stakeholder conflicts tend to dominate most aspects of the aid relationship. It is therefore not very surprising that the use of evaluations should be subjected to the same forces.[90]

Evaluations are very donor-centric, a majority of local stakeholders did not find much value in evaluations at all. This is evidenced by the fact that there were few examples where evaluations actually contributed something new in terms of knowledge. Neither the issues nor the questions were new. They had been discussed before. The evaluation is just another means of conducting the same dialogue. In that process opportunities for learning certainly emerged, but it would appear rather by accident and not for the majority of those concerned with the evaluation and its object.

References

Bajaj, M., 1997, *Revisiting Evaluation:* A study of the process, role and contribution of donor funded evaluations to development organisations in South Asia. IDR.

Carlsson, J. *et al.*, 1999, Are Evaluations Useful? Cases from Swedish Development Co-operation. Sida Studies in Evaluation 99/1.

Levin, E., 1993, "What characterises a good evaluation?" Sida Evaluation Group.

Saasa, O. & J. Carlsson, 1996, *The Aid Relationship in Zambia. A conflict scenario.* Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute.

Samset, K., Forss, K. and O. Hauglin, 1993, *International Learning from Evaluations and Reviews.* Evaluation Report 1.93. Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Patton, M., 1986, *Utilisation-focused evaluation.* Beverly Hills: Sage.

---

[90] Saasa, O. & J. Carlsson, 1996.

Learning the Local Perspectives

Kai-ming Cheng

Introduction

A lot of project work in development entails fieldwork. By definition, fieldwork is intended to give an understanding of the reality by going into the reality. This is in contrast to understanding the reality from a distance, in the office, by reading documents and working on data collected by other people.

However, doing fieldwork does not automatically mean understanding the reality. This is the main theme of this paper. Understanding the reality does not only mean gathering information or data from the field. It also involves making sense of such information and data, and that is affected by the way such information and data are processed or organised in order to form a concept. In other words, even when facing the same set of objective data, different people may end up with different observations, because in organising such data, subjective thinking is inevitable and indeed necessary.

My view in this paper is that for most development projects, which are different from academic studies, the end results should be for the good of the people in the local community. As such, projects are successful only if there is a real understanding of the actual needs and problems in the local community. However, needs and problems are subjective constructs that are perceived differently from different perspectives. Unless we understand the local perspective, we may not appreciate the local problems. In the end, we may seem to be solving problems, but may not actually be solving the problems as seen by the local communities.

In the rest of the paper, I will illustrate this observation by personal experience of how I learnt from the local communities and adjusted my misunderstanding of the local reality. Many of the personal cases have been used elsewhere in several different contexts. I will also discuss, where appropriate, how international organisations involved in development projects learn or do not learn from the local perspectives.

Where is learning to take place?

In 1987, when China's reform of the economy had been under way for quite a number of years, but reform of education had just started[91], I worked for UNICEF in a project to understand the changes in educational planning and finance at the county level[92] (Cheng, 1992). The project took six intensive weeks. Although at that time, I had been following education developments in China for many years, I had never been in a rural village and had no knowledge of what planning was like in China's planned economy, let alone how it had changed because of the reform.

Thanks to Manzoor Ahmed who was UNICEF representative in China, we designed the project in the ethnographic convention, so that we did not impose any preconceived framework on the study, but allowed the reality to unfold itself. That is, instead of trying to understand what was happening in China according to how we conceived educational planning in the way commonly understood in the international arena, we tried to understand what was meant by education planning as it was understood by Chinese planners and policy-makers.

It was indeed a learning exercise.[93] Although I was a student of planning, what was happening in China went well beyond what textbooks could teach. China had perhaps the most sophisticated system of educational planning. Apart from the approaches and techniques that were beyond what textbooks could ever accommodate, there was a huge team of planners at all levels of administration. These planners spent most of their time in the field, in schools, and hence they had first hand information about schools in their catchment area. They know best the inter-relations between different parts of the social system and they are very good at navigating the political arena in order to achieve what is best for the education system.

I was lucky to have encounters with educational planners at all levels in the same project: national, provincial, county and township planners.[94] They provided me with a vivid delineation of educational planners in China:

---

[91] The nation-wide reform in education started in 1985 when a comprehensive reform at all levels of education was formulated in a major reform document.

[92] Counties are local administrative units with an average population of around half a million. Education at county level is mainly basic education and pre-school education.

[93] The report on the project was published as Cheng, 1991. Many of the learning processes are reported and analysed in Cheng, 1988.

[94] The township planning was usually taken up by the principal of the central school, which was the administrative as well as the professional centre of a cluster of schools.

the nature of their jobs, their lives, their training, their methodology, their ways of thinking, their relations with the schools, and their culture. Although they were not the decision-makers *de jure*, they do have the de facto role of decision-maker at local levels. Yet, they are professionals, very devoted to the development of children. Hence, they play a bridging role between the macro-policies and the micro-reality in schools. They are not just statisticians or systems engineers who only execute planning. Ever since then, educational planners have become my key informants in most of my projects.

Through the project, I also realised that in order to understand developments in education, we have to understand many other aspects of social lives in China. Without understanding those contextual dimensions, we cannot fully understand the changes in the reform. Conversely, education is a very convenient window for understanding China's society and its changes. Education is related to macro-level policies such as economic policies or population policies, but it is also closely linked with the lives of the rural parents. It is a very sensitive barometer of societal changes in China, yet it does not have the political sensitivity that would deprive us of access to data.

In the same project, I gathered a lot of data on all aspects of educational planning for basic education. However, until very late in the project, there were no data about pre-school education which was one of the major concerns of UNICEF. Under normal circumstances, the absence of data would be the most legitimate excuse for making complaints. However, it was then discovered that at that time, pre-school education was under the auspices of the Women's Federation and hence the education authorities did not have the data. The absence of data led me to talk to the Women's Federation which revealed a large body of knowledge.

On another occasion, our mini-bus passed by a school near the road. None of the local planners on the bus knew the school. That was very unusual, since the local planners were usually so knowledgeable about the schools. Then I was told that the school was run by an enterprise and was not administered by the local education authority. It was therefore a blind spot for the education authority. This in turn led me to further probe the situation, and realise for the first time that there is a whole category of schools outside the regular system.

In the above examples, I learnt the first lesson, namely, learning how to learn and where I could best learn. This in turn leads to three questions: Who should be our major informants (or teachers)? Where are the sites

or windows where we can learn most effectively? Where can we most effectively obtain data?

Most of those who work in the field would learn this sooner or later. Those who do not learn or learn very slowly are perhaps not aware that the local partners are indeed our teachers. What is required from an outsider is no more than an open mind, and to listen to our teachers carefully. If we are not prepared to listen to the local people, or see them just as inferior partners, then we will never learn. In the end, we will never discover the way to learn and from whom to learn.

What problems are to be solved?

In 1986, in an UNESCO study to understand provincial planning of education in one under-developed province, it was identified that there was a very low pupil-teacher ratio in the province. That is, there were too many teachers. This of course was seen as a matter of inefficiency and hence the report recommended raising the teacher-pupil ratio as a matter of priority.

The finding was objectively right. However, it was an issue that was not accepted by the local planners and policy-makers. There were legitimate reasons for the lukewarm response. First, the ratio was calculated on a provincial average. There were actually overcrowded classrooms in the urban cities. There the pupil-teacher ratio was high. There were, however, also schools in sparsely populated areas, where there were only a few students and hence the pupil-teacher ratio was low. Little could be done to change the situation. Second, teachers worked in a very different style. They were usually not only teachers in the classrooms, but were class-teachers who were responsible for pastoral care, remedial tutorials, counselling, extra-curricular activities. They wrote detailed lesson plans for each lesson. They paid regular home visits to every student, and so on. Hence, whether the pupil-teacher ratio was high or low was in fact dependent upon the expectations of the local communities.

In this case, it was perhaps not so much whether or not the problem of the pupil-teacher ratio could be tackled. Rather, the issue at stake was whether the pupil-teacher ratio should be identified as a priority problem.

In 1989, in a World Bank project preceding educational loans to under-developed provinces in China, I participated in research to set the background for project identification. When the team visited the schools,

it was -5°C but there was no heating in the classrooms. Primary school children shivered with their hands in their pockets, with running noses. We all thought this ought to be a fundamental problem and should be given priority. However, an initial estimation already convinced the team that it was an impossible project. The stoves, the chimneys and the coal for the vast number of classrooms in the province would alone consume almost half of the total money that was meant for the entire province. The team had forgotten the sheer numbers in China. The local planners were lukewarm about the idea, "we have all gone through that", they said. "Our priority is to have more children in schools".

Again, people in different living conditions and different life styles have different perceptions and expectations of quality of life. Without learning from the local community, we might be confined in our preconceptions and hence identify problems that are not essential to the local communities.

What are the questions?

In a study that compares four countries (China, India, Guinea and Mexico) regarding the quality of basic education (Cheng, 1996), we started with a number of questionnaires and a test for literacy and numeracy. The questionnaires pertained to students, classes, schools, teachers, parents, principals, local leaders and so forth. The test contained a paper on literacy and a paper on numeracy.

When we were framing the tests, the local researchers queried why there were only two components. They argued that in China, students' conduct or morality were as important as knowledge and skills, which was what literacy and numeracy were about. They recommended that there should be a paper testing students' value judgements. We actually added such a paper in the China study which was not compared with the other countries.

The issue has proved very enlightening. Apparently, there are, among different cultures, different interpretations of *knowledge*. In some cultures, either morality is seen as a derivative of knowledge and skills (e.g. social skills), or as something which is a bonus but not a core function of education. If we had not tested students' morality in the study, we might still have compared among the different countries, but then the study would not have reflected what was actually happening in Chinese schools.

The negotiation with the local researchers on this issue was a learning

process. We took it for granted that literacy and numeracy were something that all systems of education share as being most essential. Hence we asked questions only in the realms of literacy and numeracy. The Chinese researchers, however, were mindful of the objectives of their education system, and gave us a new dimension to study. Had we not had the disagreement from the Chinese researchers, we would have been asking questions that would not have been totally valid in the Chinese setting.

In another context, there was a question that was raised very often by international consultants sent to China, but was never felt to be a question by the Chinese. This was about textbooks. When I wrote the first report on China's rural education in 1987 (published in Cheng, 1991), most readers in international organisations were curious about the obvious omission of descriptions about textbooks. Elsewhere in developing countries, textbooks have always been a major concern. To what extent textbooks are provided and to what extent they are used are always prime questions asked when examining a system of basic education.

The question of textbooks was never raised in China, particularly before and at the beginning of the economic reform when textbooks were supplied by the government with a heavy subsidy. Every year, textbook demand for the next academic year was estimated over the entire country. At a certain time of the year, all the printers throughout the nation were required to give precedence to textbook printing; at some later time during summer, the railroad was required to give top priority to textbook transportation. All these arrangements were made in the shared belief in the culture that textbooks are essential to education. This is inherited from a strong tradition where education, book-reading and examinations are almost synonyms.

The utilisation of textbooks, which is often a problem in many developing countries, is again not an issue in China. The issue in China is sometimes quite the opposite: teaching and learning have been too "bookish"; they have been relying too much on books.

Hence, questions are seldom asked about the supply of textbooks in China. Even in the late 1980s and 1990s when textbook printing was decentralised and became expensive, the strong cultural tradition made parents very tolerant of the high prices and hence the high private costs for formal education.

That it is not a question does not mean that we as outsiders should ignore the issue. Rather, that it is a "non-issue" is indeed something for us to learn. That there is no problem in the planning of textbooks does not mean that there is nothing worth noticing. Quite the opposite, the

"non-issue" represents a whole host of assumptions and practices that underpin the education system in China.

What are the assumptions?

In the four-country comparison mentioned above (Cheng, 1996), another episode was a very intriguing learning experience. It was about parents' rationale for sending their children to school. China was quite well known for its high attendance in basic education. Apart from small pockets of minority groups (that do not share the mainstream Confucian culture) and difficult localities, primary education was basically universal. We tried to build into our parents' questionnaire a question to explore the rationale behind this.

When the draft questionnaire underwent a trial in a township, we split into teams each visiting a few parents. Rural parents usually did not know how to respond to the question "Why do you send your children to school?" They often found it difficult to give an answer. At first, we regarded the non-responses as "no answer", "could not explain" or "did not care". However, when we faced similar responses among a large number of parents, we began to realise that assuming that there ought to be an articulated answer would be problematic.

We suddenly realised that the non-response represented a kind of "taken-for-grantedness" that would be treasured by anthropologists as core to culture. It is exactly because it is part of the basic assumptions in the culture that it is never challenged within the culture, and hence people in the culture are usually incapable of articulating an explanation. Based on that, we gradually came to the conclusion that the aspiration to schooling was indeed part of the culture.

That interpretation was confirmed when parents strongly rejected the notion that schools should teach vocational skills. They regarded vocational skills as antithetical to formal schooling, whose purpose was precisely to move students away from village lives. The interpretation was further confirmed a few years later when primary school attendance was adversely affected by fee-charging in universities. That is, when parents were forced to make a rational calculation about sending their children to school.

If we had not been prepared to adopt a totally open mind, and if we had not been prepared for alternative ways of thinking that could be totally foreign to us, we might have easily carried out the questionnaire,

without understanding the deep stories behind the answers.

In another World Bank mission, when we were in a Miao minority area, we tried to understand the opposite phenomenon: serious non-attendance among girls. Local studies had been done before our visit. The conclusions included "backwardness", "discrimination against girls", "early marriage against the legal age", and so forth. All these followed the line of thinking of the policy framework.

When we visited the families, we discovered that girls in the Miao villages were all engaged in embroidery from a very young age. Their skills in embroidery, as were demonstrated by what they wore, were an indication of their talents, and were in turn a token for their social prestige. The more talented at embroidery were attracted to better husbands. The expectations based on embroidery skills were so extensive and deep-rooted in the culture, where girls who went to school would incur a social cost that they could not afford.

This clear fact has changed our perceptions about girls' dropout in these Miao villages. Unless the social environment is changed, there is little that government policy or legislation can do to boost girls' enrolment.

Again, it was only when we kept an open mind, and did not assume non-attendance to be automatically a result of evil intentions or backward traditions, that we could have a real understanding of the problem, and did not expect simple solutions to the problem.

What are the solutions?

Besides the fact that assumptions and questions can be totally unacceptable to the local community, even if the right questions are asked and the appropriate problems are identified, viable solutions emerge only when the learning process is complete.

There is a common belief among consultants on education systems that children who are not suitable for academic study should be given a vocational education. Along these lines, China actually has established quite an elaborate system of various kinds of vocational education and training, which extends from junior secondary level (i.e. from 7th grade onwards). Vocational education and training at the basic education level was never very popular in rural areas. In many rural villages, only a very few students eventually pursue further studies beyond junior secondary schools (7th to 9th grades), and many of them end up working as farmers, or as occasional labourers in the urban cities. Hence, vocational education

and training ought to be very relevant to their future careers. So why is vocational education not popular?

In various projects, when I asked parents why they send children to school, after allowing them to unobtrusively develop their views I usually added a question: "Don't you think schools should teach farming skills, or book keeping which would be more useful in daily lives?" The answer, unanimously, was, "No, schools are not for that". For them, schools are for "exiting the villages", for getting a ticket to urban lives. Many explained to me that farming skills, or fixing electric appliances, for example, could be easily learnt by self-exploration, or by "asking the neighbours". When the same questions were posed to Indian parents during my fieldwork[95], they even more overtly said, "Please don't. We send our children to school exactly to avoid those skills!"

Apparently, most consultants are thinking of education as a pure form of learning, and hence what is learnt should be relevant to lives. The rural parents think differently. Learning for rural lives happens quite easily in their lives. What they want their children to do in schools is to find the way to move away from rural lives. Our aims of *learning* are not their aims for *education*. To them the relevance of education is about social mobility and, for that matter, examination results.

On the other hand, there are solutions that are seen as creative by the local communities, yet are not seen as acceptable by the foreign consultants. One example is the primary boarding schools in China. According to the principles of decentralisation, children should have access to schools within two kilometres of where they live. This apparently sensible policy, however, has presented a paradoxical situation to rural areas where the population is sparse. If the policy was followed, there would be very small schools with very few students scattered in different small villages. The local planners have created the model of primary boarding schools, such that a cluster of several villages can sponsor a boarding school at some convenient location. Such a school enjoys an economy of scale and can provide quality education. Although it means parents have to bear a higher private cost for the boarding school, they are quite willing to send their children to such schools for better educational opportunities.

However, most international consultants would disapprove of this. They would see it as inconceivable and unhealthy to have boarding

---

[95] This is the CHIND project that compares the cultures of learning in China and India, 1999-2000, in collaboration with Nirmala Rao, supported by the Hong Kong Research Grants Council.

schools for children at the ages of six or seven. The separation of the children from their parents is simply unacceptable. It was not unusual that conflicts arose when consultants reported negatively on such practices, and the local planners and educators were forced to defend them. There are simply assumptions among the consultants that are not shared by the local educators and parents, and *vice versa*. Unless the consultants make an effort to understand the basic assumptions within the local community, they will not be able to appreciate what is and what is not acceptable among the local community. As a matter of reference, boarding kindergartens are not uncommon in Chinese urban cities, where resources are not a problem.

Do international organisations learn?

What I have learnt throughout the years is that working in the field is a continuous learning process. I am convinced that social activities such as education are value-specific and hence culture-specific. We simply cannot pretend that frameworks developed elsewhere can be borrowed to identify or solve problems in a particular society. There are norms, values and assumptions that could be totally different, if not opposite, in different societies. There are therefore different perspectives that identify problems differently, present different criteria for solutions, and design different solutions for the problems. Consultants who are appointed by international organisations, who come from outside, have to learn from the local culture before they can start doing anything helpful to the local community.

Such a learning process is by no means straightforward. It is not only that the consultants have to keep an open mind on whatever is observed in the field, but they also have to be conscious that the local community might have a totally different perspective about the same issues, and efforts should be made to understand that perspective. Unless there is a determination on the part of the consultants to totally go against the culture or change the culture, the consultants have to work within the local cultural framework in order to make meaningful contributions. In other words, the consultants have to learn from the local culture. But even if the aim is to refute or change the culture, for the sake of argument, the consultants have to understand what is there that they want to refute or modify.

Consultants come and go. There are only a few consultants who can stay with a particular culture for a continuous period of time. That makes

the learning process rather difficult. Culture is something that cannot be learnt just by identifying a few indicators and understood by a survey, or by a *blitzkrieg* visit.

There is therefore also an issue of how the international organisations could maintain a continuous learning process about a particular culture. It is perhaps easier for organisations that have a permanent office in a particular country, so that the organisation could have an anchor in the society, and hence could accumulate knowledge and experience about that culture, provided that the major representatives do not suffer from frequent personnel changes.

It is not unusual to observe international organisations that repeat the same mistakes about the local culture, and repeat the same learning process, before the personnel undergoes another reshuffle. The interruption in the learning process is never compensated. It is also not unusual to observe some international organisations, newly arrived in a particular recipient country, with the due arrogance of a "donor", trying to interpret the local situation with a high degree of naiveté (if not ignorance). They often repeat the same mistakes that were committed by other organisations which arrived in the same country some 15 or 20 years earlier.

Such mistakes are clearly observed by the local partners. The problem is that such activities usually bring money with them. The local partners may be reluctant to go against the enthusiasm of the "donor agency", if that might mean a hampering of the mutual relations, even if the project is doomed to fail. Most often, the eventual failure of the project, which could mean a complete waste of money, is not seen as failure in understanding the local culture, but rather, a mistake in the local culture. In other words, the consultants are not wrong, but the local people are. In such cases, the organisation will never learn.

References

Cheng, K.M., 1988, "Ethnographic evaluation of the educational planning process: Experience of two case studies in Mainland China," *Hong Kong Journal for Educational Research*, 3, pp. 75-82.

Cheng, K.M., 1991, *Planning basic education in China: A case study of two counties in the province of Liaoning*. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.

Cheng, K.M., 1996, *The quality of primary education: A case study of Zhejiang province, China.* Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.

Cheng, K.M., 1997, "Qualitative research and educational policy-making: Approaching reality in developing countries," in Crossley M. and G. Vulliamy (eds.), *Educational qualitative research in developing countries: Current perspectives.* New York: Garland, pp. 65-85.

Cheng, K.M., 1999, "Understanding basic education policies in China," in Liu, J., Ross, H. & D. Kelly (eds.), *The ethnographic eye: Interpretative studies of education in China.* New York: Farmer, pp. 29-50.

What Did Mr Olofsson Learn?

Margareta Grape

Quite a number of years ago I visited Chile with one of the leaders of the Swedish labour movement. It was before General Pinochet was forced to hand over presidential power to a democratically elected president in the late1980s. I was then director of the International Centre of the Swedish Labour Movement. Over the years of dictatorship in Chile close links were created between Swedish popular organisations and the wide and rich network of trade unions, political parties, neighbourhood organisations and other organisations there that made it possible to maintain faith in democracy. I usually went alone to Chile but this time it had been possible to travel with a member of the Swedish parliament who also held important posts in several of the labour organisations.

This man, we can call him Mr Olofsson, had never been to Latin America before. But he was fully aware of the political situation in Chile. He knew that it took a lot of courage to become involved in the struggle for democracy under a totalitarian regime. He went there in solidarity with less fortunate brothers and sisters. Maybe he was not really afraid, but I guess he felt his personal security could be threatened. Some of those he was going to meet were hiding from the police and their organisations were prohibited by the military.

On the first day Mr Olofsson was briefed at the hotel to prepare him for the meetings scheduled for the days to come. When the briefings were finished he was really worried and he said to me:

> I don't know if I can teach these people anything. They are so far behind. I doubt if they will understand. The situation here is so completely different from ours.

Mr Olofsson was genuinely worried. He had come to pass on to his Chilean brothers the wisdom of a senior democracy builder, and now he was no longer sure they were able to understand what he had come to talk about.

The visit progressed according to the programme. He met with members of trade unions. He was invited to visit mines where the working conditions were incredibly difficult. Mr Olofsson visited organisations concerned with popular education, with women and young people proudly building organisations from below in poor suburban areas in Santiago and other larger cities. He was extremely well received everywhere.

The night before we returned to Sweden he summarised his experience. This time his eyes were not filled with despair but with tears, when he said:

> Margareta, when I first came here I thought I had something to teach these people, and I was afraid they would not understand. Now I know I came to learn. They were the ones who taught me something, not the other way around.

When I asked what he meant he answered:

> The people I have met have not only taught me about their struggle for the right to live in freedom. They have also taught me how my forefathers fought for democracy and human rights in my own country. When I met trade unions and other organisations here, it was as if I had met my own forefathers. I feel as if I have been invited to share the hope for the future in Chile and at the same time meet my own historical past.

I find the story about Mr Olofsson interesting from a learning perspective of. In a sense it raises the question of whether the donors and recipients interpret a shared experience in the same way. I find this particularly important in the framework of non-governmental organisations since they claim to address the basic issues of human rights and democracy.

It is natural for me to have non-governmental organisations as my point of departure for a reflection on processes of learning in development co-operation. The reason for this is by no means that I value the non-governmental organisations higher than governments in development co-operation. It is simply because I have the longest and most direct experience in that field. I have seen many good, and unfortunately many bad, examples of NGO-projects. Good or bad, they still offer an interesting material for reflection.

But before embarking on my journey with the NGOs in development co-operation I find it appropriate to underline that there is no unambiguous definition of NGOs. There are many different kinds of organisations hidden under the wide and generous umbrella of the concept Non-Governmental Organisation.

For more than a decade NGOs have generally been the pets both of national governments in the North and the international community. They are described as the outstanding interlocutors of humanitarian commitment, efficiency and non-corruption and are by and large seen as legitimate short cuts to the grassroots. In other words they correspond to expectations that development co-operation should reach the poor, without passing through any contaminated intermediaries such as national

or local governments. In contrast with governments they are expected to deliver both material resources and some sort of immaterial hope for a better world. NGOs are considered to be flexible, close to people and they are not normally involved with corruption. In many cases all this is probably true. And yet the non-governmental organisations are very different from one other. They have different roots, structures and aims.

To my understanding there are at least two types of non-governmental organisations. One is the traditional popular movement built from below, aiming at mobilising for social and political change. The other is the professional enterprise offering services to the poor. Both types address the situation of the poor, but they do it in different ways and above all their roles as social actors are different, or at least should be different.

Mr Olofsson represents NGO co-operation focused on promoting the development of popularly based democratic organisations. The basic philosophy is that experiences gained by popular movements in Sweden long ago are universal and hence relevant in the third world a century later. Co-operatives, trade unions, women's organisations are expected to become cornerstones in building democracy no matter where, no matter when.

However, most of the NGOs involved in development co-operation are not traditional popular organisations. Many are basically private companies, offering professional services in the social field. They are not primarily expected to support grassroots organisations to become efficient social and political actors. Their role is to offer alternative solutions to provide the poor with basic social services. It seems as if they are sometimes used as interlocutors by national governments or the international community, not only because they are non-corrupt, professionally suitable and cost effective, but also because they fit in the general ideological framework where private solutions are seen as superior to public ones. In most of the countries in the North, there is a marked dismantling of the public sector and in that perspective it is fairly logical to also promote private alternatives in the third world. It is a little contradictory that public money from the North for ideological purposes is used to introduce private solutions to problems that are still mainly dealt with by the public sector in the donor countries.

Back to Mr Olofsson and his visit to Chile. He was genuinely happy to have had a personal experience of learning. He felt that the organisations he met in Chile had made it possible for him to meet the past of his own movement. But did he learn anything about the conditions

of democratic development in Chile? Was this expression of learning a part of mutual learning for him and his Chilean friends?

The main reason why Mr Olofsson was so moved by his experience was that it would not have been possible for him to experience the same thing in his own country. He had read about how his forefathers had mobilised for democratic rights. But for obvious reasons, he had not been a part of that struggle himself. It was a part of the historic memory of his country, but not of his own. His Chilean experience made it possible for him to make a trip back in history. The encounter with Chile under Pinochet was like a time machine for him. He assumed that Chile was at the same stage of development as Sweden had been in the days of his grandfather. If this were true Mr Olofsson's experience of learning would be correct, if not he was a victim of nostalgia.

Over and over again the economists and politicians are reminding us of the dramatic changes the globalisation of economy has caused. Changes on the stock market in Tokyo or Singapore have almost instant consequences world-wide. The reason why a poor Chilean is excluded from the labour market depends to a larger extent on external conditions than on national politics. The possibilities for a poor family to buy a home of their own depend on the interest rate in combination with the possibilities of getting a job. If there is a financial crisis in Malaysia, people become unemployed in the slums of Latin America. If development is favourable for investors and money traders on the other side of the globe, there is hope of Pedro and Maria getting their small house with pretty flowers in the garden. If the economy crashes in Hong Kong they will lose more than the stockholders will. They have not gambled on the market, but their lives are gambled with.

This situation today is totally different from the environment in which Mr Olofssons organisation emerged. The economy then was not global, but mainly national or at the most regional. It was possible to exercise national political power to make rules for economic life. Stockholm was in the Swedish context more important in the lives of workers than Singapore or New York. But that is no longer the case. And that is why nowadays the popular organisations in Mr Olofssons country have little if any influence or power to mobilise. Once it was possible to demand their share by means of strikes or other mass manifestations. Now that is practically impossible. It is hardly possible to bend international capital by isolated actions in a small country. Mr Olofsson and most of his friends know that, but they look back in nostalgia on times when the forces for change were strong in local communities.

Mr Olofssons immediate interpretation of the experience was that the projects he had been visiting were successful, and that they would surely lead to the restoring of democracy in Chile. The reason for his conclusion was not related to Chile, not to contemporary experiences in his own country, but rather to historical victories a century ago. The encounter with Chile was a confirmation for him of the validity and even universality of his own political convictions. He was reassured that his political "faith" was strong enough to be embraced by others fighting for the same ideals his forefathers had done a hundred years earlier. "It was good enough for my old father and it is good enough for me. Give me that old time religion!". The prescription had worked once and would certainly work once again.

I believe Mr Olofssons reaction is typical for ideologically motivated NGOs aiming at contributing to the growth of popularly based organisations in the third world. They are in a way all missionary-organisations. They want to spread the gospel of freedom and democracy. They, or at least their forefathers, have found salvation, and they are called to make others experience the same thing.

For many years NGOs from the North have brought their experiences to the South. But for some years now experiences from the South have also been transferred to the North. Poverty is no longer exclusively a third world problem. Over recent decades the social gaps have also grown wider in the North. I have been working for some time with urban issues in the European context, and there is no doubt in my mind that social exclusion in European cities is becoming increasingly similar to poverty in the third world. The social safety net is still tighter in the North than in the South, but it is getting weaker.

Interestingly enough few of the traditional popular organisations are mobilising to confront poverty in the North. There are few examples of the historical movements mobilising for justice and social dignity in the outskirts of Paris, Madrid or Stockholm, even if they are often involved in third world projects. Old time religion is not expected to give adequate answers to the contemporary poverty in their countries of origin. One reason is that many of the historical popular movements have become an integral part of the established society, and they do not represent the reality lived by people in poor neighbourhoods. They defend what they have achieved over the years, but they are seldom open for re-articulating their task in a changed society. It is of course contradictory that they become involved in the third world but that they lack the vision to confront

poverty and exclusion in their own part of the global village. This shows how difficult it is for them to reinterpret their historical experiences in a new context, which might indicate that they are not the bearers of hope for change, but rather of confusion and helplessness.

But with or without the historical popular movements, poverty has become a part of the European agenda. The European Commission launches programmes and invents funds for projects in poor neighbourhoods. The regional funds are now being reformed, and in connection with that, the situation of so called deprived areas has been discussed. Conferences are organised to develop strategies, to exchange experiences and to demonstrate "best practices". Experts meet to compare theories and to present reports. Despite the growing interest in the issue, there is very little interest to discuss root causes. The main preoccupation seems to be to find someone to pick up the bill. Who is to pay for social benefits for the unemployed, for poverty-related crimes and violence, for housing, education and health for people who cannot pay for themselves? The Cities do not want to do it. The national governments are not very interested and in the name of the principle of subsidiarity, there is bargaining going on as to how much should be covered by the European Union. Strangely enough there is no or at least very little debate on how to redistribute national, regional and local resources in order to combat poverty. None of the European Cities are poor. The fact that the poor in the Cities are growing poorer does not alter that fact. If the traditional popular movements had believed in their old time religion they would have mobilised to change the politics of redistribution, but they have not.

The traditional popular movements seem to have been replaced by new ones in the struggle against poverty in the North. It seems as if the inspiration comes from projects successfully executed in the third world, rather than success-stories from the past in their own countries. I have seen many examples of projects executed today in the outskirts of European Cities, that are practically identical with projects carried out in Chile, in El Salvador or other Latin American countries during times of dictatorship. There was a period when organisations were prohibited. Free elections were not held. Trade unions and political parties were banned and so on. The leaders of popular organisations who tried to act were persecuted and many times killed. In addition to that social programmes were cut, and the educational possibilities for people were few. People learned that they did not have anything good to expect from the state, and they tried to solve their problems by themselves.

Underground-schools started, soup kitchens, "ollas comunes", grew like mushrooms, alternative local governments developed etc. Most of these experiences were participative and had a strong element of keeping the memory of democracy alive, and practising democracy for the time they hoped would come when the dictatorship would eventually end.

During this period NGOs from the North in close alliance with their governments stepped in to fulfil some of the obligations the dictatorships set aside, when they ceased to be the government for all their citizens. Governments in the North and considerable parts of the international community assumed a subsidiary responsibility to make up for some of the abuses of human rights in the dictatorships. This arrangement covered only small areas, but some of them turned out to be strategically important. A generation of new leaders was formed. They assumed responsibility in a period when it was dangerous to be a leader. The co-operation with NGOs in the North permitted them to become part of larger networks. This became their protection, but also an important environment for education. Organisations that emerged during this period had to deal with many aspects of community life. Their formula was to mobilise the neighbours to get things done. No one would offer them houses, acceptable sewage-systems, opportunities for adult education or support for their children to get a reasonable education. If they wanted any of these things, they had to organise it themselves with support from abroad.

Many who got involved in these kinds of projects are now local councillors or mayors in poor neighbourhoods. Some even hold governmental offices. Local governments are now implementing some of the ideas that developed during hard times. In some cases even governments are integrating them into national development strategies. One interesting example is Honduras. After hurricane Mitch the role of local government has been central in the national debate on how to organise the reconstruction work. Municipalities in Honduras and the international community insist on giving local governments a major role and the Honduran government prefers a more central model. I doubt this debate on decentralisation would be possible if there had not been such a strong emphasis on neighbourhood projects during times of totalitarian regimes.

If the main effort in the South is to restore the civil society and to make it an integral part of national structures, the tendency seems to be the contrary in the North. The poor neighbourhoods tend to become enclaves in otherwise wealthy environments. The difference between people living in poor areas is not exclusively described in socio-

economical terms. Many of those living in poor neighbourhoods are immigrants from third world countries. Many speak another language than the majority-population. They have darker skins. Many have another religious faith than the majority. All this together paves the way for regarding poor areas as third world enclaves separated from the rest of society. And many times they are looked upon as third world phenomena in Europe, not primarily as a consequence of the global economy per se but as a result of strong migration movements.

It is by no means strange that it is natural for non-governmental organisations to look for models from the third world. The old models for social integration in the North have failed long ago. The public sector is being dismantled and poverty is to a large extent labelled as an immigration-problem. Once again learning becomes essential, not only to evaluate individual projects, but to understand the mechanisms behind social exclusion and poverty.

It is beyond any doubt that NGOs now actively involved in projects targeting the urban poor in European metropolises have learned from experiences in the third world. The question is once again; how do they interpret what they have learned? What have they brought home to their own constituencies? Is it relevant to transmit experiences gained during dictatorships in for instance Chile or Central America to metropolitan areas in Western Europe?

It is in a way fascinating to see how the poor in Europe are seen as separated from the rest of the community economically and socially. In the name of empowerment the wealthy part of the society is requiring the poor to take care of themselves. Tax-free zones for small and medium enterprises producing for the markets of the poor are promoted. In some areas money as means of payment is replaced by a scheme based on exchange of services, or other barter arrangements. The incompatibility between the islands of poverty and the rest of society becomes increasingly more manifest. A different society is taking shape, and this society is sometimes referred to as the third sector. It is not public and it is not private, and it basically lacks the potential to become a part of either. Strategies like these and many others do not aim at integrating the poor into the general schemes, but to make them survive, segregated from the rest. In a sense, projects from the third world, aimed at giving the poor more strength vis–á-vis democratic institutions, run the risk of creating patterns that make exclusion and segregation permanent. They do so since they are multiplied and not evaluated in the light of the context.

There is every reason to be happy and proud of non-governmental organisations when they have been able to contribute to maintaining hope in times of despair. I have seen how representatives from NGOs have been invited as guests of honour in connection with events to which normally only heads of states, governmental ministers, business executives and others belonging to the international jet set are invited. It is truly moving to see the typical grass-rooters from the North mingling with the bright and the beautiful. It is not my intention to diminish the importance of what has been achieved by and through NGOs. But I find it relevant to challenge the belief that it is possible to implement one experience of mobilising the poor regardless of political or chronological context. Basically this addresses the issue of learning and the question of the interrelation of experience and context.

That brings us back to Mr Olofsson once again. He was really touched when he recognised, or at least thought he recognised, an important part of his own history. Maybe the NGOs are doing the same thing when they copy experiences and projects from the third world and implement them in the North. They recognise poverty, social exclusion, political marginalisation and even more the physical looks of the people living in the deprived areas in European Cities. They have learned what worked in the South and they implement their experiences in a context that they regard as identical. And yet I believe they make the same mistake as Mr Olofsson did. Methods developed in Sweden a century ago or in Latin America during dictatorships were relevant in their contexts. They were successful and made a difference in the historical situation in which they were developed. But it takes more than copying successful projects to repeat success. It does not make much sense to copy an experience, no matter how successful, if it is not relevant in the new political context. Only when methods are truly contextual is it possible to evaluate the relevance of methods that might have proven useful in other circumstances historically or politically.

Learning in the perspective of democracy building must be much more related to the surrounding social and economic realities than what normally seems to be the case. The global village demands answers adjusted to local conditions and yet the answers must be relevant in the global context. For others involved in development co-operation this is obvious. Who would suggest that old-fashioned factories were built in developing countries? Factories must be competitive on the world market. The laws of competiveness are the same in the North as in the South.

The same goes for banking systems, financial politics or physical infrastructure for that matter. But when projects aimed at promoting democratic development are developed it is as though the global reality no longer exists. It is as though the world shrinks to the tiniest part of the community, a neighbourhood in the North or the South. Successful experiments in strategies for survival are shared but quite seldom in the light of the question of whether they are efficient in increasing the power of bargaining for the poor. It seems as though it is enough for us to measure their capacity to promote physical survival and improve the quality of life a little for the poor involved.

Finally the question remains: Did Mr Olofsson really look in the wrong direction? Was he really mistaken? Did he by being wrong mislead his friends in Chile? If he did, I did and so did the rest of us Europeans involved in supporting the struggle against the military dictatorship in Chile.

I honestly doubt that we did any irreparable harm. Democracy is now successfully under reconstruction in Chile. Chileans used what was relevant to them in their situation and ignored the rest. Or to put it bluntly, they took the money we offered and used it in the best possible way. What unites donors and recipients is a mutual commitment to democracy and human rights. What differs are the stories. The donors tell stories that fit into their patterns ideologically and historically, and they tell the story of their own struggle, supported by others who did not always understand their situation so well, but who offered co-operation. So maybe Mr Olofsson was looking in the wrong direction but without spoiling the possibilities for the projects to be contextually relevant, even though he did not discover the context. The sad thing is basically that he, and so many others, did not learn to see beyond the methods. So many of us missed such an important opportunity to learn that methods are successful only when they are able to relate to the environment in which they are applied. That understanding would have been useful to help us become more effective and more relevant when we try to deal with poverty and social exclusion in the North too.

Learning in International Development Co-operation – an Example of a Small International Institution

Jacques Hallak

Introductory statements

The objective of this paper is to summarize lessons that I have learnt from my own experience in international co-operation. Although I was exposed to international development co-operation as a whole, my own experience is primarily within one sector, that of education, and predominantly in specific areas of that sector, namely policy, planning and management.

Although I have visited a large number of developing countries, I have never actually had profound experience of the living conditions, having not had the chance to permanently reside in any of them.

With these caveats, I am proposing to present, in the first section of the paper, some general comments on learning in the area of overall development co-operation. In a second section I will deal specifically with co-operation in education, and in the last section, I will draw from my experience within UNESCO/IIEP.

Learning in the area of overall development co-operation

"Has learning taken place in development co-operation?" In my view, yes, as it takes place in all social organizations (entities, institutions or systems); whether the process of learning is formally organized or not, it does take place when "institutional memory" can develop. However, the process is usually slow: if the speed of learning is too slow and its consequences are "long-term" and if, in addition, the social organization can be regarded as ephemeral (or having a short life duration), the impact of learning becomes problematic. As a matter of fact, sceptical observers and some students of international development co-operation express the views that "learning does not take place in development co-operation". To support their views, they refer to the fact that after several "decades of development" adopted by the UN system, several developing countries have not experienced significant improvements and a few have even found their situation deteriorating. At the same time, quite surprisingly,

the same observers assume that learning should take place in development co-operation; they usually propose recommendations to"improve and make more effective development co-operation" based on their assessment of "what went wrong?" i.e., learning from experience.

During the past few decades, development co-operation agencies have been continuously under pressure to improve the impact of their programmes, to improve the efficiency of their mode of operation, and to be given more legitimacy and recognition for their efforts. Put in more simple terms, co-operation agencies are asked to "do more, better, with less resources". Although targets of support to development (0.7 per cent of GNP) were regarded as appropriate by governments and relevant institutions in the rich countries, in actual fact, this quantitative target was never reached (except in two or three countries), while pressures on the co-operation agencies have been growing because of:

1) budgetary squeezes and financial difficulties encountered by several governments of the industrialized world since the late seventies and early eighties,
2) a growing conviction of lack of transparency and accountability in the use of public resources devoted to co-operation,
3) a shared concern with the lack of suitability between the resource allocated by co-operation agencies and the actual priorities of developing countries, and
4) a permanent tension between promoters of multilateralism and bilateralism in development co-operation, which – with the recent trend of globalization of economies – has been further expanded to include a broad divergence between those who want to see a dominant role for the private sector in the co-operation business and those who believe that development co-operation is primarily a public concern.

To address these issues a number of initiatives have been taken in order to transform and adapt the area of development co-operationso that the organizations therein become "learning organizations", for example:

• promoting partnership among agencies of co-operation for development in order to learn from each other more systematically, and
• building a more comprehensive and reliable knowledge base in order to guide the action of development co-operation agencies.

Learning from each other's experience

Probably the most striking trend in the development co-operation business during the past two decades has been a rather broad demand for promotion of inter-agency interactions and co-operation; to (i) learn from the experience of each other, (ii) establish a more consistent dialogue with beneficiary countries and avoid misallocation of resources and divergences in policy orientations; and (iii) build more constituencies and "collegial references" for each agency. To cite a few mechanisms of inter-agency consultation and operation we can refer to CGIAR in agriculture, the African Capacity Building initiative in Africa, and NETAID, an inter-agency initiative led by UNDP to fight against poverty.

The Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) approach is probably the most single powerful illustration of both concrete inter-agency co-operation and the need to adopt a different style of co-operation for development, based on the principle that recipient countries should own the programmes of co-operation and indeed be actively involved from their inception. To use jargon familiar to members of the donor community: countries are expected to be in the driver's seat. Interestingly enough, the CDF assumes a "holistic approach" to development and rejects the piecemeal approach which used to be (and still is) regarded as pragmatic and reasonable by the stakeholders of the development co-operation business, in particular, the World Bank. Development is regarded as a complex process that requires due account to be taken of all the elements of development, including social, human, governance, environmental, economic, financial, and more recently, cultural. Two decades ago references were very seldom made to the concept of "ownership" by recipient countries, to actual efforts to concretely apply "comprehensiveness and integration" in the development co-operation business. Without doubt, learning has taken place, even if only between the rhetoric of what is a sound process of development co-operation and the actual practice, there is still a long way to go. Indeed, in this respect, some observers of the practice argue that nothing has really changed and, for example, sectoral policy dialogue between countries and co-operation agencies remain primarily led by agencies, and ownership by recipients remains a pious hope. In my view, if one compares the current trend with what used to be the "normal approach" – there are grounds for arguing that "learning" has taken place.

Knowledge base

1) Under the auspices of DAC, and quite often to meet with requirements of national constituencies, several agencies have been producing more systematic and more comprehensive data on financial flows of development. We have also observed, especially during the past decade, that several agencies have commissioned external audits and evaluations of their overall aid policy and practices.

2) Data produced both nationally and internationally has been used in many instances to guide debate in parliament and prepare government decisions on both the level of financial support to development as well as sectoral allocations and establishment of priorities. Unfortunately, in several cases, the knowledge base is being used to manage a "reduction of aid flows" and not to guide expansion of financial support. Evaluation and audit reports have been used to guide agencies in drafting their "white papers" or "policy platforms" for development co-operation. At the same time, in several cases, evaluation and audit reports have been used to reform and/or restructure aid agencies and their mode of operation. In this regard, it is interesting to note that (a) there are a number of common trends among agencies, which suggests that lessons are shared and have significant impact on the business of development co-operation; (b) different, sometimes, contradictory patterns occur, not only among different agencies but over a rather short period of time, for example, in less than ten years, several "waves" of restructuring and reform have been recorded: decentralisationand re-centralisation; linking and de-linking; sectoral responsibilities with geographical concentrations; relying increasingly on outside expertise – in the private/professional sector, at the same time localising the control of resource allocation to entities not concerned with development co-operation, etc. These "swings of the pendulum" are illustrations of "learners' behaviours" of those in charge of development co-operationand of their a ttempts to continuously adapt the organizations to the needs of the business of development co-operation. However, continuous reform and restructuring are often the result of external factors such as cuts in budgetary allocations or changes in leadership.

3) Finally, in the same vein, evaluation of implementation of development co-operation programmes and projects have become

a rule (the norm) in most co-operation agencies. Lessons drawn from evaluation of implementation have been accumulated and used as a "reference wisdom" in the negotiations and feasibility testing of programmes and projects of development. Issues of capacity building, sustainability, and ownership of the development process have emerged and become critical in the definition of efficient approaches to implementation. A body of "common knowledge and expertise" has gradually developed and is being shared among co-operation agencies; a strong incentive being that agencies are joining efforts in supporting and financing programmes of co-operation. Questions such as "How to design a project?"; "What makes a good project?"; and "What is a proper framework for efficient implementation of programmes and projects?" are well documented, and convergences, if not similarities, in the approaches among agencies have been observed during the past few years. For example, the so-called "logical framework" is adopted by most of the agencies and "imposed" on recipient countries.

Education and training

The comments made so far naturally apply to the education and training sector.

Indeed, learning has taken place over the past decades, both as regards to sectoral priorities for action by the development co-operation organisations and managerial approaches to be adopted to ensure more effective and efficient modes of operation. This has possibly been due to a significant trend of promotion of partnership among various protagonists within the field of the development of education, in particular, members of the development co-operation family.

Sectoral priorities

In addition to the International Conferences on Education organized by UNESCO/IBE, a number of world conferences took place in Jomtien, Paris, Hamburg and Seoul, which could be considered as "learning opportunities" for the development co-operation business. Whether such opportunities have actually been used remains to be confirmed. A number of "declarations", "targets", "follow-up programmes" have been associated with such events; not always leading to convincing measurable impact. In

this respect, I would like to mention the case of the Jomtien conference.

In 1988, at a meeting of the International Working Group on Education (IWGE) – a club of donors previously called "the Bellagio group"– participants concluded from their exchange of experiences and their analysis of a number of studies and researches, that primary/basic education was not receiving enough attention from the donor community and, given the comparative advantage of primary education over other levels of education, resource allocation in developing countries by level of education showed a striking under-investment in primary/basic education. The Steering Committee of the IWGE decided to mobilise governments, the donor community and the basic education profession. A year later the Jomtien Conference took place; an international agenda was adopted which has, for the past decade, affected priorities in resource allocation, both by governments and donors, while at the same time, paying more attention to the role of previously neglected partners in development co-operation, namely the NGOs, and giving absolute priority to investments in basic education.

Many other, more modest, examples can be given to illustrate the learning that has occurred in the development co-operation business since the adoption of the international agenda in education and training, or the establishment of sectoral priorities for investment and financial support:

1) *Level of education:* primarily for basic education (although in some countries basic education includes both primary and secondary education). However, ten years after Jomtien, a growing number of donor agencies are changing their views, due to demand from developing countries and "learning from experience". It is unwise to ignore both the implication of the generalising of the provision of basic education on other levels of education and the basic demand for training professionals at all levels in each society. Thus, what was "common sense" thirty years ago is being rediscovered today and we now refer to "more for basic education within an overall balanced resource allocation by level".

2) *Type of delivery systems:* while until recently development banks used to neglect non-school education, informal education (community based) has received growing support. The development co-operation business has learnt that it is not physically possible to address the needs of all target groups with traditional primary schools.

3) *Target groups:* there is consensus on the priority to address the needs of girls and women (incidentally, the justifications offered are not always on "moral grounds", they are often on operational

grounds, namely, investment in the education of girls and women produces much higher returns is likely to be far more efficient, again, an illustration of learning). Another consensus is on the needs of the disadvantaged groups;

4) *Category of investment:* less on physical investment (buildings) and more on capacity building and up-stream support. This is a clear outcome of the learning, which has been accumulated by the development co-operation community after several decades of support to educational development.

Managerial guidelines

Here are a number of examples that illustrate the magnitude of the changes; some relate to the actual functioning of the agencies, others to the priorities adopted in their co-operation with beneficiary countries:

Structure and operations

Many agencies have reformed their organigrammes several times during the past decade to take into account the lessons learnt, in particular, the difficulties faced in implementing their policies of support to education. For example, a more "integrated approach" to human resource development often meant amalgamating the entities of the agencies in charge of education with the entities in charge of training; the same rational led to bringing together "education" with "health" and "population" and establishing a "social sector division". At the same time, to reduce the share of management costs, we have seen systematic sub-contracting of professional tasks to the private sector and more reliance on decentralised mechanisms and localisation of implementation. As a consequence, the "central staff" in charge of education is limited in many agencies and often responsibilities are "coupled" with "geographical competence". Some agencies – as is the case in the Dutch Co-operation– have left most development co-operation initiatives (in particular, education) to staff located in their embassies and to representatives of the countries concerned.

It then became more attractive for agencies to look for co-financing and initiatives led by development banks (especially the World Bank) that could both provide "intellectual support", i.e. take an overall responsibility for the assessment of the merit, say of programme support, and be the financier of the last resort.

Another related consequence is changing the preference for the modes of intervention from activities to projects; from projects to programmes; and from programmes to policy related grants and loans.

Finally, based on actual experiences of development co-operation in education performances, preference is given to simpler rather than to more complex designs for proposals for support. A few years ago, it was regarded as advisable to avoid "Christmas tree educational projects", to use the terminology of some development agencies, today, preference is given to "support granted to implementation of educational policies" on which agreement has been reached.

Empowerment and capacity building

Ultimately, what matters in development is the significance of the impact and the sustainability of the changes introduced. Several diagnoses of education sectors have shown a lack of ownership and of adequate capacity for formulation of policies, programmes and projects, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The "catchwords" became ownership and capacity building. The Working Group on Education Sector Analysis (WGESA) of the Association of the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) gives one relevant illustrative example in this respect. Since 1995 the WGESA has focused on reinforcing African-driven sector analysis work; a basic assumption of the working group is that the formulation of relevant and effective policies and reforms requires education sector analysis that is conducted and managed by the countries themselves (ownership). Participation and dialogue between national governments (under their leadership), international funding and technical assistance agencies and the educational research community are what is needed in order to achieve this. With this principle in mind, one review has been completed of the experience of Zimbabwe in education sector analysis and four other reviews are under way in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Lesotho and Mozambique.

Another example is the growing share of resources of co-operating agencies devoted to capacity building activities in educational projects and programmes; while in the early sixties and seventies, and even until the mid-eighties, a growing share of resources – though limited – went to training of "local staff". Since then, it has been recognized that training alone is not enough; without institutional development and appropriate policy environment, the chances of sustainability of investment in education remain slim. Only the combination of training, institutional development and promotion of favourable environment – (namely capacity building) – is likely to yield more effectiveness and efficiency in the investment of co-operation in education.

The International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP)

In this section, I will concentrate on my experience at the IIEP. Let me first briefly introduce the IIEP. It is an UNESCO Institute, established in 1963, with an initial mission of training educational planners and administrators primarily from developing countries. It is modest in size (ten to twenty programme staff); financed through a grant-in-aid from UNESCO and voluntary donations from governments. After some thirty-five years of existence, the IIEP has trained about 3,000 senior officials from more than 100 countries. It has built a knowledge base and published about seven hundred titles, backed up by a very important collection in its documentation centre. It also serves as a centre for exchange, both among professionals and education officials.

Let me now pose a number of questions and comment on them, in the light of ten years experience at the IIEP:

"Has learning, to any major extent, taken place at the IIEP?"

A number of examples can be provided to support the statement that learning has taken place at the IIEP during the past ten years:

(a) from training to capacity building; an evaluation of the impact of the training programme of IIEP concluded that (i) a proportion of former trainees have not been employed in educational planning activities and/or have few opportunities to apply what was learned at the IIEP. This has meant that, on the one hand, the Institute has needed to adjust the training programmes offered to make them more relevant to actual needs of Member States, which has resulted in growing and significant attention being given to issues of management of education, both at sub-sectoral and institutional level. On the other hand, it was found that the difficulties faced by our alumni in finding employment and in applying skills acquired at the IIEP were the result of weak institutional development in the countries concerned and lack of an appropriate environment for effective work. This has led the IIEP to attach particular attention to, and to include in its programme, activities to develop and strengthen institutions (distribution of relevant documentation; training of strategic staff; signing of institutional partnership agreements) and activities to promote favourable policy

environments by organizing policy fora to sensitize key decision-makers on critical issues and the way to address them.

(b) *from training to learning by doing;* another example is the development of training tools and modules using actual experiences of countries or partners concerned. IIEP's experience has shown that both the credibility and relevance of what is taught are very much related to how it is taught. As a consequence, training materials are based on concrete case studies carried out with the help of national experts and officials; initial versions of materials are systematically validated and tested "in the field" prior to being made available.

(c) *from initial training to continuous support;* a recent evaluation, conducted by the IIEP, addressed to five groups of trainees (over five years), concluded that most of the alumni felt it necessary to be able to update their knowledge and expertise; they requested refresher courses on new topics or methods developed by the Institute. We have started a first experimental course for alumni this year.

"How and from what source has learning taken place?"

In its current six-year medium-term plan, the IIEP has adopted a strategy to progressively organize itself as a "learning institution". The main concept behind this is that the Institute builds a number of activities into its programme that could serve as a basis for its development. In particular, there are activities which could help the Institute establish its own list of priorities for its programme, for example, observing the trends in the environment and in educational planning in different countries and reflecting on their consequences to the IIEP programme. There are other activities that could help the Institute improve its mode of operation, such as an evaluation of the implementation of training, research and dissemination programmes. Other activities are sources of skill development for IIEP staff, for example, getting involved in "operational activities" means being exposed to "first hand" experience of the realities in Member States. Similarly, evaluating country projects and programmes is a crucial source of knowledge and expertise for the staff. Finally, very important sources of learning are mechanisms of dialogue and consultation among the development co-operation agencies. Being part of UNESCO means having direct access to such sources. Moreover, hosting the ADEA gives the IIEP easy access to the knowledge and expertise developed by the stakeholders of this association, governments,

professionals and the co-operation agencies. Also, as the secretariat for the IWGE, the Institute participates actively in the consultations among the agencies and the adoption of the agenda for education in the profession.

"Has the IIEP been able to apply learning to practice?"
Yes and no. In many cases, because of financial constraints and/or high dependency of partners, as well as institutional inertia (due, in particular, to staff profile), it has not been possible to apply in practice what has been learnt. Changes in larger institutions are slow and difficult, while the IIEP is small in size, it is an integral part of UNESCO – a major specialised agency of the United Nations.

At the same time, a great deal of change has occurred at the IIEP as a result of learning, for example the decentralisation of programme implementation; the gradual change of the mission statement; the hybridisation of the financing of the programme, with a limited but significant share of cost recovery, the use of new information technologies and the development of distance training activities.

However, it would be inappropriate to conclude with a simple "yes and no" formula answer to the challenges faced by development agencies and institutions considered to be "learning institutions" which are trying to apply what they learn in their programmes.

Some Concluding Remarks

From the experience of IIEP, I have noted a number of facts, which I should like to share by way of conclusion. The chances of success of operating learning institutions of a similar size than of the IIEP rest mainly on three sets of factors:

1. *Governance:* There should be a confusion of roles between the manager and the Chief Executive Officer. The latter draw its legitimacy from both the Governing Board and the various stakeholders of the institutes (including UNESCO); while the former can act legitimately under the system of delegation of authority of the Director General of UNESCO. Only, because of confusion of the two roles in the same person, is it possible to both manage and promote change in management. Only in this way, is it possible to reconcile "autonomy" and "obligations to comply with UNESCO rules and priorities". In the case of other institutions not linked to a

large organization, it will still be advisable to keep the leadership under a single holder.

2. *Resources:* Learning institutions require special financial support for R&D and experiments. Very few agencies are ready to support such activities. The IIEP was fortunate to have built very strong institutional ties with the education department of Sida. Agreements did include the possibility for the IIEP to dedicate small amount of resources for experimental activities and evaluations. This has helped enormously.

3. *Staff:* As already mentioned earlier, resistance to change, existing profiles, and instability are significant obstacles to running learning institutions. For an institute like the IIEP, we have suffered from all the three obstacles. There is no simple way to address this issue of building staffing conditions conducive to change generated by learning. At the managerial level (director, senior staff and coordinators), the same difficulties apply. Moreover, changes suggested by learning produce insecurity and have destabilizing effect on management. Therefore, it is particularly demanding on the leadership of the institution to build consensus for change among the managerial staff. Altogether, for learning institutions to work successfully, a number of conditions are required, not always available in the real setting of most international institutions.

A Personal Reflection – Learning and Development Aid, 1960-2000

Kenneth King

Introduction

This experience of learning in development aid has been drawn from several different learning environments: academia as student, teacher and researcher; participation in aid projects; long term membership of a Northern NGO; and shorter term responsibility for research aid world-wide in a bilateral agency. It is peculiarly appropriate to seek to explore some of the challenges surrounding learning and development aid at a time when it would appear that many assistance agencies have rather recently discovered the importance of becoming learning organisations and including their Southern partners, their Northern public, and their own staff in their "knowledge management" and "knowledge sharing" strategies. The current fascination with the role of knowledge in the development process raises questions about how this diverges from what went on before, and why this particular interest has arisen in the last few years of the Fourth Development Decade.[96]

As the subject is learning, it may be useful to analyse change over time, and to make frequent transitions between personal and organisational learning, and to seek to relate both of these to wider trends in the last forty years of development cooperation. But at an early stage it should perhaps be emphasised that although the focus of this book and this chapter may appear to be on the cognitive domain, there is an inescapable ethical dimension of development. This is certain greatly to complicate the task of sifting out the cognitive lessons of experience with development.[97] For one thing, if development is intimately concerned with the ethical issues of commitment, solidarity and care, then it may well be that, running in parallel with this cognitive domain, there is an affective domain, which

---

[96] The author is currently working on an Economic & Social Research Council-supported project on the knowledge policies of the World Bank, Sida, DFID and JICA, under the title 'Learning to make policy: donor agencies and international development'.

[97] In the foreword to the UK White Paper on International Development, the Secretary of State has put the ethical dimension of development rather sharply in focus: "It is our duty to care about other people, in particular those less well off than ourselves. We all have a moral duty to reach out to the poor and needy." Short, 1997, p. 5.

may well have conditioned the personal interests in and attitudes towards the development challenge in the first place.

Learning in the North about the developing world

Formal schooling in the UK in the late 1950s gave children exposure in their school texts to what had been the empire, and increasingly to what was called the Commonwealth. But the tone of these texts was a far cry from the "development awareness" proposed in the UK's 1997 White Paper on International Development: "Every child should be educated about development issues, so that they can understand the key global considerations which will shape their lives" (DFID, 1997, p.77). By contrast in the late 1950s, development education was unknown, and at the university level, development studies and the newer centres of area studies had not yet arrived. Undergraduates such as myself in this period, therefore, acquired an interest in and commitment to Africa or Asia completely informally, and as much through undergraduate students from those continents and from student societies as any other source.

It is worth remarking that the widespread presence of overseas, often Commonwealth, students studying as undergraduates in British universities was a major source of Northern learning about other countries. Such students - like the late Julius Nyerere in Edinburgh or Wole Soyinka in Leeds - were here on virtually the same fee basis as home students. It would not be until the late 1970s in the UK that all the Commonwealth countries - rich and poor - would have to pay exalted overseas fees. At a stroke this changed the composition and internationality of the undergraduate student body in the UK, and removed a vital source of Northern learning about other countries.

However, in this earlier period, there was an essential symmetry in financing and in rationales for university study between overseas (developing country) and home students. This would change once undergraduate developing country students had become much less common, and once post-graduate students from developing countries had increasingly begun to pursue what sometimes came to be called "development disciplines", on development assistance funds.[98] In many British universities in the late 1990s, effectively the "international" under-

---

[98] The agency notion that some knowledge is more 'developmental' than other has had several manifestations, e.g. in the 'Development University' of the 1970s and in the Global Development Network of 1999.

graduate student body is more and more made up of other European Union students, and year or term abroad North American students. The chance to learn on equal terms, at the influential under-graduate level, with "developing country" students has become much more rare. One result has been that Northern students have come to learn about development as a formal discipline rather than through the symmetry of undergraduate life.

Learning through working in the developing world

After the undergraduate experience of ordinary interchange with overseas Commonwealth and other developing country students, and awareness of political and equity concerns in the late 1950s e.g. in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, Kenya and Algeria, one possible outcome was an attitude of commitment to particular issues, especially in Africa.[99] But still without any formal disciplinary framework of "development".

However, the very late 1950s and early 1960s were coincidentally an era where the commitment to, and solidarity with, developing countries stirred by the liberation movements were suddenly provided an ample opportunity for practical implementation. The independence of many countries between 1957 and 1964, especially in Africa, created an enormous demand for teachers (and other professionals) at almost every level of the dramatically expanding national systems from secondary school, to teacher training college, polytechnic and university. What is intriguing about this huge movement of graduate teachers from North America and Europe to the newly independent states is that the process did not feel like what would later be called an aid project. These expatriates had regular contracts with ministries and universities, and some relatively small supplementation on their return, for example, from the Peace Corps, VSO (UK), British Council or the bilateral agency. This rather extraordinary episode which lasted for some 10-15 years has been little analysed. In some quarters it was characterised at the time, by the new breed of development economists, as being a strategy to develop high level manpower, but it was equally responsible for forming (or re-enforcing) a very powerful commitment amongst the expatriate personnel

---

[99] This account from now on is illustrated principally from sub-Saharan Africa. The relationships of the North to other regions of the developing world would necessarily differ significantly from what follows for Africa.

to the countries (and continents) in which they temporarily worked.[100]

During this episode, the education systems, and especially the new universities in sub-Saharan Africa, were more "international" in staffing terms than they will ever be again. But this internationality did not feel like a comprehensive development project; rather, it was large-scale staff recruitment for institutional development, pursued by many different donors, agencies and local governments in loose coordination. The resulting North-South academic collaboration was relatively unremarkable, but its character was as symmetrical as it has ever been since. This was principally because the bulk of the jobs filled by expatriates were in regular line positions, and most of their research appeared to be done through the national universities, and often for local seminars, journals, conferences and higher degrees – and not for consultancy projects.[101]

There is a real sense in which this rather extraordinary episode was a once only experience, and can never be repeated on this scale. But in terms of Learning-in-Development-Cooperation, there may be some lessons which it holds. First, the in-comers were largely in ordinary jobs, and, as this was before the decimation of the value of the currencies of the developing world, they were on similar salaries, and in similar housing to the national staff. Second, the in-comers were also at all levels of the schools and higher education institutions; they were not automatically in leadership, or in training-the-trainer positions. Hence there was not an expert and counterpart culture. Third, and related but most important, this was not seen as something special, to be dignified by the language of partnership and technical assistance. These were felt to be ordinary jobs, and the Northerners had come to them in rather the way that the Southerners had gone to Northern universities – on almost the same terms. Doubtless an important factor was that – whether the in-comers were going to schools, colleges or universities – these were generally still high quality selective, if not elite, institutions. There was not, therefore, necessarily, a poverty or service focus to the work, even if it had been some form of solidarity with or commitment to Africa or Asia that had interested individuals in the first place.[102]

---

[100] The author taught in the elite General Wingate School in Addis Ababa from 1962-65. This British Council-supported school did feel like an aided enclave, as all the teachers were European bar two.
[101] This section draws upon King, 1990. The author taught at the University of Nairobi between 1968 and 1972.
[102] An illustration of this quality was that it was not uncommon, in the large Teachers-for-East Africa scheme, for Northern undergraduates to acquire a graduate teacher training qualification from Makerere.

This process of sending people, on contract and as volunteers, from the OECD countries (including importantly Japan) has continued, but there is now a major distinction. On the one hand, there are still many relatively young people going out through volunteer agencies, but they tend to go to poorer, often community and self-help schools, as far as the education sector is concerned. In such schools they may often have the best skills and qualifications compared to other staff. On the other hand, there are still substantial numbers of somewhat more experienced people going out as advisers, consultants and programme officers attached to agency projects and programmes. They will normally be on fundamentally different terms of service to those with whom they are working. The older concept of working on a regular, collegial basis in the schools and universities of Africa has vanished with the exception of a handful of people for whom salary is not a concern.

The significance of this episode for those who participated in it was that working in a so-called developing country institution was an experience of collegiality on regular terms, not some special aid partnership or African capacity building exercise. By contrast, working in the 1990s – or doubtless the early 2000s - in NGO projects or as a consultant or programme officer in bilateral or multilateral aid projects can frequently be an experience of an unequal and asymmetrical relationship, and often because the financial power is so obviously on one side.

There is an interesting set of questions to be raised about the longer term cognitive and attitudinal consequences of this kind of collegial experience of development-through-working. But for the moment we shall look at just one – the desire to study and understand in greater depth the countries or regions in which teachers or volunteers had worked.[103]

---

[103] By the late 1970s and early 1980s, as we have implied, the parallel movement of young people to study in Northern universities and colleges had been decimated by the devaluation of the currencies of much of the developing world. For many countries, this meant that study in the North became aid-dependent.

Learning about development through research

One of the options after working as a teacher in the developing world during the 1960s was to return to do further study at masters or doctoral level in the recently established centres of area and development studies that were set up during the same period in several, but by no means all, OECD countries.[104] These centres in conjunction with key disciplinary departments in the new African universities and in Europe and North America assisted in the dramatic expansion of studies in African history, politics, geography, education, economics and anthropology, law, literature etc. Some of the research broke new ground methodologically, and its outcomes rapidly made possible new courses across the African universities.

Coincidentally in terms of the theme of this book, *Learning in development aid*, my own doctorate was on an aspect of the same topic – aid. Though it concerned the 1920s and 1930s before bilateral or multilateral development assistance agencies *per se* had been established, its central focus was on the attempt to produce a consensus about education priorities through the visits and publications of the first two "international" education commissions to report on the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. These education commissions were supported by a foundation in the USA – the Phelps-Stokes Fund – and missionary bodies, but their work was enormously influential at the time with colonial officials and the missionary leadership. The core message was that Africa should learn from the politically conservative tradition of Booker T. Washington and adopt the educational and political values appropriate to people living predominantly in rural societies, under white rule. The recommendations about adapting education to slowly changing traditional societies and their local cultures were seen by critics to be inherently opposed to the expansion of secondary and higher education, and to be in danger of encouraging an education that sounded pedagogically progressive but was potentially politically inappropriate for an almost completely colonised continent.[105]

---

[104] The Development and Area Studies constituencies vary enormously across OECD countries. A useful analysis of UK can be found in Grindle and Hilderbrand, 1999. In Japan, Development Studies was set up very much later. In the author's case it was the establishment of the Centre of African Studies in Edinburgh in 1963 that led to selecting that university for doctoral studies.

[105] At the time the most vocal critics were W.E.B. Dubois in USA, A. Victor Murray and Norman Leys in UK, and in the 1960s, Philip Foster in his classic book, *Education and social change in Ghana*. The author's own book, *PanAfricanism and education* is a detailed account of this early venture in international educational policy transfer.

The proposition that sub-Saharan Africa should learn from the American South, and its predominant pattern of race relations, may seem bizarre nowadays but at the time these seemingly "international" recommendations about an "appropriate education" for black people world-wide were highly influential. As far as the implications for the recent development decades and the potential for the analysis of policy consensus and transfer are concerned, these education policy papers (as we would call them now) illustrated the capacity of "international" missions to capture and dominate the discourse about education in sub-Saharan Africa, assisted by high visibility visits to Africa, and subsequent publication of the two policy papers, *Education in Africa* (1920) and *Education in East Africa* (1924). As a re-enforcement of learning about development, substantial numbers of white educational leaders working in Africa were brought to the United States, and exposed to "good practice" in black education in the Southern States.

Unlike education policy papers of almost 60 years later, such as the World Bank's *Education in sub-Saharan Africa* (1988), the earlier commissions were based on no less than six months each of field visits to schools, mission stations and colonial education departments. But in fact the central educational (and political) assumptions of the missions had been set before their departure from North America, and the detailed visits merely illustrated and justified these working assumptions. In other words, the apparently international authority of these education commissions to Africa overlaid the fact that what was on offer to Africa was a highly local political and educational compromise derived from the United States.

Essentially, this doctoral work, completed more than 30 years ago, and published under the title *PanAfricanism and education* (1971), was a detailed, critical account of the achievement of a policy consensus by the North about education in the South. It was the first of a series of researches by the author which were dedicated to the unravelling of policies developed primarily in the North but intended for the South. Dedicating a whole book to the analysis of an agency's policy development can have had little impact on the specific agency at this distance from the events; but this kind of detailed analysis of the sourcing and transfer of policy continues to be necessary, as we shall see later.

This small illustration of Northern "expertise" on the South in the field of education in the 1920s may stand for an enormous range of other Northern commentary that constructed Africa – it might be called Africanism, in parallel to Orientalism. But for many of the new (African and non-African) scholars in African studies in Africa, Europe and North

America in the 1960s and early 1970s, the rationale for much of their research and writing was to challenge the dominance of the Northern, colonial discourse about Africa, and to establish that both historically and currently Africans were actors and agents in their own right, not just passive recipients of histories fabricated elsewhere.

Consequently, as we have implied above, there was a flowering of African accounts of the colonial, pre-colonial, and new, post-colonial periods. The search for the African voice (in contrast to European accounts) meant that there was widespread use of oral tradition and interview to tease out local perceptions of schooling, culture, politics and society. By contrast with the new "development" literature which could sometimes imply that agency remained in the North, and that development was something which was prescribed for and done to poorer countries, the new Africanising disciplines emphasised African initiative. Exciting new "schools" of history were to be found in Dar es Salaam and in Ibadan, to mention just two examples, and the author was one of many who mapped and documented, through oral sources, a past that had hitherto been little visible, and for which there were few conventional written sources.[106] There was no doubt that the research priorities of the individual and the university departments were being driven by local and national requirements.

We have already made the point that in the 1960s the in-coming academics from Europe and North America were on something very close to ordinary local university salaries. It was also true, for a good deal of the new research that was carried out, that it was not necessarily externally funded; both local and expatriate staff applied for funding from their own universities. Though research budgets were very small, a good deal of the new research was carried on without external funding at all.[107]

The rise of learning in development cooperation

From the perspective of this book, it might be readily assumed that learning in development aid was a good thing. By contrast, we would wish to argue that there is a sense in which the rise in agency capacity to

---

[106] Capturing the oral history of the elderly who had played a key role in particular spheres was crucial. See Thuku, 1970, *The autobiography of Harry Thuku* (with the assistance of K King), and Makonnen & King, 1971.

[107] In the author's case, the research on Thuku, Makonnen and much else in Nairobi was either unfunded or assisted by very small grants from the Dean's Fund of the University of Nairobi.

analyse development priorities has made for a less symmetrical relationship between agency and national priorities, and between agency-supported expatriates or local researchers and those without access to agency funds. This would increasingly become evident in the late 1970s but, initially, in the 1960s agencies had very little in-house capacity to analyse development, as can be seen from their early reports and sector papers (King, 1991).

This was also evident in the field when I started carrying out my first research on the informal economy in Kenya in 1972. With the benefit of hindsight I now know that there was work being supported internationally by UNICEF on the new topic of "nonformal education" and, coincidentally, at the very time that I had started to work on the area of microenterprise, Kenya was also the site of the famous World Employment Mission (which was to internationalise the concept of "the informal sector), though I was not aware of the Kenya Mission in the summer of 1972. It is probably also significant that I started the work with a small travel grant from the University of Edinburgh, but later trips were supported by the then Ministry of Overseas Development. In other words, research that had started with university funding was later identified by a bilateral agency as being relevant to its development concerns.

Nevertheless by the time the work was completed in 1975 and published in 1977, as *The African Artisan,* there was still very little agency-supported research material in circulation in Kenya. Despite the value of the few agency products such as the report of the ILO Mission (1972), it was still possible to note the wide range of research associated with the professional university research conferences in East Africa, and especially in history and social science (King, 1977, p. 220). But within a few years this was to alter dramatically. With the reduction of agency support to higher education – and its redirection to basic needs – along with the reduction in the real value of university salaries, local research was gravely affected, and increasingly resort was made to agency consultancy funds as university research moneys disappeared. The consequences of the rise in contract and consultancy research were already clear to students of higher education – such as David Court – in the very early 1980s.

Effectively, development agencies had very rapidly increased their knowledge and information requirements between the late 60s/early 70s and ten years later. A key period for the education sector in the World Bank, for example, was the late 1970s, when an External Advisory Panel

advised the Bank to substantially gear up its own in-house education research capacity, which up to that point had been minimal. But more generally this capacity building within the agency world had a series of knock-on effects at the country level. In a weak, and relatively new education research environment like Kenya, what Court termed "the domination of external demand" had the effect of making the local research community the recipient of a series of international fashions or emphases which have shaped education aid. This changing external demand in a weak local institutional setting can preempt research agendas and make the emergence of longer term basic research more problematic (Court, 1983, p. 181-184).

Put differently, this new preoccupation in the agency world with changing development priorities, and a multiplicity of feasibility, appraisal and evaluation studies to accompany them could be readily accommodated in strong Northern institutions, and did lead to longer term research accumulation.[108] But with the retreat of many agencies institutional support to higher education more generally in Africa in the 1970s (World Bank, 1991), the new consultancy culture could undermine the now weaker research mission and mandate of universities.

It is important not to overgeneralise about the character of this external agency demand and its potentially negative impact upon the steady accumulation of research knowledge in higher education. There were certainly a number of agency traditions that were much more directly concerned with the progressive building of capacity in the South, and were antagonistic to the short-termism of the consultancy culture. Amongst the most notable of these were the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, which from before the establishment of bilateral agencies, had been associated with long term institutional development in the South; and from the early 1970s there emerged the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada. What was revolutionary about the approach of the IDRC, was that it operated on the assumption "that the best people to decide what the developing countries really need are the people of those countries, and that research aimed at meeting those needs is best carried out by scientists of the developing world" (IDRC, 1981, p. 5). In order to illustrate the importance of what certainly looked like a

---

[108] For instance, Michigan State University became associated with USAID's support to non-formal education, as did the University of Massachusetts. In the author's own case, small scale research funds from the UK's bilateral aid agency allowed him to focus on education and the informal sector for several years in succession.

new direction in learning in development cooperation, we shall examine some dimensions of this new approach in the next section, drawing examples especially from the realm of education and human resources.

Agency learning-from-the-South

What was innovative about the IDRC was its faith in the capacity of developing countries to set their own research agenda, and to carry out that agenda without the direct collaboration of Northern researchers. This flew directly in the face of a great deal of agency practice which had come to rely on Northern institutions and on Northern expertise (linked to short term Southern consultancies) for a good deal of their projects and policy work. IDRC was unique at the time by identifying research knowledge as the key deficit in the South, and in assuming that South-South networking was arguably as important as South-North. Almost three decades before "Knowledge for Development" became commonplace as the title of the World Development Report, IDRC, followed by Sweden's Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC), underlined the central role that research knowledge, generated in Southern institutes and universities, must play in development.

In the education field, IDRC became known for supporting independent research centres in countries such as Chile and Argentina during the dark days of dictatorship, but also for being responsive to the needs of younger researchers in many African countries wanting to pursue their own work at a time when local university funding had dried up.

One of the more ambitious initiatives of the IDRC was to set up an international advisory group in the area of education – the Research Review and Advisory Group (RRAG). Established in 1977, at the very time that the World Bank and other agencies were emphasising the importance of building *agency* research capacity, it could well have become a policy think tank synthesising available research lessons relating to the developing world in education (as the Bank began to do very effectively). Instead, it reflected faithfully on the diversity of education research environments in the developing world – from Uganda to Thailand, and from Chile to Mali – in ways that underlined the importance of being responsive to country-specific strategies for capacity building (Shaeffer and Nkinyangi, 1983; Myers, 1981). The logic of the IDRC vision of local responsiveness led to the replacement by regional advisory groups of the single international group, with the

result that there are still today regional policy research networks in East and West Africa (ERNESA and ERNWACA), as well as in the North (NORRAG).

The experience of observing the process of learning-in-agencies, from within, is instructive.[109] At least within the IDRC – and from all accounts in other agencies – there was a great deal of time consumed in the discussion of strategies, modalities and mechanisms. Some of this is the inevitable result of organisations that have headquarters (usually in national capitals in the North), but also have decentralised offices, and in turn maintain a vision of responding to the specificity of conditions in many different countries and institutions, from government research centres to private and university centres. In some agencies, something of this intense institutional learning may become visible through sector policy papers, or sub-sector policies in respect of higher education, vocational or basic education, or in regional policies for Africa, South Asia or Latin America. But agency staff will testify to the fact that such products are just the tip of the iceberg of discussion and debate about policy in the agencies. Most of this never sees the light of day, but is contained in trip reports, memos and meeting reports. This institutional learning and institutional memory are, arguably, much more complex than official agency policy, and probably impossible to synthesise in the manner of policy papers.[110]

In the case of the IDRC, there was no education policy paper produced during its first decade. This was almost certainly due to the IDRC ambition of seeking to be responsive to the research priorities of developing countries. But this meant that in several programmes IDRC did not have the sort of policy papers produced over two decades which in other agencies such as the World Bank or the British aid agency ODA/DFID have been seen (and analysed) as evidence of learning and change within the organisation.

---

[109] The author was in charge of the IDRC's Education Research Programme from 1978 to 1981, and was, along with two other contributors to this volume (Jacques Hallak & Ernesto Schiefelbein), one of the original members of the Research Review and Advisory Group from 1977.

[110] Recognition of the importance of institutional memory within agencies can be seen in the decision by the World Bank to explore ways of capturing the rich texture of individual learning, as just one aspect of its current interest in knowledge policies.

Synthesising academic and policy learning

In the last, almost, two decades the challenge to Northern academics working on the field of international education and training has been to marry the increasing demands of their universities (especially in the UK) for highly rated research products with the obvious opportunities for field experience and exposure which tend to be via short term consultancies (Buchert and King, 1996). In my own case, unlike that of many academics in the developing world discussed earlier, I have principally secured access to research rather than consultancy funds to work in Africa, which has meant that it has been possible to maintain a long term commitment to analysis of the informal economy in Kenya, despite the interlude in the IDRC. The successful completion of a 20 year tracer study of artisans in Kenya who had first been interviewed in the early 1970s could however – in the context of this present book on learning in development aid – raise an interesting question about what the agency itself has learnt about the microenterprise sector over the period of 20 years (since both research projects were supported by the Economic and Social Research department of UK's bilateral aid agency). What was even more intriguing however was that compared with the early 1970s there was a quite overwhelming amount of material (evaluation, consultancy and policy work) generated by the donor agencies working in Kenya on various dimensions of the microenterprise sector. It was one of the starkest contrasts with the earlier period (King, 1996). It was therefore possible to examine in detail the construction of Kenyan policy towards the informal sector over the period of two decades, but it was legitimate to conclude that Kenya's policy was as much a site of donor policy learning as Kenyan.

On the other hand, one of the direct results of having been a short term actor in the development assistance community was that it provided an opportunity for continuing analysis of the agency world itself, and especially the role of research and knowledge generation in the education sector. It was possible here too to examine the way that agencies had learnt about different sub-sectors of education over a twenty year period (*Aid and education in the developing world,* King, 1991). Again it needs to be re-emphasised that unlike many academics in sub-Saharan Africa whose institutional settings may be so fragile that there is no space to convert research tasks for agencies into academic books, it is still possible to do this in Northern universities. Indeed it is imperative to try and do so in the UK because of the Research Assessment Exercise which rates all universities by measures of research productivity.

But one of the most important, long-standing learning influences of being in the agency world, and more specifically in the IDRC with its linkages to the Research Review and Advisory Group (RRAG), was that the core RRAG idea of synthesising research knowledge for policy, and policy knowledge for research became a personal commitment and a regular activity. Commencing in 1985, with the support of Swedish SIDA's Education Division, and continuing to the present, the attempt has been made, through an unusual aid policy bulletin, *NORRAG NEWS,* consistently to translate into an accessible but critical format the lessons of agency policy for the benefit of researchers and policy people in the South as well as in the North.[111]

In one way *NORRAG NEWS* (NN) acts as a commentary on agency learning, but because many of the network members are actually in agencies, it may even act as a source of agency learning. Each issue is organised around a current theme of significance, and in some cases the theme is of sufficient importance that it merits a meeting as well as a subsequent book.[112] The focus of the bulletin is on education and human resources, but because agency learning and change tend to be cross-sectoral, it is possible that the trends analysed in NN are agency-wide.

The commitment to knowledge sharing and networking through a mechanism like *NORRAG NEWS* is at odds with the academic priority placed on knowledge generation. Its informal character and its attempt to maintain a dialogue or a conversation amongst the membership are at odds with the pressures on academics to publish in peer-reviewed journals. Again, it should be noted that knowledge sharing and dissemination are not straightforwardly cognitive activities, but they in part derive from the very values of commitment, solidarity and partnership which we identified as the origins of concern with development in the first place.

Agencies as learning organisations: knowledge monopolies or knowledge collectives?

Through this short piece we have questioned whether the rise in the importance of agency learning – not just in the Bank but in the bilaterals

---

[111] Since 1998, NORRAG NEWS has been supported by the Department for International Development (UK). The Secretariat of NORRAG has been supported by Swiss Development Cooperation since 1991.

[112] NORRAG published a whole book on the World Bank's higher education policy paper (1995).

– has altered the terms of trade between donors and recipients. The determination with which agencies have built their own in-house analytic capacity, and have developed policy papers, and target strategies to guide their work, has meant that agencies have never been more confident about what they know about the education requirements of poor countries. Arguably, this has made for greater asymmetry between North and South, and this has taken place, paradoxically, at the very time that the agency discourse about genuine partnership and national ownership of policy has been more marked than ever before.

The architecture of development assistance keeps changing rapidly as, for example, sector wide approaches became fashionable,[113] and then the comprehensive development framework emerged from the World Bank. Quite rapidly, also, at the very end of the 1990s, agencies began to take an interest in knowledge policies. Again, the World Bank took a lead in this with its notion of becoming a Knowledge Bank.

But there are two possibly contradictory policies at the centre of this knowledge preoccupation in the agencies. On the one hand, there is the view that the Bank and other agencies are the central deposits of an enormous quantity of knowledge-about-development, and that this software or knowledge deposit could become as important an element of development aid as grants and loans for physical and human capital have been before. With the Bank's capacity to access and integrate knowledge for development world-wide, it could project itself as one of the key global portals to development knowledge. The power of information technology to assist this process of synthesis and dissemination could then mean that the Bank's "lessons of best practice" were no longer dependent on its operational work or on its policy papers, but could be globally available at the touch of a button. This vision of the Bank's role in global knowledge about development naturally raises concerns.

But there is another side to the architecture of knowledge development in the Bank and in several bilaterals. This involves the view that the Bank cannot possibly aspire to a monopoly of knowledge, and that there must be knowledge sharing with non-Bank sources of knowledge both in the North and the South. A new discourse has begun to emerge that talks of "communities of practice" straddling the Bank and other centres of expertise. And there seems to be a more pluralist conception of knowledge appearing. Combined with the emphasis on synthesising and

---

[113] The December 1999 issue of *NORRAG NEWS* 25 is concerned with sector wide approaches.

sharing rather than managing knowledge, this suggests an institution that is rethinking its role and authority as a direct result of privileging knowledge in its present work.

It is far too early to say, either in the Bank or in other agencies, whether the knowledge revolution will have the effect of further centralising the authority of the agency world, or whether it could lead to the awareness that many other partners, North and South, will be needed than the traditional NGOs and the development agencies. Could knowledge be linked to the very suggestive concept of "alliance-forging" cooperation which the Swedish *Partnership with Africa* report highlighted, and which pointed to the potential of all kinds of relatively symmetrical North-South alliances between civil society, local government bodies and professional bodies (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1997)? If so, it would have much in common with that ordinary working experience in the South which we described at the beginning and which committed so many Northerners to a lifetime of work in development.

What is clear, after 40 years of increasingly "professional" development cooperation by development agencies, and after the massive rise in analytic capacity that we have alluded to, is that many will agree with the President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, when he says, in the very last month of this century, that "Development aid needs fixing" (Wolfensohn, 1999). The admission that development has failed, by the criterion of alleviating poverty, is very humbling. Equally however if the world were to agree with his statement that "Brick by brick, we must build a new development architecture to address the silent crisis of global poverty", then a first lesson for the 21st century, derived from the last four decades, would be that the new designs for development should not emerge, Minerva-like, from the North.

References

Buchert, L. and K. King, 1995, *Learning from experience: policy and practice in aid to higher education*. The Hague: CESO/NORRAG.

Buchert, L. and K. King, (eds.), 1996, *Consultancy and research in international education: the new dynamics*. Bonn: DSE.

Court, D., "Educational research environment in Kenya", in Shaeffer, S and J. Nkinyangi, (eds.), 1983, *Educational research environments in the developing world*. Ottawa: IDRC.

Foster P., 1965, *Education and social change in Ghana*. London: Routledge.

Grindle, M. S. and M. Hilderbrand, 1999, *The development studies sector in the UK: challenges for the new millennium*, Report for DFID. Harvard: Harvard Institute for International Development.

IDRC, 1981, *Searching: review of IDRC activities 1980 and a look back at IDRC's first decade*. Ottawa: IDRC.

Jones, T. J., 1920, *Education in Africa.* New York: Phelps-Stokes Fund.

Jones, T. J., 1924, *Education in East Africa.* New York: Phelps-Stokes Fund.

King, K., 1971, *PanAfricanism and Education*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

King, K., 1977, *The African Artisan.* London: Heinemann Education.

King, K., 1990, "The new politics of international collaboration in educational development: Northern and Southern research in education", *International Journal of Educational Development* vol. 10, no 1, pp. 47-57.

King, K., 1991, *Aid and education in the developing world.* Harlow: Longman.

King, K., 1996, *Jua Kali Kenya: change and development in an informal economy 1970-1995* . Oxford: James Currey.

Makonnen, T. R. and K. King, 1971, *PanAfricanism from within.* Nairobi: Oxford University Press.

Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1997, *Partnership with Africa: proposals for a new Swedish policy towards sub-Saharan Africa*. Stockholm: Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Myers, R., 1981, *Connecting worlds: a survey of developments in educational research.* Ottawa: IDRC.

NORRAG, 1995, *Learning from experience: policy and practice in aid to higher education,* The Hague: CESO/NORRAG.

NORRAG NEWS, The bulletin of the Northern Policy Research Review and Advisory Network on Education and Training, from 1985 to present, Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh.

NORRAG NEWS, "Swapping Partners: the new politics of partnership and sector-wide approaches", (25), December 1999.

Shaeffer, S. and J. Nkinyangi, 1983, *Educational research environments in the developing world*. Ottawa: IDRC.

Short, C., 1997, "Foreword" in *Eliminating world poverty: a challenge for the 21st century*. White paper series: Cm; 3789. London: DFID.

Thuku, H., 1970, *The autobiography of Harry Thuku.* Nairobi: Oxford University Press.

Wolfensohn, J., 8 December 1999, "Development aid needs fixing", *International Herald Tribune*.

Learning in Development Co-operation – the Case of Finland

Kirsti Lintonen

Global changes

The world has changed dramatically since the Second World War and especially so during the last decade, after the end of the cold war. Conflicts and wars have changed their nature, international trade and communications carry out their functions irrespective of national borders, the focal areas of commerce and politics have shifted. The end of the cold war marked the bankruptcy of the one party system of the centrally planned economy.

This has led to an unprecedented growth of international trade and an increase in investments. The spread of technological innovations and the interaction between cultures from different countries and continents have generated possibilities for ever increasing and broadening prosperity. The bi-polar world is followed by an era of globalization and a more transparent dialogue of cultures.

These changes had profound implications for the developing countries themselves and for the co-operation patterns that have governed the relations of industrialized countries towards the third world. New approaches had to emerge to tackle the challenges of globalization. Globalization in this context means first and foremost assisting and preparing developing countries to be able to become more active participants in world politics and trade.

Changes have also occurred in the character of violent conflicts. Wars between countries have given way to internal and regional conflicts, especially in developing countries with the victims, even targets, being increasingly the non-combatant civilian population. Although often disguised as ethnic differences with justifications being sought from religious or cultural aspects it remains clear, that the root cause of these crises is poverty, lack of economic development and inequality.

Recession and reduction of foreign aid

Radical changes in major Finnish export markets and a serious domestic banking crisis in the early years of the 1990's led in Finland to the most severe economic recession of the post-war era. The rapid economic decline and sharp rise in unemployment figures led to a rise in social expenditures and unfortunately a subsequent dramatic curtailment of the Finnish ODA. Budget allocations to development co-operation were cut in half. *The execution of these budget cuts became a learning process in itself.* From the start it was clear that we did not want to break promises made to our partners. Each project went through a thorough examination and evaluation on the possibilities to accommodate them in a tighter budget frame. Simultaneously a dialogue with our partners was established on the measures to be taken. This resulted in most projects having their implementation time extended rather than being curtailed. It was thus possible to execute projects, albeit at a slower pace, while at the same time providing for the necessary savings of government expenditure.

This process, and particularly the attention given to the time factor, generated even more lessons as the slower rate of implementation led to more sustainable results as a consequence of easing the time pressure. With the extension of the time frame it was learned that a scaled-down administration and implementation on our side demanded a more balanced distribution of responsibility between partners. The results of the increased local responsibility were that partnership between Finland and partner countries deepened and local ownership and commitment could be rooted more firmly. The country's own strategies became priorities. Of importance was also the conscious enlargement of development co-operation dialogue towards more political contents while trying to combine different aid instruments (grants, loans, multilateral aid) for a more coherent approach. Indeed, it turned out that the budget constraints with subsequent decrease in quantity thus led to an increase in quality. This process also strengthened the practical aspect that development co-operation could not be executed without paying due attention to other societal sectors: political, social and economic conditions came to be acknowledged much more than before as important elements of project consideration. This means that the notion of technical project performance lost the prominent position it had held previously during the period of rapidly increasing development co-operation budgets. A result oriented process became dominant instead of the previous project oriented one.

New policies

After some financially extremely tight years, economic conditions started to develop rather favourably. Finnish membership of the European Union after 1995, radical and efficient restructuring programmes of the Finnish economy and a tight fiscal policy led to a remarkable economic recovery in Finland in the latter half of the 1990's. The better financial situation allowed more attention to be given again to development issues and towards developing countries.

With lessons learned from the financially forced adjustments to our development co-operation programmes and subsequent rethinking of aid theory and methods, it was recognized *that development policies could not be implemented in isolation separated from global realities or from political and economic aspects.* This meant that Finland had to become increasingly outward looking and cooperate with other countries, enterprises and non-governmental organizations.

Subsequently, the cabinet stated in December 1996 in its decision-in-principle on development co-operation that development co-operation plays an important role in Finnish foreign policy. This decision was especially important in so far that it stipulated that development co-operation constitutes an integral component of national foreign policy. Accordingly, development co-operation is seen in the policy paper as a development policy instrument which improves human security, reduces poverty and promotes sustainable economic, social and ecological development and democracy, good governance, human rights and equality. Development co-operation also has an important role to play in supporting the integration of developing countries into the global economy. Besides formulating future guidelines of Finnish foreign aid, the strategy also states the government's intention that aid should start increasing immediately.

Simultaneously, the change in the international security environment meant that *Finland defined its security policy as being based on a broad, comprehensive concept of security and increasing international in-depth co-operation.*

The concept of broad security includes not only issues of military security but also other factors influencing global human security. Security goals related to arms control and disarmament are now accompanied by peace- building and the development of human and ecological security. Peace-building supports democratic political and socio-economic institutions and cultural structures that create a foundation for human security and respect for human rights.

European policies

Besides the profound changes in the international scene, Finland's membership in the European Union has led to Finland being more strongly involved in global questions. It has also brought a whole new set of countries in to the scope of Finnish foreign policy and has diversified both the opportunities and obligations to participate in development policy formulation on theoretical and practical levels. Issues and geographical areas that have previously not been in the focus of Finnish deliberations have become vital parts of our foreign policy.

The objectives of Finnish development policy are aligned with EU's common foreign and security policy and development policy entered in the Union's founding treaties. As a member state, Finland is committed to align its policy with decisions made on the EU level. Member states are also required to coordinate their activities in international organizations and conferences.

The framework of Finnish aid had thus to experience major changes. In order to be able to respond to the new challenges brought about especially by membership of the EU and changing international political and economic climate, structural changes to foreign policy formulation and administration became necessary. With foreign aid being an integral part of this, development co-operation administration had to undergo changes as well.

The well-established Nordic co-operation, which has been extended to development co-operation since the 1960's, was a model of integrative and coordinating development policies long before the Finnish membership of the EU. *The Nordic approach has been, and still is, influencing the Finnish view on development co-operation in the European Union. It seems that this kind of co-operation is now gaining ground in the Union as well.* The Finnish presidency of the EU in the latter half of 1999 stressed the coherence of environment and development.

The new climate demands a reorganization

The Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which is also in charge of the Finnish ODA, was reorganized in the summer and early autumn of 1998. In a departure from a sectoral division of bilateral foreign relations, the Ministry re-arranged these into geographical divisions, thus integrating political, economic and development co-operation issues in regional units.

The reorganization of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs aims to achieve greater coherence between the various sectors of foreign relations. Project planning and administration are dealt with in regional divisions and units. Policy formulation, financial decision-making and multilateral issues remain with the sectoral divisions. The portfolios of the three Ministers at the Ministry, namely the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister for Foreign Trade and the Minister for Development Co-operation, also remained unaltered with a fourth, the Minister for Nordic Co-operation, having been added with the inauguration of a new cabinet following parliamentary elections in March 1999.

One of the key elements in the organizational changes in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs is that making development co-operation an integral part of Finland's foreign policy puts the Ministry in a position to focus its assistance to partner countries in a more coherent way than previously, taking into account the overall political, economic, social and environmental conditions, which might affect the efficiency and sustainability of ODA financed projects.

The integrated administration also provides for the more comprehensive concept of aid, especially with respect to democratic and environmental as well as human rights issues. It has also facilitated the broadening of professional staff. Compared to the previously limited number of professional ODA-trained personnel, the situation has markedly improved. The allocation of experienced ODA-professionals to regional units on the one hand and the training of diplomatic staff and their integration into ODA-duties too, provides a broad-based range of human and institutional expertise in that field.

Investment in training and education is considered crucial. Emphasis is placed on training diplomatic staff in project management and "traditional" ODA-staff in substantial issues in the traditional field of foreign policy. Sectoral specialists have been recruited to provide technical expertise.

Coherent policies

All of these external changes and their internal responses have given us a better and more cohesive understanding of the vast field of development co-operation. The aid-fixed scope of the early years of development co-operation has given way to a more unified foreign policy approach. We came to realize, that policies and measures previously regarded as

political, defence, economic or cultural issues are in fact at the very root of development questions. The lateral coverage of development co-operation had to be redefined in a new, much wider sense.

These lessons came to be reflected in the government's 1998 statement on Finland's policy on relations with developing countries. Finland's goal is to support political and economic reform and manageable change in developing countries, and thereby create conditions for peaceful, sustainable development and well-being. The Finnish policy seeks to advance a controlled, non-violent transition to democracy and responsible market economy. Well-functioning democratic processes and equally distributed economic and social welfare serve to prevent crises in advance and to handle them politically. At the same time they prevent uncontrolled migration and refugee problems.

Other global pressures threatening Europe include climate change, criminality, the spread of drug abuse and epidemics and religious fundamentalism. A preventive influence on these threats can be exercised by supporting developing countries to implement the global agenda and by helping them tackle the underlying reasons for their problems. Development co-operation is seen as a means to an economic, social and institutional foundation for international peace and human and ecological security. It provides long-term support for the capacity of societies to deal with conflicts peacefully and exercises a favourable influence on conflict resolution.

These viewpoints are the rationale behind the concept of broad security described earlier. Conflict prevention thus includes a variety of measures and cannot be identified or described as a separate policy or an implementation thereof. The emphasis in conflict prevention has very much shifted from weapons of mass destruction towards conventional arms, including small arms and from global war scenarios to intra-state and regional conflicts. These destroy development potential and impede the prospects for future sustainable development. For this reason the Finnish government and the European Union consider conflict prevention and peace-building the cornerstones of today's development co-operation. Long-term development efforts for creating an economic and social basis and institutional capacity for peace and human security need to be emphasized. Capacity building is one of the most crucial aspects in this context. Conflict prevention is closely linked to questions of human rights, democracy and gender equality. Recent events, even in Europe, have highlighted the importance of conflict prevention. Conflict

prevention in its most basic form influences the way of thinking towards more openness, tolerance and a sound ethical morale. This is well reflected in case of the Berlin wall: although it already came down ten years ago, a mental wall still continues to exist between east and west.

The importance of trade policies in this respect, previously underestimated, has become acknowledged. Ethical trade principles are increasingly enforced by the private sector, and they are among the most powerful tools to combat corruption. The role of the WTO with regard to trade practices, rules and access questions is of crucial importance for the developing countries. It is obvious that bilateral and multilateral co-operation as well as the breakthrough during the Finnish presidency of the EU on a successor to the Lomé convention are aimed primarily at capacity building to prevent a marginalization of developing countries or part of their population. Besides the facilitation of trade regimes a new, integrative vision was seen by the ACP countries.

Traditional long-term partnership with a relatively small number of selected primary recipient countries continues to attract the main emphasis of Finland's bilateral development co-operation. Complementary to this is the concept of flexibility, adopted as a result of the rethinking of general development policies outlined earlier. The flexibility concept, included in the decision-in-principle, has the potential to extend the geographical range and strengthen the overall effectiveness of aid through greater policy coherence. Examples of activities that come under the concept of flexibility are co-operation for a limited period with some countries, trilateral co-operation, thematic multi-bi-co-operation with certain UN agencies, funds for democracy and human rights managed by the Finnish embassies as well as foundations established by Finnish NGOs in the fields of human rights, environment and assistance to the disabled. While providing for opportunities to assist in achieving short-term goals with this approach, the concept of flexibility does not change Finland's principles of commitment to long-term partnership and programmes, but is complementary to them.

The forms of co-operation and measures to be adopted vary from one developing country to another. With the more advanced developing countries the importance of commercial and economic co-operation becomes more pronounced. The Finnish policy includes an ethical point of view: Finland prioritises co-operation with the least developed states and the poorest population groups in developing countries in order to prevent their exclusion from the world economy in the current process

of globalization. The LLDCs in particular need support to help them benefit from the global rise in living standards as well as economic and social progress.

Finland has also come to emphasize the cultural dimension, which was only of marginal importance in the pre-1990's programmes. Cultural understanding should now form the foundation for all relationships. It was realized that without cultural understanding the promotion of political relations and social and democratic development is difficult and may even prove counterproductive. Ethnicity is an essential component in the cultural traditions of many countries. The acceptance and consolidation of a multicultural national identity helps developing countries to shape the rapid pace of economic and social change to their own advantage. Culture and traditions are crucial to the eradication of ignorance, intolerance and prejudice. Long traditions or cultural strength can, however, not justify the human rights violations which we have been forced to witness lately in Kosovo, Afghanistan and East Timor. Ethnic identification is a normal reaction to the pressures of globalization but it cannot be the justification for homogenization. We have learned from these tragic events that the state needs to be a society whose foundations are made up of the common values of all its ethnic groups.

Formulating these new aid guidelines at cabinet level as well as their adoption at administrative level and practical implementation through reorganization have come through experience and a long learning process. The central lesson which has evolved through these years is that there are no separate entities in either foreign policy or in development co-operation. All different segments are closely interlinked and addressed with a coherent, coordinated policy. For development co-operation specifically, coherence at practical level means keeping qualitative standards high, constant evaluation and extensive use of sectoral specialists at all levels in a geographically based administration.

New approaches in field work

In field work these principles and aspects are implemented at all stages of development co-operation. Certain entities such as respect for human rights, good governance and gender equality are mainstreamed throughout the whole process. This does not mean however, that they would not be touched upon as separate issues as well.

One aspect which has had a more profound impact than many others

on practical considerations in development co-operation is the question of ownership. Experience has shown that the recipient country's own responsibility for the nation's development must be stressed as being of primary importance. External assistance can never replace the recipient countries' own efforts and own responsibility. But strengthening local ownership provides for deeper responsibility and is thus conducive to more sustainable development. It has to be noted that the recipient countries' responsibility depends on their governments' and administrations' adoption of values, morale and ethics. Good governance, transparency, accountability and sound ethical and moral principles are the manifestation of political will for sustainable development and the successful management of globalization.

We have learned through experience that the most effective means are the control exercised by the civil society, the rule of law and respect for human rights. NGO's have proven to be particularly valuable in supporting the culture of democracy. Democracy, political rights and a free press are prerequisites of political accountability. The rule of law and good governance lead to judicial accountability. Accountability as such forms the basis of good governance, which is conducive to investments and development. The demand for the respect for the rule of law also implies the notion of the necessity of providing universal human laws. This means that inhumane laws need to be changed. The work done by the NGO's is in many instances complementary to official ODA efforts since it has the potential to be active in sectors or areas where governmental involvement is difficult.

Ethical issues have thus come to the forefront. But these can only be effective if ethical codes of conduct are applied by private enterprises as well. The use of positive conditionality, where adherence to universal principles and commitments to ownership generate external assistance, is a measure to be used.

The financial crisis in south-east Asia has taught precisely the validity of these principles. The crisis was not all about currency fluctuations or capital drain. The real reasons lie deeper: in the underdevelopment of societal structures, the lack of social security nets, the disregard for the civic society and a deficiency in democracy. *This means that in the long term help cannot be expected solely through financial recovery, but through simultaneous development of the different structures of society and through democratization.*

Finland's own legacy

The relations between Finland and her partner countries have evolved from a donor-recipient relationship to one of partnership. As a small country without her own significant economic interests in the southern sphere Finland has embarked on the road of development co-operation from the basis of solidarity. Questions of poverty, marginalization and underdevelopment have very recently become characteristic of Finland. The nation gaining independence, fighting wars and losing importance as a mainly primary goods producing country, namely forestry products, is still alive in the collective memory of Finland. Social and educational investments, the diversification of the economy and gradual development from a rural society to an industrialized nation are such recent experiences in Finland that contemporary development co-operation issues are being handled in an unselfish manner. Having been only a few decades ago a recipient of external aid, it has been natural for Finland to place herself mentally in the position of her partner countries.

Summary

Finland has gone through a major learning process in her relations with the developing countries in the 1990´s. It started with the end of the cold war and the intensification of global changes especially in the field of trade, investment and information technology. At the same time Finland was hit by the worst economic recession of her post-war history and this resulted in severe cuts in development spending. However, less money meant a comprehensive dialogue with the countries receiving our aid and the outcome was a true partnership and ownership; the dialogue covering a broader and more political agenda and the development issues becoming less technical and more result oriented in nature.

The experience gained in the early part of the 1990's together with economic recovery resulted in the Government's decision-in-principle on development co-operation and subsequently in the Statement on Finland's Policy on Relations with Developing Countries stating that Finland's goals are promotion of global security, reduction of widespread poverty, promotion of human rights and democracy, prevention of global environmental problems and promotion of economic dialogue. Formulating these new policy guidelines at cabinet level was also reflected in the administration when the Ministry for Foreign Affairs

was reorganized in 1998 from sectoral to geographical orientation thus integrating political, economic and development issues in regional entities in order to safeguard coherent policy making and implementation.

A global world means one world. The marginalization of developing countries, of whole nations or minority groups cannot be tolerated. Problems cannot be solved only by military means. We need long term commitment to develop a global economic, political and social culture that is conflict preventive through addressing the root causes of today's conflicts: poverty, inequality, lack of democracy, disrespect for human rights and the degradation of the environment. We need capacity building for the integration of the developing countries in the global economy. This means that our lesson is a broad based coherent foreign policy. The ultimate goal in development co-operation must be human security. Development co-operation needs to be a process that has tangible results for the ordinary people and an impact on the lives of future generations.

Development Co-operation and the Process of Learning

Narciso Matos

Introduction

Dramatic changes have taken place in the last decades of the 20th century such as the end of the cold war and of the bipolar world; the increasing power of telecommunications; the ease and speed of transportation; the recognition of and greater concern for global problems, and the need for concerted efforts to address them, and the evolution towards democracy in an increasing number of African countries. The relationship between African countries and the industrialized world has also been evolving from mistrust and confrontation towards healthier partnership and co-operation. The relations between the colonized and colonizers are being replaced by efforts to establish equitable relationships governed by mutual understanding and respect, and by a growing sense of interdependence and common destiny.

Aid, development co-operation and international partnerships are phenomena of this new age. The world, and certainly the developing world, is still plagued by serious problems. The success of humankind in creating a better world depends, in no small measure, on our ability to learn from, and improve upon, past experiences and relationships. It is therefore timely that this effort is now being made to synthesize the experiences gained in the process of development aid and co-operation.

The author departs from the standpoint that North-South relations are nowadays generally better than before, and that the lessons from the past are informing today's prevailing relationships. This paper attempts to reflect upon the experience gained from university relationships between African institutions and European partners.

Learning through Experience

The author's home institution, the University of Eduardo Mondlane, in Mozambique, has learned a great deal in the process of development co-operation. Some of the most relevant lessons learned are presented below.

Lesson 1. The role of strategic planning

It is important to develop a medium to long term *vision* and *development plan* for the institution. These instruments must be developed through an open, participatory, consultative and negotiated process which should include all relevant stakeholders within the institution, representatives of the government and civil society, as well as all major development co-operation agencies related to the institution. The process of planning is as important as the final product, particularly considering that a good plan needs periodic adjustments and updates, and its correct and creative implementation can only be assured if all stakeholders approve of, and identify themselves with, the plan.

> The University of Eduardo Mondlane (UEM) in Mozambique started a process of Strategic Planning in 1990. This came about in response to needs felt internally by the university management to update the mission and activities of the institution and adjust them to the needs of Mozambique, at a time when resources were very scarce. UEM was the only university in the country providing training and research in 22 licenciature programmes in 12 faculties (Annual Report, UEM, 1991-92), and Mozambique was facing a destabilizing war supported primarily by the apartheid regime in South Africa. The planning exercise was also stimulated by agencies such as Swedish SIDA/SAREC and the Dutch Ministry for Development Co-operation (DGIS), who suggested to the Rector of UEM that a development plan would help them and other partners understand the institutional objectives and plans and decide on the best support they could provide. By 1991 the first UEM Strategic Plan named Present and Perspectives had been prepared in a process involving the university community, representatives from government, particularly from ministries of education and finance, the private sector and international agencies. A process of institutional reform and of regular reporting through annual reports and annual consultative meetings accessible to all stakeholders was initiated, and UEM planning became a major instrument of information and coordination of assistance.

Lesson 2. Coordination with partners based on institutional plans and reporting mechanisms

Fundamental change in key policies of development co-operation agencies is difficult and takes very long periods of time to be effected. This is the case with the policy of most, if not all, influential development agencies in relation to higher education and research in Africa. For almost two decades the prevailing view and policy have been to underplay the importance of universities in the process of creating the human resources needed for sustained socio-economic development.

The interaction with a multitude of partners and funding agencies

puts severe burdens on the management structures of an institution. This burden results from multiple contacts with different, major and smaller development co-operation agencies, each with its mandate, areas of interest, preferred programmes and reporting cycles, which need to be understood and adhered to by the management of the institution. An institution can best interact with partners and reap more benefits if it uses its vision and development plan as a framework for bilateral and multilateral consultations and negotiations.

By 1992 the central administration of UEM interacted directly with about 31 international agencies, representatives of governments, and other partners (Annual Report, UEM, 1991-92). The requirements to meet these representatives, prepare and present activity and financial reports, entertain review and evaluation teams, put a heavy demand on administration. This is compounded by the diversity and multiplicity of formats of programme proposals, reports and financial statements, with each funding agency requesting a particular format and reporting schedule. With the inception of strategic planning, annual consultative meetings have been organized since 1991, and all major national and international partners have been invited to attend and presented with comprehensive reports of activities and financial statements duly audited by international firms. The consultative meetings are used as a framework for collective information to partners and attempts are made to develop the reports so that they have the quality and detail acceptable to as many agencies as possible. Success in streamlining reporting has been marginal, but coordinating donor support by the UEM as the beneficiary institution has been strengthened, and the institution itself became more knowledgeable of its priorities and best way to be accountable to partners and stakeholders.

Partners in development co-operation have their institutional mandates and areas of particular interest and intervention, and there is a limit to their capacity to respond positively and flexibly to the needs and expectations of recipients. Moreover, the capacity and degree of freedom of representatives of development agencies to understand and adapt to the expectations, possibilities or requirements of the other party depend upon their influence on policy and decision processes at home. Junior representatives tend to be less flexible and strictly confined to rules and regulations. They seem to have limited mandates and are often unable to engage in creative and conclusive dialogue.

These observations are exemplified by the little progress made to harmonize donor requirements, particularly concerning the format of applications for grants, the modalities for reporting, the financial statements and audits, despite all efforts to do so. Equally, only modest results have been obtained from the initiatives taken to encourage the development co-operation agencies to provide flexible and less earmarked

support, as well as from the requests made to donors to provide resources to be used to upgrade, maintain or develop physical facilities. Little progress has also resulted from the debate about the need and feasibility of providing monetary incentives to academic and other staff involved in projects.

> Financial difficulties are among the most serious limitations that affect the quality of education and research. Of particular concern to universities is the poor work environment, conditions of service and the inadequate remunerations and incentives for staff. Laboratories, libraries and other academic facilities are in dire need of repair, modernization and supplies, and salaries are not sufficient to make ends meet. When the salary of even a full professor falls below the minimum required for living, sometimes below the equivalent of $100 a month, academic staff and technicians, particularly in the areas most demanded by the market place, leave universities or become involved in private consultancies and other private activities, to the detriment of academic work. Consequently, many costly and well designed programmes do not yield the expected results. Often a very small, and indeed an insignificant fraction of the overall cost of a programme, could have a very significant impact and elevate the morale and commitment of staff, if used to establish a scheme to reward active participation and staff performance. Regrettably, hardly any agency is prepared to even consider these problems. Because the problem is complex, it has been for many decades considered untouchable.

Lesson 3. The influence of socio-political and economic situation on development co-operation

Development projects are very dependent upon the political situation and changes that occur in the developing countries, and these changes often determine the very success of the programmes. It is therefore imperative to undertake periodic, dispassionate and objective assessment of risks, to ensure that efforts and resources are not spent without well-founded expectations and that these resources will be protected from major policy shifts.

> The experience of Nigeria provides a vivid example. Until the demise of the military regime in Nigeria and the election of a democratic government sworn in, in May 1999, this giant of Africa was excluded from most international programmes. This was the case with a World Bank programme directed to Nigerian universities, as well as with academic programmes sponsored by the Commonwealth, of which Nigeria's membership was suspended. Several other educational programmes were put on hold until changes toward constitutional law and respect for human rights started to occur in that country.

The importance of understanding the cultural, political and social environ-ment can never be overemphasized. Representatives of development co-

operation agencies who spend sufficient time or live for a period in developing countries display greater ability to grasp the fundamental aspects of the situation, and the objective and subjective limits placed on their interventions. Thanks to their long interaction with citizens, local procedures and behaviours, they develop a realistic sense of the threats and opportunities facing their enterprise.

Changes in the developed countries also influence the agendas and focuses of development agencies, and the institutions at the receiving end need to be sensitive to such changes to be able to steer their expectations and programmes without losing sight of their visions and development goals. For example, the end of the cold war, the fall of the Berlin wall, and more recently, the crisis in the Balkans, illustrate this point, in that these developments shifted European attention and resources towards reconstruction and development in East Europe and the Balkans. As a result, fewer resources have been made available for programmes in Africa.

Lesson 4. International support and the image projected by the beneficiaries

Development co-operation needs to justify its moral and strategic reasons, and to market its results to parliaments, governments and the wide public in developed nations. Development co-operation needs to demonstrate that resources are put to good use and that they have positive impact on development. This is important for it to secure a place on the agendas and budgets of developed nations. The following delicate balance is worth noting here: it seems that development assistance should not proclaim too many positive results as the implication may be drawn that there is no need to continue assistance which should be diverted to countries or regions where the needs are greater. However, development assistance should not depict a desperate and hopeless situation either, as then the value and impact of assistance becomes questionable.

> Mozambique's per capita GDP of $63 in 1992 (Occasional Paper 118, IMF, January 1995) was the lowest in the world. Immediately after the end of the destabilization war in 1992 and the first multi-party and democratic elections in 1994, a period of national reconstruction and reconciliation was started. In brief, the situation was by all standards very bad. To reflect this situation, and it seems also to attract foreign aid, the government and partners outside, including NGOs, started to consistently present Mozambique as a country in need of assistance, as the poorest country in the world. This strategy helped to harness support, but a point was also reached when its effectiveness started to be questioned. Why was Mozambique still in such a desperate situation? Weren't there any "points of light", any positive developments? What had happened to the solidarity support provided to the country during the initial years of liberation and even during the war? Today, Mozambique together with half a dozen other African countries, is presented as the model for structural adjustment programmes and success stories. One may ask if the information pendulum has not swung all the way to the other extreme, ignoring serious and persistent problems, not least the widespread poverty facing the great majority of citizens, and the inequity in the distribution of wealth that is now being generated.

It is important to disseminate and market the positive experiences of development co-operation, as well as to assess programmes critically and correct errors. This strengthens the efforts and initiatives of the supporters and friends within the development co-operation agencies, and helps them demonstrate the legitimacy and justification of their actions before governments, parliaments and societies.

Lesson 5. The importance of integrating support into institutional development frameworks

Partnerships need to be embedded in proper institutional frameworks and the activities and programmes to be jointly undertaken must fit within the overall institutional plans. *Ad hoc* arrangements or very personalized relationships, as opposed to institutional agreements, lead to conflicts and management deadlocks, and do not ensure long term continuity. For this reason, partners in development co-operation need to take into consideration the institutional framework and make sure that they discuss problems openly, understand and to take into consideration the salient aspects of institutional development. This is valid even for limited interventions such as grants for research and training in selected disciplines.

Development co-operation agencies are indispensable interfaces between the people and institutions in developing and developed countries. Yet there are tensions associated with their activities. In some cases institutions engaged in development programmes become

competitors. Sometimes partner departments compete for the resources made available by donor agencies.

Images of research laboratories or offices furnished and equipped with modern and functional equipment amidst the decay and poverty of departments and faculties are all too familiar in African institutions. These islands of exception are often the creation of project-moneys. The staff in such units benefits from working facilities and conditions better than elsewhere in the institution. Naturally, tensions develop between the needs of the department or faculty – sometimes these are simply access to a photocopier or a fax-machine – and the protection of the project resources for what they were provided for. At the same time, costs such as electricity, telephone bills and salaries of project-staff are met by the overall institutional budget. There is also the legitimate expectation that upon termination of the grant, the faculty or university will sustain the activity. Thus, a project created to help, becomes a thorn in the side of the institutional leadership and donor agency, and a potential source of conflict. It reminds the players that whatever the value or place of an intervention, it needs to be satisfactorily placed in the institutional context.

Another source of tension results from an assessment of individual performance in academic settings which is based on criteria that exclude participation in development assistance. This does not encourage senior and qualified staff to devote time and experience to development co-operation. To counter this problem, rather than promoting institutional linkages between specialized departments, research groups or units, development agencies recruit staff specifically for development programmes. Considering that partnerships are intended to outlive individual players, which is only possible if institutions involve their permanent staff in the programmes, this expedient constitutes but a temporary, and hardly a good, solution.

Lesson 6. Small conflicts in an extensive and long partnership

Development co-operation agencies learn in the interaction with partners in sharing responsibilities and powers to decide and deal effectively with development problems. The case of the Netherlands, long-term support to UEM shows that even within a relationship characterised by trust, conflicts may occur. Conflict resolution forms an important source of learning.

The Netherlands' assistance to the University of Eduardo Mondlane, in Mozambique is one of the longest and most sustained efforts of its kind in Sub-Saharan Africa, comparable perhaps only to SAREC's support for research capacity building. Having started in 1978 it continues even today. By the mid-90's about 35 Dutch lecturers funded by the Netherlands were present at the same time at UEM, and they each stayed there continuously for two years or longer. At that time the university did not have sufficient qualified and core staff. Without the support, some degree courses and whole university units could not have continued their operation. To achieve such level of assistance in human resources, the Dutch NGO, NUFFIC and DGIS (the Department of Development Co-operation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands) had to rely on staff recruited from universities abroad to fill the needs of Mozambique, to complement the involvement of permanent staff from Dutch universities. In the Netherlands centres for development co-operation, departments of international relations and similar settings assumed the task of providing "back-stopping" to UEM by establishing links between departments at UEM and their equivalents in Dutch universities. This arrangement did provide relief but was also marred with problems such as limited interaction between Dutch and Mozambican peers and departments, difficulties in building long term continuity of programmes (institutional memory could hardly be created with staff recruited especially to go to Mozambique and who did not return to the Dutch counterpart universities).

Opportunities for Learning

The author considers he has learned from seminars and periodic meetings organized for interested audiences and policy makers, which provide opportunities to synthesize experiences and constitute important sources of inspiration. Selected examples of such events are the Conferences "Linkages Revisited" (The Hague, 1995), organized by NUFFIC, "Role of Universities in the Development of Africa", (Stockholm, 1996), organized by SIDA, "Moving from Rhetoric to Reality" (Ottawa, 1996), organized by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, "Towards a New Partnership for African Development" (Abidjan 1997), organized by the Nordic Africa Institute of Uppsala, "Images of Africa" (Stockholm 1997), organized by SIDA/SAREC and the Ministry of Education in Sweden, "Challenges and Perspectives of Universities in Africa" (Kampala, 1998), organized by German development agencies, "North-South Co-operation to Strengthen Universities in Africa" (Groningen 1998), organized by the Center for Development Studies at the University of Groningen.

Though many conferences and similar events are organized in Africa,

these are not primarily devoted to assessing the experiences gained in the process of development co-operation. Meetings and seminars with that purpose, which the author attended in Africa, were organized in partnership with or directly by development co-operation agencies. It seems that fewer opportunities for learning and synthesizing of experiences have been created in the South.

Another important source of learning which deserves mention is provided through direct interaction with representatives of other institutions, external evaluators and qualified personnel on topics which concern the management of institutions and programmes. Through their questions, personal analysis and assessment of progress and failures, external agents stimulate and prompt periodic examination of institutions and programmes. In this way partners invariably bring lessons to be learned, sometimes from similar activities with which they are or have been involved elsewhere. The case of gender awareness is a good illustration of how interaction among partners can bring about learning and change thinking and practices.

> The concept of gender equity in modern organized life, with the specific meaning of increasing the participation of women in education, government, parliament, and in the world of work, though not alien to African societies, was strongly reinforced and brought to the fore through interaction with, and even conditionalities posed by, agencies and partners from developed countries. At the level of African vice chancellors the story is told that when a representative of the Rockefeller Foundation presented a paper on gender in African universities at a continental conference of university leaders in 1993, comments such as "gender is not on our agenda" and giggles reflected the mood of the time. That was the first time that many university leaders were confronted with the theme at a public forum. Today, gender analysis of student enrolments and academic staff have become a common feature. In Mozambique, though emancipation of women was a cardinal policy of the liberation movement from the 60's and 70's – there were then all-women military units, schools and kindergartens run by the women's movement – gender studies and gender affirmative action are only now being considered as an explicit policy at UEM under a new Strategic Plan being prepared.

Creating a Learning Environment

Among the factors contributing to the creation of a learning environment, the following should be considered:

The existence of an atmosphere of confidence between the partners and a clear statement of purposes is important. This requires determined

efforts to build mutual confidence between the partners and that the ultimate objectives of one side are clearly stated and understood by the other side, and that these are not conflicting. Positive lessons can best be derived from an environment free of suspicion and mistrust.

The development of an institutional culture which welcomes assessment, learning, internal evaluation, and encourages a process of building upon past successes and learning from past errors is vital.

The commitment of staff to the implementation of agreed programmes and their continued presence in the institution for reasonable periods of time is an essential factor for learning to take place. High rotation of staff or if staff devote little or marginal attention and time to programmes limits the possibilities for learning. The brain drain affecting African universities is also a serious constraint to effective learning.

> Brain drain is a serious phenomenon as qualified staff leave Africa for North America and Europe, and nowadays also for Botswana, South Africa and the Middle East For example, according to recent information, of about 1,300 medical doctors turned out by the University of Ghana over the past 4 to 5 years, only about 400 remain in the country. Less recognized is the migration of staff from universities and research centres to the private sector. Paradoxically this is a particularly serious problem in countries were political stability and economic recovery have been set in train, and new national and foreign companies attract the best qualified and experienced people. At the same time, unattractive conditions of service discourage new generations of graduates to pursue academic careers, and the replacement of the first generation of academics and scientists does not take place as they retire or leave the institutions for other sectors, with an impact comparable to the external brain drain. In Mozambique qualified professionals are few and market demand for consultancy studies and full-time appointments are high and attractive, against which educational institutions and the government sector are unable to compete and retain their staff.

Financial resources are an important and often ignored condition for the creation of an environment and opportunities conducive to learning. For staff to be able to learn they need to have peace of mind and to be free from concerns such as obtaining extra income to make ends meet. When staff remuneration and benefits are grossly inadequate these concerns and the subsequent involvement in extra activities do not leave either the time for, or provide an incentive to, learning. Institutions also need resources to allow the participation of staff and programme managers at relevant seminars and conferences, as well as to organize events within the institution itself for staff to share experiences and learn from others.

Learning also requires an institution to be endowed with sufficient

and well-qualified staff, as learning does not occur effectively if staff is over-stretched. Very often, the more experienced and diligent members of staff get involved in more activities and work-fronts than a single person can possibly handle. When staff do not possess adequate academic and professional qualifications and managerial experience, there is a natural and healthy desire to enrol in post-graduate and professional training. While this is positive for the long-term institutional development – if the institution devises mechanisms to retain the staff it trains – this also reduces the time and attention devoted to development co-operation and the possibility for staff to learn from these activities.

Learning also requires that the experience acquired in the process of development co-operation is "work-shopped", written down, published in qualified journals and widely disseminated. The point has been made that there are not enough opportunities to organize meetings and engage in collective discussions in cash-strapped institutions, as is the case in most developing countries. Journals and opportunities to publish are very limited, which also limits the flow of information and experience.

Practical Applications of Knowledge

In the author's experience, it has been possible to apply a substantive part of what has been learned. This has resulted primarily from an experience of learning by and while doing things. Some of the *limitations,* among others, to this learning experience have been the following:

The demands on time are very high and little time is left to synthesize, write about and publish practical experiences. Like the author, most of those involved in institutional development constitute a first generation of nationals in leadership positions at department, faculty or university level. Prior individual experience is limited, and there is little opportunity to learn from more experienced and seasoned colleagues.

The low level of education and professional training of support staff makes the application of new experiences difficult. Occasionally there is also a strong resistance to change by staff members who are, or consider themselves to be, too old to learn new procedures or to evolve to new ways of doing things from the rules and procedures that they have known and used throughout their professional life. With some reason, considering their lack of the basic educational requirements to learn new skills, some regard change and new experiences as threats to their job security and fight against, rather than seek ways to adjust to, change.

Institutions in developing nations often have fragile internal organization and support systems, while the interaction with partners from industrialized countries is almost invariably with more experienced personnel, who are also supported by better organized bureaucracies and more experienced teams in their home institutions. Fragile organization also implies that a very significant part of time and energy is spent creating new or upgrading structures to bring them to acceptable levels of performance and accountability. The application of new knowledge and experience requires involvement for concerted change and adaptation all over an institution, and this is difficult to bring about at the necessary speed and at the time when such improvement would be most useful.

Resource scarcity places serious limitations on the application of new experiences. At the author's home university, and in his current position, the first and dominant priority is to devise ways and means to generate or attract income to the department, faculty, university and now to the Association of African Universities. There is little if any room for experimentation beyond the limits of the programmes' budgets, as there are no resources for learning experiences such as seminars, workshops, and conferences.

There are also unique *opportunities* to try new ideas and implement innovative experiences in the process of development co-operation, some of which are the following:

Working in young and relatively new organizations, with mostly young staff, provides an environment with few established traditions that resist to change. The institutions are therefore more apt to assimilate change and growth, including the creation of new units or the establishment of new procedures and practices. This provides an opportunity to do new things, though the kind of resistance to change mentioned above can by no means be ignored.

Improving the Conditions for Effective Learning

Development co-operation will still be needed for several decades in the future. If current positive socio-economic and political developments in Africa, and for that matter, in developing countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia in general are sustained, development co-operation or donor aid will evolve into partnerships among increasingly equal partners. Co-operation and partnerships and the material, cultural and spiritual benefits that they bring to humankind will become more

prevalent than aid.

By illustrating in this paper what has been learned, the opportunities for learning, and the constraints to effective learning facing institutions and individual players in developing countries, it is hoped that some light has been shed onto some of the requirements for even more effective learning. It is relatively easy to enumerate the reasons for despair and at times hopelessness in developing countries and the inherent difficulties and questions facing development aid and co-operation. Nevertheless, for the author, there is simply no other rational alternative to choosing the more difficult path of making co-operation work and interdependence the common vessel that will carry all nations and peoples into the future.

References

Annual Report, UEM, 1991-92, University of Eduardo Mondlane.
Occasional Paper 118, IMF, January 1995.

Non-Organic Intellectuals and "Learning" in Policy-Making Africa

Thandika Mkandawire

As the 1990s came to an end, there was a chorus of "*mea culpa*" first by governments and much later by donors, that policy-makers had got things terribly wrong. In looking back at the 1980s and 1990s, one is struck by how policy-makers pushed African countries in the wrong direction even as it became evident from Africa's own experience and that of others that the neo-liberal reading of history and understanding of structural constraints facing developing countries were wrong. What emerges from current debate is that the "learning curve" has been inordinately steep in the African case. Some of the reasons given have included (a) the lack of "ownership" of policies by the African countries (b) the dogmatic and arrogant posture of those who came to Africa's rescue (c) the authoritarian and non-participatory governance of African societies (d) the tendentious reading of "lessons for Africa" from other parts of the world. These, I believe, are contributing factors. I would, however, like to add one more: namely the *failure of the political class to establish a productive and organic rapport with their own intelligentsia /intellectuals*.

Few African leaders have sought to cultivate an indigenous "intellectual" class that was, in the Gramcian sense, "organic".[114] The kind of rapport that the Indian nationalists sustained with the intelligentsia in the post-colonial period or the links that Jewish intellectuals had to the Israeli state were rarely seen in Africa.[115] Nowhere in Africa, except perhaps Algeria, where the intellectuals were organic to the FLN movement and government[116], and South Africa, where Afrikaner intellectuals were close to the apartheid regime, did there develop such a close relationship. One consequence is that the African post-colonial "nation-building and development" project has had no organic intellectuals

---

[114] Leopold Senghor tried after the 1968 student revolt. The state launched a programme of intellectual recruitment to recover the lost space. The Nation and Development Club, open to people outside the ruling party, was set up. Mamadou Diouf notes that in the view of the new generation of ruling party intellectuals, "the key failing of the post-colonial compromise was its reliance on "the politics of mere politicians". Their proffered solution was the creation of a new legitimacy on the basis of technocratic nationalism".

[115] See for instance the account in Sand, 1997.

[116] Algerian intellectuals have paid a heavy price for the divisions along "Francophone" and "Arabophone" lines and for the inclusion of the one and exclusion of the other.

and the few that sought to assume that role were reduced to purveyors of apologetics or sycophants. A number of reasons account for this historical peculiarity.

Misconception of the Role of the University

First was the conceptualisation of the African universities as simply institutions for producing the "manpower" to indigenise the civil service. This belief involved complete misunderstanding of the task that lay ahead. African leaders either overestimated the power and capacity of the "kingdom" Nkrumah had enjoined them to seek, or underestimated the intellectual and political complexity of the processes of development and nation building. Once indigenization was achieved, most governments had little argument for continued support to the African universities. The confusion as to what to do with the universities after indigenization was compounded by the dubious claims by the World Bank that higher education in Africa had lower returns than secondary and primary levels of education, signalling to all donors the need to cut their support for university education. This has resulted in serious neglect of national institutions of learning which must have had obvious effects on the learning process.

Repressive Regimes

Second, the repressive politics that became the norm simply left no room for intellectuals to occupy public space.[117] Many spaces that were open (at least theoretically) to intellectuals elsewhere were erased, infested or occupied, sometimes physically, so that neither "ivory towers", nor "Olympian detachment" nor "self-imposed" marginalisation were meaningful options. In addition, most of the spaces over which we could exercise our autonomy were funded by outsiders who also sought to delimit our intellectual spheres. Such were the constraints that in most cases the choice was between exile, sullen self-effacement and invisibility, or sycophantic and fawning adulation of power. There were, of course, those who heroically gave themselves the option of standing up and fighting – who ended up in jail or dead. The repressive politics was

---

[117] For problems of academic freedom in Africa see Africa Watch, 1991, CODESRIA, 1996, Diouf, 1983, and Mkandawire, 1996.

further fuelled by the penchant of African leaders to assume the role of philosopher king and to reduce intellectual work to the incantation of the thought of the leader. Leaders sought to acquire intellectual hegemony by themselves or through advisers constructing intellectual frameworks which would guide national debates. Nkrumah with his pan-Africanism and Nkrumahism, Nyerere with his Ujamaa, and Kaunda with his Humanism are some well-known ideological constructs. In many cases most of the ideological schemes propounded by African leaders were highly idiosyncratic and often so incoherent as to be beyond the comprehension of the propagators themselves. Adhesion to them was not only difficult but also hazardous to those sycophants who diligently sought to follow the leader through infinite twists and turns as the leader sought to bridge the cavernous gap between the rhetoric of national goals and reality of predatory self-aggrandisement.

It should be underscored that much of the distance between the African intellectual and the politician was not by choice. The instinctive position of the African intellectuals was in some sense to be "organic" to the national movement and submit their intellectual values to the nationalist project. I have argued elsewhere that from the many self-allotted "historical tasks" of African nationalism five would stand out as most widely accepted at the time. These were: *complete decolonisation of the continent and national sovereignty, nation-building, economic and social development, democratisation and regional co-operation.* These were, if you like, the key constituent elements of the "nation-state project" of African nationalism, a much abused and now badly tarnished ideology. African intellectuals initially shared these objectives and were willing to submit themselves to the command of the nationalist and developmental state which they viewed as 'the custodian of the development process, with the university as an institution that had to train human resources for development. And in the early years the relationship between the state and intellectuals was good. In the words of Abdalla Bujra (Bujra, 1994) this "was a remarkable period of general unity and agreement about both goals and means". In his turn Sadiq Rashid has characterised it "as a period of mutual tolerance and amicable co-operation between the academic community and the policy-making entities" and of "mutual accommodation and wilful co-operation" when " views of academics were solicited by the latter, while the former readily obliged and often took pride in being associated with the honour of contributing to the crafting of national policies and exposure to the limelight as a result thereof" (Rashid, 1994).

By the 1970s things had begun to turn sour. This became worse with the end of the post-independence euphoria and consensus, and even worse with the arrival of adjustment when African governments turned their ears elsewhere.[118] Sadiq Rashid (Rashid, 1994) summarises the experience in this period in the following manner:

> Beginning with the second half of the 1970s and until the present, readiness to solicit and use social science research for policy-making purposes has waned progressively and almost ceased to exist as related to certain areas. Indeed, the amicable relationship and attitude of mutual tolerance which characterised the interface between academia and bureaucracy in the immediate post-independence era has soured badly and has given way to increasingly strained relationships of suspicion, mistrust, antagonism and sterile lack of co-operation. A number of reasons have been responsible for this state of affairs.
>
> Many governments … neglected and declined to actively solicit the views and research inputs of national think tanks, particularly as related to the primary areas of policy setting or policy prescriptions. While a number of social scientists have continued to produce research that was relevant to policy-making purposes, such efforts have often been wilfully ignored. Where research has produced divergent views, it has usually been considered as subversive. Evidence has also indicated that even when solicited by governments, the rate of adoption of recommendations made by social scientists was dismal.

One should also add here that in many ways the research had become progressively even less likely to be usable by existing regime. The intellectuals' response to their impotence in influencing government policies was to turn towards other potential users of research in "civil society". Recourse to "civil society" has, unfortunately, not been without problems. In purely professional terms, the type of research demanded by the NGOs that were the main direct consumers of research in civil society, was of the consultancy type and was often premised on the assumption that poor research was good enough for the poor. This has often been found to be intellectually unsatisfactory and demeaning. The opportunistic and instrumentalist view of research and the ephemeral nature of the NGOs' presence and projects cannot have contributed much to the learning process.

---

[118] To add insult to injury, the "masses" with whom intellectuals believed they identified tended to be indifferent to the fate of intellectuals at the hands of the State. In some cases, such as Algeria, they were outright and murderously hostile. The striking image of the African intellectual, then, is his/her marginality and disenfranchisement, a theme captured in much of African writing.

Reliance on Foreign Expertise

Third, African governments relied heavily on foreign mentors, admirers or sycophants for intellectual inspiration or affirmation. Thus Nyerere had a band of foreign "Fabian socialists" who had easy access to him, in sharp contrast to Tanzanians who had difficulties seeing Nyerere. Kaunda had John Hatch as a close intellectual associate, who was invited to be the first director of the Institute for Humanism; Nkrumah had surrounded himself with pan-Africanists, such as George Padmore and W.E.B. Dubois. In later years there were European and America "radicals" who were to appear as peripatetic advisers to a whole range of "progressive" regimes in Africa.

In earlier years, such reliance on foreign expertise was justified either as a response to the absence of skilled indigenous experts or, increasingly, as evidence of "the colonial mentality" which simply assumed that our erstwhile colonisers knew better. In more recent years, the use of foreign expertise is part of the domination of policy making by the aid establishment. The "experts" are part of the paraphernalia of conditionalities, which is based on the principal-agent paradigm, with donors as the principal and African governments as the agents. The effect of this has been bemoaned by the donors themselves, who now call for the transfer of "ownership" to the Africans.

The "principal-agent" framework within which aid has been cast has increased the need for greater control of development by the aid establishment and its insatiable quest for feasibility studies, evaluations and "rapid assessment" results etc. which now sustains a veritable consultancy industry. This industry is recruiting African academics in a particularly pernicious way which is unlikely to enhance society's learning experience. In the 1980s there was a new wave of African professions closely linked to this consultancy industry. As a result professionalization of intellectual life was not due to the munificence of African states but of the contracts from foreign governments and NGOs (Bangura, 1994; Mkandawire, 1998). African governments could only access their own intellectuals through donor-contracted reports. This should not be interpreted as suggesting that African intellectuals were close to donors. Donors themselves usually exhibited ill-disguised contempt for local intellectuals by whom the donors felt criticised. They also tended to consider them to be mercenary or part of the rent-seeking or clientalist cliques that had benefited from past policies so that their opposition to "reform" was self-serving. With such a view of local

capacities, donors were to embark on the unending task of "capacity building", an open-ended process in which the proverbial blind have led the not always blind.

In addition, there simply have been too many cooks in the policy-making kitchen to allow for any learning process to take place. The number of donors criss-crossing the continent, all with their own history with Africa, their own understanding of the problems, their own ways of doing things, rather than affording the Africans a wide range of choice have appeared to simply compound the confusion. Donors themselves are acutely aware of this; hence the endless debates about "donor coordination". Ideally, of course, the recipient state should coordinate development activities under its jurisdiction. In reality, most recipient states relate to foreign donors in a supine position, leaving the thinking, planning, experimenting and, therefore, learning to foreign institutions.

Relevance of Research

Fourth has been the problem of the "relevance" of the research. Governments often argued that local research was "irrelevant", by which they meant that it was not immediately usable in policy matters. Governments often insisted on eschewing basic research to engage in what was called "applied research". In this they were strongly supported by donors – both governmental and non-governmental. In some cases, the "relevance" issue spilled over to question the quality of the education process, with academics insisting on standards and governments insisting, in a populist manner, on relevance. African governments often tended to reduce relevance to the provision of "manpower" resources for development and incantations of the ideology of the ruling party. African scholars have, like anyone else, been torn between the quest for universalistic understanding of society and the need to bring out the specificities of their societies.

The question of relevance, appropriateness and meaningfulness of what they were producing touched a soft spot among African scholars and became "a source of considerable soul searching among the social science community" (Bujra, 1994). African intellectuals have been under enormous pressure to "account for themselves" (Mafeje, 1993). Not surprisingly, many members of the African "professorial" have raised serious doubts on their role as intellectuals and the relevance of the institutions they inhabited or run. Ali Mazrui has argued that "the African

university was conceived primarily as a transmission belt for Western high culture, rather than a workshop for the failure to contextualise standards and excellence for the needs of our own people, to ground the very process and agenda of learning and research in our conditions" (Mamdani, 1993). Understandable though some of the anger and frustration may be, it does considerable injustice to the historical record and African intellectuals. My own view is that if African research was "irrelevant", this was not in the simplistic "basic" and "applied" research dichotomy. It was, rather, at two other levels. One was the oppositional stance of most African intellectuals and their unwillingness to be "usable" by some of the unsavoury regimes that littered the African continent. One simply did not want to be relevant to a Mobutu[119] or Banda. "Relevance" would have been as good a case as any of "adverse organicity". Those of a more revolutionary temperament simply did not see any point in advising regimes that were doomed by history or by imminent revolution. In addition, repression bred alienation which, combined with Africans' visceral populism, only bred an oppositional stance toward government.

The second, and more serious problem was whether our basic research really addressed the key issues and whether, when it borrowed concepts, it was sufficiently sensitive to the specifics of our own conditions. Part of the self-criticism among African intellectual has been around this "extroversion" and that we are too attentive to the intellectual fads of the West. Paulin Hountondji and Kwesi Prah have accused African scholarship of mimetism of the worst kind (Hountondji, 1992; Prah, 1998).

Conclusion

To learn from its own experiences, a society must have the "capacity to learn". Even for "borrowed" ideas, nations need a domestic intellectual infrastructure to adapt and translate this knowledge for local use. African societies have invested a lot in creating a cadre of educated citizens who can acquire, generate and disseminate knowledge. The numbers are far from adequate but they are substantial. In this paper I have outlined some of the impediments to the effective utilisation and mobilisation of these scarce resources for the broad social project. It is this failure that partly accounts for the much-bemoaned "steep learning curve". Whether

---

[119] V.V. Mudimbe is reported to have run away from Zaire after having refused a seat on the central committee of Mobutu's ruling party.

knowledge is useful or not, is not defined exclusively by those who produce it. Society and especially those who wield power must demand knowledge and have the political will and institutional wherewithal for its utilisation. Both are still lacking in most African countries.

References

Africa Watch, 1991, *Academic Freedom and Human Rights Abuses in Africa*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Bangura, Y., 1994, *Intellectuals, Economic Reform and Social, Change: Constraints and Opportunities in the Formations of a Nigerian Technocracy*. Dakar: CODESRIA.

Bujra, A., 1994, "Whither Social Institutions in Africa? A prognosis", *Africa Development* XIX, pp. 119 -166.

CODESRIA, 1996, "The State of Academic Freedom in Africa.", CODESRIA (ed.). Dakar: CODESRIA.

Diouf, M. and M. Mamdani, 1983, *Academic Freedom in Africa*. Dakar: CODESRIA.

Hountondji, P., 1992, «Recapture», in E. Mudimbe (ed.), *The Surreptitious Speech: Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mafeje, A., 1993, "African Intellectuals: An Inquiry into their Genesis and Social Options", in Diouf, M. and M. Mamdani (eds.), *Academic Freedom in Africa*. Dakar: CODESRIA. pp. 193-211

Mamdani, M., 1993, "University Crisis and reform: A Reflection on the African Experience", *Review of African Political Economy* 58.

Mkandawire, T., 1996, "The State, Human Rights and Academic Freedom", in J. D. Turner (ed.), *The State and the School: An International Perspective*. London: Falmer Press.

Mkandawire, T., 1998, "The Social Sciences in Africa: Breaking Local Barriers and Negotiating International Presence", in H. S. Marcussen and S. Arnfred (eds.), *Concepts and Metaphors: Ideologies, Narratives and Myths in Development Discourse*, vol. Occasional Paper No. 19, pp. 92-119. Roskilde: Roskilde University.

Prah, K., 1998, *Beyond the Colour Line*. Trenton N.J.: African World Press.

Rashid, S., 1994, "Social Sciences and Policy-Making in Africa: A Critical Review", *Africa Development* XIX, pp. 91-118.

Sand, S., 1997, "Between the Word and the Land: Intellectuals and the State in Israel", in J. Jennings and A. Kemp-Welch (eds.), *Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushdie*. London: Routledge.

Slow learning in Development Co-operation to Latin American Education

Ernesto Schiefelbein and Paulina Schiefelbein[120]

Summary

This article is about learning in relation to outside support to formal systems of education in Latin America. It looks at the complex relationships that exist between knowing about the shortcomings of these systems and actually doing something to change the direction and modalities of outside financial and professional support.

The article suggests that it can not be taken for granted that learning is institutionalized in the two major organizations that provide outside support for education i.e. World Bank and the Inter American Development Bank (IDB).

It illustrates that even when knowledge is available (which is not always the case) change of policy and practice may be risky for those involved. There is no incentive associated with change even when there is clear evidence that conventional solutions have not given the expected results. This is clearly the case in the field of education in Latin America in spite of over 12 billion dollars invested in the last decade by the World Bank and IDB.

This poor result may be linked to the lack of formal evaluations for most of their projects, and, hence, with incentives to project officers that are probably not linked to the educational outcomes of their work, but to the number of designed projects and the amount lend. On the other hand both Banks have reviewed the projects they have financed, commissioned valuable "state-of-the-art" reports in relevant topics, and the IDB funded a study on Cost-Effectiveness of 40 strategies that could be used to evaluate their loans. These facts suggest slow learning in development cooperation to education and no built-in incentives to hurry the process in spite of willingness to learn.

In 1990, the time was ripe for improving quality, given that 95 per cent of the children were enrolled in the school system. But present achievement scores are too low with respect to developed countries

---

(Casassus *et al.*, 1998) and today, unfortunately, half of fourth grade students are still not able to understand even a simple paragraph in the first page of their national newspaper (Schiefelbein, 1999). Something went wrong with the set of projects financed by the Banks and has not yet been identified, even less corrected. Still "public spending is often inefficient, a result of misallocation" (Patrinos and Ariasingam, 1997, p.2). Therefore, it is time to learn about the causes of this poor outcome in order to design relevant strategies. Fortunately some positive signs are observed.

In spite of the poor education outcome generated by investment projects, there has been some learning in the co-operation agencies for developing education in Latin America. Several strategy papers and sector papers show efforts for re-shaping agencies' policies (Wolff and Castro, 1999; OAS, 1998; UNDP, 1998; Castro and Carnoy, 1997; Patrinos and Ariasingam, 1997; UNESCO, 1996, 1992; World Bank 1995; Psacharopoulos, 1994). The IDB has funded a cost-effectiveness study of current strategies even though the results may challenge strategies included in most projects financed by the agencies (Schiefelbein, Wolff and Schiefelbein, 1998). However, the learning has been the result of personal initiatives rather than a systematic attempt (and funding) to identify the problems and to find effective ways to support the development of education. Given that the analysis of development co-operation should probably be regional the funding mechanisms should also be designed to operate in a regional dimension.

Limited funding for research evaluation of new strategies, together with certain characteristics of the evaluation and change processes, places constraints on the learning processes for "those involved in" development assistance to the education sector in developing countries. These evaluation efforts may be affected by: (i) the stage educational development of each country; (ii) relevance of selected problems, likely causes, and potentially feasible solutions to be tried out; (iii) ability to select the researchers and practitioners that could successfully carry out those studies and experiments; (iv) availability of projects with potential for coping with relevant problems (and ability to select the most appropriate); (v) pace of acceptance of reliable new research findings (that usually tends to be slow); (vi) availability of evidence objective enough to support the definition of policies; and (vii) incentives for improving current policies that are operating smoothly, when better policies become available .

Nevertheless, there are no institutional incentives for improving efficiency nor a personal incentive because decision-makers are not affected by the impact of their decisions about the education systems (their children are usually enrolled in private schools). Furthermore, in those cases when there has been some institutional learning, in development co-operation, it has taken a long time for the relevant policies and strategies to be modified.

The fact that this paper has not been prepared as part of an initiative of a development agency, is the first hint of a lack of institutional interest in the analysis of learning about development aid for education. No wonder there is little learning about the best way to co-operate for the improvement of education in developing countries.

The level of interest in learning may be related to the stage of educational development of the region

The lack of reports on improving the effectiveness of development co-operation to education in the seventies and early eighties may have been linked to the social pressure for expanding enrolments during that period (UNESCO, 1989). At that time there were few incentives to learn about effectiveness, because the target was to do "more of the same". Projects for expanding enrollments were designed by estimating the number of required places and the number of teachers that were going to work with the children. The main problem was "where" the new schools should be built, rather than how they should be operated. At that time the analysis of educational development was carried out in local research centers with the support of the Ford Foundation and IDRC (Schiefelbein, 1978; 1985). Eventually USAID contributed to launch a research reports exchange network on Latin American education (REDUC) that started preparation of state-of-the-art reports in relevant areas of education.

However, during the nineties there has been a growing social demand to improve the quality of education (UNESCO, 1996; Schiefelbein and Tedesco, 1995; Schiefelbein, 1995; McGinn, 1990). The private sector is now competing in a global economy and requires better-educated workers (ECLAC, 1992). Therefore, there has been an increasing pressure for improving the way education is delivered. But results of implemented change have been less successful than expected. Lack of relevant information has forced decision-makers to take risks about (or bet on) the potential or feasibility of a given strategy. In order to reduce the

level of risk or uncertainty, development institutions have analyzed available research findings, even though they should fund research, design experiments and follow them up closely in order to accumulate the knowledge required to improve the quality of education (Schiefelbein, Swope and Schiefelbein, 1999). In the meantime, subjective evidence on cost-effectiveness made available recently by a dozen world experts (Schiefelbein, Wolff and Schiefelbein, 1998), suggests that the education investment projects are not taking into account the most efficient strategies recommended for Latin America.

There is a chance element in the accumulation of new relevant knowledge

Serendipity has played an important role, both in selecting the topics that should be analyzed and in identifying the relevant sources of data and analytical approaches (Schiefelbein, 1999). For example, the hint that repetition was underestimated in Latin America resulted from a failed attempt to simulate the historical enrollments by grades in the case of primary education in Chile (Schiefelbein & Davis, 1974; Schiefelbein, 1975). Later on, the linkage between high repetition in first grade and the lack of a minimum ability to read was suggested in a tracer study (Schiefelbein and Farrell, 1982) and reinforced by people working at the classroom level to improve teaching methods (Castillo, 1975; Ezpeleta and Weiss, 1994; Schiefelbein, 1988). The eventual estimation of high repetition rates in Brazil using a different source of data provided further reliability to the estimated high level of repetition and the need to find the main causes of this problem (Costa Ribeiro, 1990). Eventually the linkage between repetition and achievement test scores was detected in a field research in Honduras financed by USAID (McGinn *et al.*, 1992). The next step was to analyze achievement by groups of test items to identify student problems. Data from Chile, El Salvador and Honduras showed low percentages of correct answers about understanding simple phrases (UNESCO, 1992; Chapman and Mahlck, 1993; Wolff *et al.*, 1994; Schiefelbein and Schiefelbein, 1998).

Individuals in development agencies supported this research on the repetition process through all these stages, because no well funded research lines were available. A similar process was observed in the case of the analysis of returns to education carried out by George Psacharopoulos since the early 1970s. In both cases the internal learning

process could have been much faster if international development institutions or academic institutions had been willing to learn about the key problem of quality, or rates of return. If that had been the case they should have assigned resources to find the causes of each problem and to carefully discuss the results.

Lack of a theory of learning is a constraint for finding new knowledge

The lack of a well-accepted theory of learning impinges upon a systematic construction of new knowledge. There is no consensus about how we learn and how we can improve the way we learn. There is no theory of learning that can take into account the different types of students and social contexts in which students learn (McGinn and Borden, 1995). Therefore, the point of view of the researcher (the implicit model in the research approach) will affect the probability of producing a relevant result. For example, frontal teaching (whole class lecturing) may be effective for students that are homogeneous in terms of: their previous training, family support, access to reference books, travels, exposure to other languages and expectations (Flechsig and Schiefelbein, 1985). But frontal teaching is not going to be necessarily suitable for groups of heterogeneous students with large differences in: levels of income, timely entrance to school, family support or vocabulary. In summary, approaches that can work for certain groups are not suitable for others. However, this assumption is not explicit in the proposed regional strategies prepared by development institutions.

The willingness and fortune to observe promising strategies

Subjective evidence and luck also affect the selection of projects that offer interesting learning opportunities. I once misjudged the evidence and rejected an invitation to visit the Colombian Escuela Nueva experiment in 1985. I was told that the project was unique and extremely successful (Colbert, Chiappe and Arboleda, 1993), but I did not understand the information and I delayed the visit for two years. I assumed that the Escuela Nueva approach was as good as other good innovation projects that I have visited in several Latin American countries. Only

when I visited a few well implemented Escuela Nueva schools in 1987, did I realize the wealth of the experiment and detected key innovative elements such as: learning materials dealt with by students; group work that personalized the role of teacher; teachers being free to cope with unexpected questions or answers; students successfully developing complex projects; the number of options allowed to the students; the amount of writing they were producing; and the interest of parents in working with their children and the school. I described the operation, methods and evaluations during the following years (Schiefelbein, 1992). In general it may take some time before the experiment can be described in such a way that any teacher will be able to understand its main elements and the way they are used in the learning process. On the other hand, careful experimentation can also provide the basis for remedial treatments (Vaccaro and Schiefbein, 1981). The findings of such research have eventually been used to develop a massive remedial program for students in primary education (Gutman, 1993).

The commitment of functionaries to accumulate relevant new knowledge

Sometimes diffusion of new information requires functionaries willing to take risks. In other cases, it is a matter of time to get acquainted with new approaches, while in a certain number of cases the research is flawed and should be discarded. At certain moments it requires courage for a member of an organization to support new learning in areas operating according to accepted conventional wisdom, and at a performance level very well rated by most functionaries. For example, in the late seventies the head of the Statistical Unit in UNESCO was willing to publish a report showing that Latin American repetition rates estimated with a simulation model were much higher than the rates in the Yearbooks published by the countries. He risked his job, because he would be challenging the official data provided by the countries' members of the board of that organization. Eventually, he took the risk and published the report as a methodological analysis (Schiefelbein and Grossi, 1981). Eight years later, the head of the UNESCO Regional Office for Education prepared a review of that repetition report and the findings were presented to the Ministers of Education gathered in Guatemala (UNESCO, 1989). Fortunately the Ministers accepted the analysis and decided to make a special effort to improve quality in order to reduce repetition. But there

is no doubt that those two international professionals risked their jobs. Without their courage the reports would not have reached a wider audience and triggered further research.

The present testing program carried out by UNESCO in Latin America is also the result of individuals willing to make an extra effort to help countries to improve their ability to measure basic outputs of the system. The large gap in achievement scores compared with developed countries shows the need to improve the quality of the education delivered by schools (Casassus *et al.*, 1998).

On the other hand project officers convinced of the potential benefits of the institutional policies may reward countries that conform to those policies (McGinn, 1997). A World Bank sector report (1995) states:

> Countries prepared to adopt a higher education policy framework that stresses a differentiated institutional structure and a diversified resource base, with great emphasis on private providers and private funding, will continue to receive priority (McGinn, 1997, p. 232).

Through decentralization, even if the evidence is shaky, the policies will be implemented.

> .... it will take some time before we are able to determine the general usefulness of this approach. In the meantime, it is important to implement mechanisms in new projects or pilots that will evaluate the effectiveness of demand-side financing approaches (Patrinos and Ariasingam, 1997, p. 46).

All available information should be carefully analyzed, but using associations as causalities avoided

Sometimes research findings are interesting, but the evidence is not strong enough to support the definition of new policies (McGinn, 1997). For example the "production function" research identified elements (textbooks, homework, or school time) that were associated with higher levels of achievement (Velez *et al.*, 1993; Harbison and Hanushek, 1992; Schiefelbein and Simmons, 1979). However *association* is different from *causality*. Researchers in the area of "production function" have suggested the need to carry out classical experiments (based in their associations) before preparation of a project for massive investment according with their findings.

When evidence suggests the potential of certain strategies, countries may be willing to take risks based on such evidence, but national

authorities should be aware of the risk. For example, most of the support for radio education is based on a single evaluated experiment (Jamison *et al.*, 1981; Suppes *et al.*, 1978). Also, present policies supporting decentralization and demand-side financing school choice and private education are not based in strong evidence (Patrinos and Ariasingam, 1997, p.46). The evidence is contradictory and further analysis is required (Prawda, 1992; Mizala y Romaguera, 1998) even though there are interesting possibilities for specific experiences (Swope and Latorre, 1998).

Careful assessment of research findings is required when a significant proportion (near 60 per cent) of the variance in achievement levels remains unexplained in most cases (Harbison and Hanushak, 1992). This explanation gap is probably due to the lack of a standard to measure teachers' quality. Such a big gap suggests that there is seldom enough objective evidence available to design efficient strategies. This constraint suggests that the learning of development institutions should take into account not only objective and subjective evidence for preparing projects, but also the evaluation of their impact. Therefore, it is necessary to rely on expert opinions and judgments. An exercise carried out with ten of the best established world experts in education development shows wide differences with respect to the strategies implemented by international banks and bilateral agencies (Schiefelbein, Wolff and Schiefelbein, 1998). It will be necessary to learn more about the differences between implemented projects or government policies with respect to the most efficient strategies selected by the panel of world experts. In the meantime, the differences illustrate the magnitude of the learning gap in institutions that are implementing development policies.

Research findings should also be used to challenge conventional wisdom and traditions, even when limited evidence is available. Sometimes "watching TV" is assumed to be detrimental to students' achievement. However there seems to be a curvilinear association. Learning may improve for students watching TV up to ten hours per week and may be reduced over that amount of time (García *et al.*, 1974).

To summarize, there are examples of poor analysis that has put off timely definition of key problems to be studied (Schiefelbein, 1998). For example, expensive data on testing has been little analyzed (Rojas and Castillo, 1998; Chapman and Mahlck, 1993). Countries only report the "percentage of correct answers" by different groups. However such a percentage always includes a certain number of *"correct answers by*

chance". The proportion of correct answers by chance is larger for groups with lower percentages of correct answers. Therefore, quality gaps are larger than usually assumed and the educational system is much less equitable than is described in sector analysis. In fact half of the student enrollments drop out of primary education in Latin America after five to seven years of schooling, not being able to understand an article written on the first page of their national newspaper.

Lack of incentives to implement more effective educational strategies

Staff of development co-operation agencies (or their children) are not affected by the classroom impact of their projects nor are their professional careers. Therefore, they have no institutional incentives for optimizing their learning about the best strategies to improve the performance of education systems. Fortunately, personal commitment often compensates for this lack of built-in incentives.

The whole learning process is affected by the gap between the educational background of decision makers and the education delivered to students in rural areas or in urban marginal schools of developing countries. The gap is so wide that policy makers or lending and project officials have problems to really understand the key elements of the educational development process. Furthermore, those leaders are not going to be affected by the final outcomes of the recommended strategies or projects. Therefore the effort spent in the design of good education projects only depends on their personal values and commitment. The lack of incentives for the educational leaders to do their utmost to achieve success with their policies, seems to be sadly reflected in the poor educational outcomes.

To summarize, the lack of evaluation of the impact of projects in academic achievement (and ideally in the personal development of students) reduces professional evaluation to meeting goals on planned lending or timely implementation of disbursements. Therefore, progress in the professional career becomes detached from the main goals of the projects.

Time required to transform learning into actions

Even when relevant research and objective and reliable data have been available to support specific policies it has taken a long time to use that information to define consistent policies (McGinn, 1990). Three examples illustrate the large time span for "using" relevant knowledge for improving the education system. In the case of research findings on "*the rate of return to investment in education*" showing that the "rate of return to basic education" has been larger than the rate of return to secondary or higher education (Psacharopoulos, 1994), it took 15 years for lending agencies to support investments in primary education (Husen, 1993). A similar amount of time was necessary to accept (and use) the data showing that the real repetition rates were much higher (in fact, twice as large) than the figures published in the Statistical Yearbook of each country (Schiefelbein and Schiefelbein, 1998). Finally, it took some ten years from the first positive evaluation of Escuela Nueva (Schiefelbein, 1995) to replicate such an experience in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Argentina or Chile (UNESCO, 1996).

Conclusions on learning processes within development co-operation to the education sector in Latin America

Developing agencies have been part of social experiment projects that cost 3 to 4 per cent of the total resources invested in education in the region. However, far below 1 per cent of the cost of the projects has been allocated to evaluation of those social experiments. In a study on decentralization of education the authors stated that *"Formal evaluations are not available for most of the projects reviewed"* (Patrinos and Ariasingam, 1997, p.43).

There has been a transfer of knowledge about the management of resources and the region has now a better implementation of projects in terms of time, unit costs, and accountability. This process has been especially evident in the location and construction of new building and infrastructure. But the improvements of skills have sometimes been the result of training abroad (Wieczorek, 1999).

There is little evidence of improvements in the quality of Latin American education according to the findings of national testing carried out in the late nineties in a dozen countries (Casassus *et al*., 1998). In one of the most successful projects the reduction in the *difference between*

scores in project schools and all schools was smaller than the *improvement in scores of all schools* (Garcia Huidobro, 1999).

The critics of institutional development policies call attention to insufficient empirical support; the evidence to support them is insufficient or contradictory (McGinn, 1997, p.233). Most reports prepared by development institutions are based on previous research rather than on specifically designed research or evaluation of their development projects. Relevant state-of-the-art studies have been carried out on key aspects of educational processes. Previous findings have been well summarized by scholars and practitioners in areas such as: decentralization, pre-service teacher training, early child development, testing, classroom processes, technology, and in the area of rates of returns to investments in education. In the latter and in testing, new data has been collected and analyzed. But, in general, there is little learning from projects financed by development co-operation (Romain, 1985). Furthermore, the state-of-the-art studies have been evaluated by project officers rather than by world and regional experts. All in all, no agreement has been reached on how to improve education.

Suggestions based on the assumption that learning is a continuous process

Development institutions should accept that there is still a lot to be learned about how to improve education and that resources should be allocated to keep abreast. The amount of research accumulated in the last 20 years is staggering even though over half of the variance in academic achievement scores is still not statistically explained. This poor result is compounded by the fact that achievement scores only measure a fraction of educational outputs. Therefore we can assume that: (i) the rate of growth of education research will increase in the next decade; and (ii) development agencies should finance relevant research projects, mainly evaluative research.

Research carried out in-house tends to be limited in scope and horizon. "International assistance agencies can commission research externally, choosing university and other research centers in the developed countries with the objective of increasing alternative perspectives" (McGinn, 1997, p.238).

Each solution tried out in education generates new problems or areas of inquiry. And some of the so called "solutions" can be negative or should

be modified in further stages of education development. Institutions should design mechanisms to test periodically whether those "well accepted solutions" are still valid or should be reviewed. Some built in mechanism for comparison of "trial and error" approaches versus conceptualizations of "experimental" approaches should be implemented in order to protect the institutions against doing more of the same when conditions change.

Funding of projects should be de-linked from project preparation and from the operational implementation of assistance (McGinn, 1997, p.242). National governments and educators should have the advice of independent consultants who may assist the country in the analysis of the system and the preparation of well designed projects. It is sometimes difficult for national officers to discuss under equal conditions with staff of development agencies.

In summary, if education projects are costly social experiments (in resources and in foregone opportunities for improvement), evaluative research should be carried out on a regional basis (and not only as individual country projects), and results assessed periodically. Furthermore, institutions should be aware that there will be internal forces trying to eliminate any type of evaluation.

References

Arriagada, A.M., 1983, *Determinants of Sixth Grade Student Achievement in Peru*, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society.

Casassus J., Froemel, J.E., Palafox, J.C. and S. Cusato, 1998, *Primer Estudio Internacional Comparativo. Laboratorio de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Ecucación.* Santiago: Chile, UNESCO-OREALC.

Castillo, G., and G. El Cuarto, 1975, *Revista Educación Hoy,* No. 30. Bogotá.

Castro, C. de Moura and M. Carnoy, 1997, *La Reforma Educativa en America Latina*, Actas de un Seminario, BID, Washington D.C.

Chapman, D., and L. Mahlck, 1993, *From Data to Action: Information Systems in Educational Planning.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Colbert, V., Chiappe, C., and J. Arboleda, 1993, "The New School Program: More and Better Primary Education for Children in Rural Areas in Colombia", in Levin, H.M. and M.E. Lockheed, (eds.), *Effective Schools in Developing Countries.* London: Falmer Press.

Costa Ribeiro, S., 1990, "On the Urgent Need for Improving Educational Systems in Latin America", *La Educacion: Revista Interamericana de Desarrollo Educativo*, No.106, AnoXXXIV. Washington D.C.: OEA, pp. 89-100.

ECLAC/UNESCO, 1992, *Education and Knowledge: Basic Pillars of Changing Production Patterns with Social Equity.* Santiago: Chile, ECLAC.

Ezpeleta J. and E. Weiss, 1994, *Programa para Abatir el Regazo Educativo. Evaluacion Cualitativa del Impacto. Informe Final.* Mexico: Centro de Investigacion y de Estudios Avanzados del Instituto Politecnico Nacional, Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas – DIE.

Flechsig, K-H., and E. Schiefelbein, 1985*, Catalogo de Modelos didacticos, Version 1985*, CIDE, Documentos de Trabajo, Santiago.

Garcia-Huidobro, J. E., "Politicas Educacionales y Equidad en Chile", to be published in a book by Harvard University and edited by F. Reimers, 2000.

Garcia, C., Castaneda, E., de Leon, L. and E. Schiefelbein, 1974, "Televisión y Rendimiento Escolar en Venezuela", *Revista del CEE,* Vol. 4 (1), pp. 43-52.

Gutman, C., 1993, *Todos los Niños Pueden Aprender. El Programa de las 900 Escuelas para los Sectores Pobres de Chile.* Paris: UNESCO.

Harbison, R., and E. Hanushek, 1992, *Educational Performance of the Poor: Lessons from Rural Northeast Brazil.,* World Bank. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hornik, R., Ingle, H., McAnany, E. and W. Schramm, 1973, *Television and educational Reform in El Salvador.* Stanford University, California.

Hung, L., Garcia, C., Pinango, R. and B. Sanchez, 1973, "Nivel de Aprendizaje de los Estudiantes Venezolanos de 6o Grado", *Revista del CEE,* Vol. 3 (4), pp. 11-25.

Husen, T., 1993, *The Encyclopedia of Education*, 2nd edition. Pergamon Press.

Jamison, D., Searle, B., Heyneman, S. and K. Galda, 1981, "Improving Elementary Mathematics Education in Nicaragua: An experimental study of the impact of textbooks and radio on achievement". Discussion Paper No. 81-5, Population and Human Resources Division, Washington D.C: World Bank.

Keeves, J.P., 1988, "Cross-National Comparisons in Educational Achievement", *World Bank Technical Paper Number 78,* pp. 151-165. Washington D.C.

Levin, H.M., and Lockheed, M.E., 1993, *Effective Schools in Developing Countries.* World Bank. London: Falmer Press.

Lockeheed, M., and A. Verspoor, 1990, *Improving Primary Education in Developing Countries.* World Bank. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mayo, J., Hornik, R. and E. McAnany, 1976, *Educational Reform with Television.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

McEwan, P., 1995, *Primary School Reform for Rural Development: An Evaluation of Colombian New Schools.* Washington D.C.: IDB.

McGinn, N., 1990, "Economic integration within the Americas: implications for education", *La Educacion,* Vol. 34 No. 106. Washington D.C.: OAS. pp. 55-70.

McGinn, N., 1997, "Towards an alternative strategy for international assistance to education", *Prospects,* Vol. 27 (2).

McGinn, N., and A.M. Borden, 1995, *Framing Questions, Constructing Answers. Linking Research with Education Policy for Developing Countries*. Harvard Institute of International Development. Harvard University Press.

McGinn, N., Reimers, F., Loera, A., Soto, M.C. and S. López 1992, *Why do Children Repeat Grades? A Study of Rural Primary Schools in Honduras.* Bridges Research Report Series, No.13, Harvard University.

McKay, H., McKay, A. and L. Sinisterra, 1978, *Cognitive Growth in Colombian Malnourished Preschoolers.* Science 200.

Mizala, A. and P. Romaguera 1998, "Desempeño Escolar y Elección de Colegios: La Experiencia Chilena", *Serie Economía* No. 36, Centro de Economía Aplicada, Depto. de Ingeniería Industrial, Facultad de Ciencias Físicas y Matemáticas, Universidad de Chile.

Myers, R., 1992, *The Twelve Who Survived*. New York: Routledge.

OAS 1998, *Education in the Americas. Quality and Equity in the Globalization Process.* Washington D.C.: OAS.

Patrinos, H., and D. Ariasingam, 1997, *Decentralization of education. Demand side financing.* Washington D.C.: World Bank.

Prawda, J., 1992, *Educational decentralization in Latin America: Lessons learned,* A view from LATHR, No. 27, Washington D.C.:World Bank.

Psacharopulos, G., Rojas, C. and E. Velez, 1995, *Achievement Evaluation of Colombia's Escuela Nueva: Is Multigrade the Answer?* Comparative Education Review.

Psacharopoulos, G., 1994, "Returns to investments in education: a global update", *World Development,* Vol. 22(9) pp. 1325-43.

Rojas, C., and Z. Castillo, 1988, *Evaluación del Programa Escuela Nueva en Colombia.* Bogotá: Instituto SER de Investigación.

Rojas, C., and J.M. Esquivel, 1998, "Los Sistemas de Medición del Logro Académico en Latinoamérica", LCSHD Paper Series, Washington D.C.: World Bank, LAC Regional Office.

Romain, R., 1985, "Lending in Primary Education: Bank Performance Review, 1962-83". World Bank Education and Training Department Discussion Paper EDT No. 20. Washington D.C.: World Bank.

Schiefelbein, E., 1975, "Repeating: An Overlooked Problem of Latin America Education", *Comparative Education Review,* V19 (3), October.

Schiefelbein, E., 1978, "Educational Research Networks in Latin America", *International Review of Education,* Vol. 24(4) pp. 483-500.

Schiefelbein, E., 1988, *Repetition Rates: The Key Issue in South American Primary Education.* Washington D.C.: World Bank, LATHR Division.

Schiefelbein, E., 1989, "Repetition: the constraint for reaching universal primary education in Latin America", *OREALC, Bulletin* No. 18, 1989, pp. 7-28.

Schiefelbein, E., 1992, *Redefining basic education for Latin America. Lessons to be drawn from the Colombian Escuela Nueva.* Paris: IIEP.

Schiefelbein E., 1995, "Educational Reform in LAC: An Agenda for Action", *OREALC Bulletin* No. 37 pp. 3-34. Santiago.

Schiefelbein, E., 1998, "En Busca del Eslabón más Débil: Mejorar la Estadística Educativa". *UNESCO-OREALC Boletín* No. 46, pp. 18-31. Santiago de Chile.

Schiefelbein, E., 1999, "Three Decades of Testing in Latin Amercia", presented at the AIDB Workshop in Okinawa, Japan.

Schiefelbein, E. and R.G. Davis 1974, *Development of Educational Planning Models and Application in the Chilean School Reform.* Massachusetts: Lexington Books.

Schiefelbein, E. and J. Farrell, 1982, *Eight Years of their Lives*. Ottawa: IDRC.

Schiefelbein, E., and M.C. Grossi, 1981, *Statistical Report on Repetition in Latin America*. Paris: UNESCO, CSR-E-40.

Schiefelbein, E. and P. Schiefelbein 1998, *Evolución de la Repetición, Deserción y Calidad de la Educación en Chile, 1960-1997.* Santiago: Junta Nacional de Auxilio Escolar y Becas-JUNAEB.

Schiefelbein, E., Swope, J. and P. Schiefelbein, 1999, *Cost-Effectiveness of Education Programs for Reduced Child Labor.* Washington D.C.: World Bank – Unicef.

Schiefelbein, E. and J. C. Tedesco 1995, *Una Nueva Oportunidad. El Rol de la Educación en el Desarrollo de América Latina.* Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editorial Santillana, Aula XXI.

Schiefelbein, E., Wolff, L. and P. Schiefelbein, 1998, *Cost Effectiveness of Education Policies in Latin America: A Survey of Expert Opinion.* IDB.

Suppes, P., Searle, B. and J. Friend, 1978, *The Nicaragua Radio Mathematics Project*.

Swope, J. and M. Latorre 1998, *Estudio Eficacia Interna de las Escuelas Formales de Fe y Alegría.* Santiago: CIDE-AED-BID.

UNDP, 1998, *Educacion: La Agenda del Siglo XXI. Hacia un Desarrollo Humano*. Colombia: UNDP, pp. 78-80.

UNESCO 1989, *State of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1980-1987.* Santiago, Chile: OREALC.

UNESCO 1992, *State of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1980-1989.* Santiago, Chile: OREALC.

UNESCO 1996, *State of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1980-1994.* Santiago, Chile: OREALC.

Vaccaro, L. and E. Schiefelbein, 1981, "Recuperacion de niños con problemas de aprendizaje y formacion de monitores a traves de su participacion en talleres comunitarios", documentos de Trabajo, PIIE, Santiago.

Velez, E., Schiefelbein, E. and J. Valenzuela, 1993, "Factors affecting achievement in primary education", HRO Working Paper, Washington D.C.: World Bank.

Winkler, D., and T. Rounds, 1993, "Municipal and private sector response to decentralization and school choice: the case of Chile", HRO Discussion Paper, Washington D.C.: World Bank

Wolff, L., 1998, *Las Evaluaciones Educacionales en America Latina: Avance Actual y Futuros Desafios.* Santiago: PREAL.

Wolff, L., and C. Castro de Moura, 1999, *Secondary Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: Critical Policies for Growth and Reform.* Washington D.C.: Education Unit, Sustainable Development Department, IDB.

Wolff, L., Schiefelbein, E. and J. Valenzuela, 1994, *Improving the Quality of Primary Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: Towards the 21st Century.* Regional Studies Program, Report No.28, Washington D.C.: World Bank.

World Bank, 1995, *Priorities and strategies for education: a review.* Washington D.C.: World Bank.

Wieczorek-Zeul, H., "People as the pivot of development*". Development and Co-operation (D+C),* NO.4/ 1999, pp. 12-14.

Learning by Doing: Reflections on 35 Y

ears with the World Bank

Willi A. Wapenhans

Introduction

"Some learn by taking risks, others by taking notes."[121] In the field of economic and social development, in which the World Bank has now labored for more than 50 years[122] , a judicious balance of taking risks[123] in the face of analytical rigor, empirical evidence, and prudent judgement, is called for. Analytical rigor, use of empirical evidence, and exercise of judgement work best in an environment of intellectual curiosity, dedication, commitment and institutional loyalty; their successful application depends on suitably qualified and motivated staff. Enlightened leadership strives to ensure the presence of these elements in optimal complementarity. That has not always happened. In consequence, institutional performance has varied – as have the external environs in which the Bank had to perform.

The insistent call for more accountability and greater effort in measuring developmental progress suggests dissatisfaction with results thus far achieved. This unease also reflects exaggerated expectations, often generated in the promotion of institutional roles and access to resources. Lack of coherence in development policy, of external supporters as well as recipient governments, must also be blamed. Inevitable disappointment resulted in sometimes harmful criticism; it is neither justified in the face of results nevertheless achieved, nor can it be sustained without realistic historical yardsticks. To substantiate criticism, recourse has been had at times to moving goal posts, a practice that inhibits otherwise open minds.

Pace and scope of development are inherent in the culture, values, tradition and historical dynamics of societies. External assistance can, and often did, improve its momentum but it should not be expected to change it fundamentally.[124] The experience of reconstruction should not be confused with the potential for movement in development. Restoring economies proved easier than creating conditions for marked acceleration

---

[124] Notwithstanding Rosenstein-Rodan's *natura facit saltum*; see Rosenstein-Rodan, "Natura Facit Saltum: Analysis of the Disequilibrium Growth Process", in Meier and Seers, (eds.), 1984, p. 207.

of social and economic development. Realism has its roots in experience. More than 50 years of development effort in an exalted position made the World Bank into a rich source of lessons.

Stakeholders in development demand to know whether the use of resources carries the prospects of generating commensurate benefits. As the definition of benefits has broadened from financial and economic to social and environmental sustainability, so was the provision of resources conditioned, to enhance the welfare content of activities supported by the Bank. Eventually, accountability extended to the Bank as a development institution; its performance, in terms of development effectiveness, began to be questioned. That raises the issue of how successful the Bank has been in learning lessons, scanning the horizons, identifying opportunities for change, advancing the development agenda, and incorporating more promising directions in its own development policies and strategies.

For the World Bank it started with the concern for the prudent use of resources made available to and by it, i.e. the quality of investment decisions and the diligence of implementation. The systematic gathering of evidence of success or failure has itself been subject to change in objectives, definitions, criteria and sophistication. Investment decisions of yesteryear cannot be measured in terms of today's appreciation of need. But today's decisions need to take account of the results of those earlier deeds. This is a learning process not yet finished; indeed, a learning process that will never be complete.

Measuring results at different levels and from different perspectives may serve objectives different than those needed to support internal learning processes. Demonstrating competence may continue to enjoy a

---

[125] The Bank is a profuse producer of learned writings on all aspects of social and economic development. It has also authorized searching external review of its performance in two succeeding attempts at its history (Mason, E.S. & Asher, R.E., 1973; and Kapur, D., Lewis, J.P. and Webb, R., 1997). Major contributions have been made to development economics, policy and practice, too numerous to list here. The reader may be directed to the two series *Pioneers in Development*; the first edited by G. M. Meier and D. Seers. 1984; and the second by G. M. Meier, 1987.

[126] See for instance Baum, C. Warren & Tolbert, M. Stokes, 1985.

[127] Article 1 of the Articles of Agreement of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD).

[128] The Articles do not address Technical Assistance though this has become a major adjunct of the Bank's operational work; today it absorbs significant staff and budgetary resources. It remains a point of contention especially with UN Specialized Agencies; they content that the Bank is trespassing and should leave Technical Assistance to them.

priority higher than prompt distillation of lessons learned. Feedback cycles may still rely on "*sitting next to Nelly*" rather than on well organized infusion of experience into operational policies and practices. That does not mean, however, that there have not been serious and continuous attempts to distill and record lessons and disseminate them widely.[125] If it appears that lessons of experience have not been learned, it is not because it has been inadequately recorded,[126] nor because of irrationality or obduracy. Rather, while incentives may be weak, an array of divergent interests and a powerful constellation of forces make things what they are; they act as formidable, at times immovable, obstacles to change.

The Mandate

The principal purposes of the Bank[127] are: to promote economic development, make loans for productive purposes, increase productivity and thus raise standards of living. Its principal instrument is the provision of long-term financing or the extension of guarantees for such financing.[128] There are three statutory requirements of accountability relating to its loan operations:

(a) the Bank shall make arrangements to *ensure that the proceeds of any loan are used only for the purpose for which the loan was granted*, with due attention to considerations of economy and efficiency and *without regard to political or other non-economic influences or considerations* (Art. III, Sect. 5b);

(b) the borrower shall be permitted by the Bank to *draw loan funds only to meet project expenses as they are actually incurred* (Art. III, Sect. 5c);

(c) the Bank shall *publish periodic reports showing its financial position and results of operations* (Art. V, Sect.13).

Article 1 gives guidance as to how the founding fathers wanted these provisions to be applied.

The Articles allow for interpretation to accommodate the evolution of the Bank. This is perhaps its most formal and fundamental learning

---

[129] Report of the Committee on Interpretation approved by the Executive Directors on Sept. 20, 1946 (IBRD Basic Documents A-1-30).

process; subject to restrictions to avoid arbitrary manipulation and abuse. In the past, several basic interpretations occurred in response to challenges facing the institution; the most notable of far reaching consequence in 1946. The Executive Directors decided at the time that the Bank had authority to extend loans for *programs of economic reconstruction and reconstruction of monetary systems including long-term stabilization loans*.[129] Further elaboration on the meaning in the Articles of the terms *specific project*, the *special circumstances* which justify Bank lending for other than *specific projects,* and the legal basis for *structural adjustment* and *sector loans* were provided as legal opinions by General Counsel in 1984 and 1988. Together with the Articles these describe today the Bank's power and the restrictions on that power against which the Bank's operational practice must be measured.

The end of the cold war and the on-set of globalization of financial markets caused the direction and the nature of international transfers of savings to change. Private transfers have become the single most important source of intermediation also for developing countries. Such flows follow economic performance, political stability, and institutional reliability. No longer are financial flows directed by the kind of political consideration that spawned large aid programs and caused massive capital flights even from the poorest developing countries. But private transfers are prone to fast and vast swings – as the Mexican and the Asian crises have demonstrated. These events also showed that the presence of the Bretton Woods institutions remains critical to help in crisis management by mitigating massive redirection of transfers. However, in these instances their actions have attracted critical comment and their traditional roles are now being questioned.

In many of the classical sectors of engagement, prominently in the public domain, the Bank needs to yield to, not compete with, the private sector. If it fails to withdraw onto the commanding heights of *policy-based lender of last resort*, the calls for its privatization will become irresistible. If it descends from its exalted position of policy advisor and financier of structural adjustment to direct its resources in support of IMF-led crisis management, it will become but a toothless adjunct threatened with merger. In either case the international community, in

---

[130] In use amongst; operational staff were: Grant, Eugene L. & Ireson, W. Grant, 1960. Eckstein, O., 1958; Hunt, P., Williams, C. M. & Donaldson, G., (eds.) 1961.

[131] Assistant Director of the Economics Department and Head of the Advisory Staff from 1947 to 1953.

particular the developing countries, stand to lose. These stark choices – as yet insufficiently articulated – call for a review and revision of the Bank's mandate and, for that matter, also that of its twin, the IMF.

Improving the Knowledge Base

The Bank had early and formative exposure in public sector infrastructure financing. Public utility and transportation projects provided the bed rock experience on which the approaches to the appraisal of capital investment opportunities and the monitoring of their implementation were honed. Methodologies of public choice, heavily influenced by US experience in public works programs, flood control, and water resources development, were the theoretical base on which a highly motivated staff build its reputation. Senior officials from the US Corps of Engineers, the US Bureau of Reclamation, and the Tennessee Valley Authority either joined or exercised otherwise significant influence on the Bank's budding concern about prudent investment-decision-making.[130] This was reinforced by condensed seminars on business finance for operational staff organized by the Graduate School of Business Administration of Harvard University.

Physical capital being in short supply, early thinking in development economics emphasized the accumulation of 'capital stocks' as the critical constraint. The questions facing the Bank were threefold: how much capital would be needed, on what should it be spent, to where should the Bank direct its own finance? Engineering economics, focussed on the optimization of technical designs, could not provide the answers. Rosenstein-Rodan[131] attempted to answer the first and provide a short cut to the second question. Self-sustained growth was thought to be attained once savings equaled necessary investment. External development finance was to provide resources until that stage had been reached. Investment

---

[132] The World Bank Economic Development Institute made it into a training course for government officials; it published a series of texts on appraisal methodology; i.e. Hans Adler, 1987; or J. P. Gittinger, 1972. Today, the limits of these criteria, especially for retrospective evaluation, are well recognized. Analyses, extending to counterfactual considerations of negative contributions, also of a non-economic nature, are beginning to make their entry. See Stiglitz, J. "Evaluation as an Incentive Investment", in Picciotto, R. & Wiesner, E., (eds.), 1998, p.288.

[133] In 1996, the Operations Evaluation Department of the Bank completed a review of 50 large dams assisted by the Bank. It gave conditional support for the construction of large dams, provided strict compliance with guidelines and full incorporation of lessons of experience was ensured; see *Large Dams. Learning from the Past, Looking at the Future*. 1997, pp.4-5.

programming was the chosen tool to help in addressing the first question. But the individual project within a program remained the point of action; it needed to be evaluated both in terms of its contribution to other projects as well as its demands on them. This would determine its approximate ranking in priority. These complementarities were seen to dominate project analysis but considered too complicated to be operationally practical.

Since markets could not be relied upon to provide the right signals, especially for investment 14 programs heavily concentrated on public sector infrastructure needs, the concept of *shadow pricing* was developed. The recognition of time as a major factor in accelerating growth led to the introduction, in the early '60s, of *the discounted internal rate of economic return* as principal criterion for *ex ante* project evaluation as well as *ex post* assessment of outcome. This heroic short cut also had the advantage of reconciling the language of the technical specialists with that of the economists. This methodology would later show a remarkable resilience, being adapted to meet the appraisal requirements of so-called soft-sector projects (e.g. human capital development, institution-building) as well. Refined to take account not only of time through the process of discounting, but also of the *before-and-after* as well as the *with-and-without* conditions, it would become the origin of a whole new appraisal industry as well as enrich the programs of many an academic curriculum.[132]

This left the third question where the Bank was to put its financing. A set of far more pragmatic considerations appears to have been at work. Statutory requirements had to be considered; first, if not the borrower, the Government has to provide a guarantee every time the Bank makes a loan. This places the Bank in the public sector, even if it finances a private party. Second, the Bank is in principle restrained to financing only part of foreign exchange expenditures; and local currency costs only in exceptional circumstances. Thirdly, being a provider of capital, the Bank naturally preferred capital-intensive infrastructure projects. This was to be the operational response to its mandate until, in 1960, IDA came into being and the agricultural sector assumed increasing priority. Even there, irrigation projects[133] remained at first the preferred target. But the spell was broken and the experience gained in agriculture was

[134] At the initiative of Mabub ul Haq, formerly Director of the Policy Research Department of the World Bank, who had by then joined UNDP, the latter proceeded to develop and issue, also on a regular basis, the *Human Development Report*. This is largely a complementary extension of the WDR; today well regarded and widely used. Overlap may occur in the area of social reporting, but that can be considered a minor failing compared to the added awareness these publications generate - each from its distinctive observation base.

quickly transferred to other *soft* sectors such as education, tourism, later health and population control.

The early interaction between policy makers, researchers and scientists as well as practitioners, within and outside the Bank, demonstrates the lively exchange of ideas and experiences that served to condition policy thinking in the Bank and with its members. There was no lack of interest in recording lessons learned. The Bank became a major repository of recorded experience on which many institutions, academic and others, as well as governments continue to draw. Over long periods the process was free-wheeling, dependent on interests and talents happening upon issues. It caused the Bank to react in its operational responses but it did not yet put it in the center of defining the development agenda.

A more systematic attempt at gathering data, creating a commonly accepted development data base from which all policy makers could work, distilling urgent operational research needs to identify priorities for the up-dating of the development agenda, and, on the basis of scholarly effort, extracting policy lessons from operational exposure and experience was thought essential. The appointment of Hollis Chenery to reorganize and systematize economic research in the Bank laid the base for a profound track record of scholarly pursuit of development policy and strategy. The reorganization of economic work in the early '70s, and the appointment of recognized academics gave major impetus to making the Bank into a major, if not the major, research establishment in the field of development economics.

In the mid-'70s, it also led to the institution of the World Development Report (WDR). Since then these reports have consistently provided an overview of the *state of development*, and an in-depth discussion of a topical *development issue*. Its statistical annex, *Selected World Indicators,* soon became the most commonly used economic and social database on developing countries.[134] This attempt at sharing knowledge, often acquired by the Bank in the course of its work, greatly improved and

---

[135] *Knowledge for Development*, 1999.

[136] Re-emergence of institutional economics as a central concern in development is to be welcomed. Neglect of institutional issues, such as land reforms to combat rural poverty, protection of property rights, rules of succession etc., were debated in the Bank but for long thought to be off-limits to active operational pursuit. In particular, reluctance to address all aspects of agrarian reform head-on caused ill-guided attempts at rural development to fail. Today, a much more determined effort at institutional development in the context of transition of formerly centrally administered economies and in the context of *good governance* (i.e. Asia crisis) is urgently needed. See also Picciotto, R. & Wiesner, E, 1998.

strengthened the systematic gathering of economic and social macro data. It generated not only continuous but also better informed dialogue within the international community on major challenges facing developing countries. And it serves to focus thinking within the Bank on emerging Bank policy directions. Indeed, the 1999 WDR[135] itself deals with knowledge as a resource for development. As new millennium begins, the Bank is gearing up to become a major intermediary of knowledge in the process of its operational work. The vastly improved access to knowledge, following the revolution in information and communications technology, should greatly aid this process. Ever more important becomes the on-the-ground adaptation to local conditions to ensure that the power of knowledge does not go astray.

Changes in Scenery

The development challenge has turned out to be more complex and its agenda more comprehensive than anticipated. But the question must be posed about who's agenda it is! To the administrative, managerial, technical, financial, and economic concerns of earlier days have been added those of social and environmental sustainability. The concern for efficiency has been extended from that of economical and timely implementation and diligent operation of projects to that of developmental effectiveness of economic and social policies including those of generational trade-offs. Good governance and the renewal of institutional economics[136], spurred on by the desperate void of institutional instruments in transforming countries, are about to usher in the legal profession as a critically important member of the team of disciplines addressing this complexity. Considerations of political economy are getting close to the limitations imposed by mandate – yet no willingness to revisit those restrictions is in sight.

[137] In 1955, Jan Tinbergen was invited by the World Bank to compose a *General Guide* to civil servants holding responsibilities in the field of development. While his report apparently did not find favor with the then President of the Bank it was, in 1958, published by it under the title *The Design of Development*; it had significant impact on the staff and was perhaps the first consistent reminder that projects needed a conducive policy environment to flourish; see also Tinbergen, J., "Development Cooperation as a Learning Process", in G. M. Meier and D. Seers, (eds.), 1984, pp.318-319.

[138] Notwithstanding Hirschman's *revolt* in the Colombian case; see Hirschman, A.O., "A Dissenter's Confession: 'The Strategy of Economic Development' Revisited", in G. M. Meier and D. Seers, (eds.), 1984, p.90.

Investment decisions are taken within a national institutional, economic and social policy environment. External finance to support such investments is fungible and thus equally exposed to these same framework conditions. In developing countries the earlier enthusiasm for comprehensive national planning as the preferred development strategy reached its peak in the 1950s. Disenchantment with the limited accomplishments followed as no clear association could be found between a comprehensive planning effort and sustained economic growth. Countries no longer relied on administrative fiat to carry out long-term plans that targeted inputs and outputs for all sectors of their economy.[137] Instead, they began to focus on two major elements of economic management: a macro-economic framework of policies to spur growth that elicited the desired behavior from both public and private entities; and a public sector investment program focused on high-priority public needs. Success studies of economic development come from those countries that have managed these tasks well.[138] The Bank's economic analyses did much to identify these phenomena, to evaluate their significance, and to spread the experience around its membership. There is reason to believe that the findings even penetrated the Iron Curtain. Since the end of the cold war the increasing globalization has put immense pressure on Nation States but they remain the stage on which a common policy regime reigns.

Central to any such policy framework relying on incentives is the pricing policy since most macroeconomic variables are prices: interest rates, wage rates, exchange rates. The Bank, through its extensive presence in the field of public utilities and their monopolistic organization, had been faced with the need to rationalize monopoly pricing early in its existence. Marginal cost pricing was developed and advocated as a second-best to a free competitive market. The importance of *getting the prices right* was one of the lessons to be re-learned. The Bank faced this issue especially as its exposure in agriculture grew rapidly and it met with the widespread practice of governments to maintain depressed

[139] See Balassa, 1989, pp.14-15. Balassa served for extended periods as a consultant to the Bank; much of his writings is based on this experience; he had significant influence on operational staffs in the Bank. In particular his empirical work on incentive policies and measures gave impetus to trade liberalization as part of structural adjustment programs; see Balassa, B. and Berlinski, 1982.

[140] Ehrlich, P., "Paying the Piper" *New Scientist*, December 1967.

[141] US AID, 1967.

[142] See W. A. Wapenhans, "Some Aspects of Agricultural Development and International Capital Flows", in A.H. Bunting, (ed.), 1970, pp. 47 ff.

domestic terms of trade for this sector as a means to subsidize non-agricultural capital accumulation. Price manipulation by governments, to achieve social and economic objectives, remained acceptable but it was recognized that this practice prevented societies from reaping potential efficiency gains. Accordingly, such interventions were to be devised as were consistent with the use of market forces. Administered exchange rates led to the questioning of the external trade regimes and their impact on international competitiveness. The Bank called for reform of trade regimes to encourage countries to compete in international markets. In the light of experience outward-oriented development strategies were promoted; it became evident that early reformers benefited most.[139]

In the 1960s the Malthusian specter reemerged forcefully. P. Ehrlich of Stanford University wrote: "The battle to feed humanity is over. Some time between 1970 and 1985 the world will undergo vast famines – hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death."[140] USAID echoed the theme: "The scale, severity and duration of the world food problem are so great that a massive, long-run, innovative effort unprecedented in human history will be required to master it... For the immediate future, the food supply is critical."[141] Ehrlich concluded "... dispassionate analysis indicates that the imbalance between food and population is hopeless". Yet, investments did take place at a rate sufficient to secure food, shelter, health care and education for an increasing proportion of a rapidly growing world population. The birth of Nation States after WW II proceeded at a historically unparalleled pace. Feudalistic societies with distinct class structures and firmly established vested interests were to be transformed, amidst a cold war in which opposing socio-economic ideologies vied for followers. The newly formed States were expected to become modern societies, offering institutional and policy frameworks conducive to accelerating social and economic development, at a rate also unparalleled in history.

The World Bank was already poised to launch programs in support of agricultural production and research, at their peak, these absorbed as much as one third of the annual commitment volumes of the Bank and

---

[143] The Malthusian Hypothesis is about to be replaced by that of selective market failure to direct R&D and appropriate technology to marginal situations; see J. Sachs in "Helping the Poor", *The Economist*, August 14, 1999, p.19. The remarkable solution proposed here is that of market manipulation to arrest populations in highly unrewarding environs. One must wonder whether this is a well considered proposal.

[144] *McNamara Years at the World Bank*, 1981, pp. 233 ff.

IDA.[142] By 1974 India had become self-sufficient in food grain production despite an unbroken surge in population growth. North America and the European Community continued to produce in excess of their needs; and, in the disguise of development assistance, to export their agricultural surplus problem. The negative impact of food aid on domestic terms of trade for agriculture added to the complexity from which development in this sector still suffers. Yet, the problem of food security remains, not because the global production base is insufficient or inadequately mobilized but because income inequalities remain to cause malnutrition especially and increasingly in Africa. Other equally telling examples can be cited to stress the point. The predictions of the Club of Rome regarding the limitations of humanity's natural resource base turned out to be excessively pessimistic in the face of technological advance.[143] In fact, the ill-advised subsidization schemes, especially of the EEC to secure raw material bases in developing countries, combined with technological progress to cause terms of trade for primary products, including those for minerals and fossil fuels, to deteriorate. Yet, life expectancy increased in many developing countries, literacy rates rose, urbanization and non-agricultural employment expanded at a rapid pace. All this occurred while the global population grew at unprecedented rates, now doubling within a single generation.

The transition to a market-oriented development paradigm was first put to a severe test by the two succeeding oil-shocks of 1973-74 and 1979-80. Severe balance-of-payment pressures caused many countries to reverse course. Fragile progress was threatened and in many instances the social strains of rapid adjustment to the external trade relationships were considered to be domestically unmanageable. This occurred only months after McNamara had vented his dissatisfaction with the so-called trickle-down effects of the new development paradigm. In his speech to the governors at the Annual Meeting of the IMF and the Bank in Nairobi in the fall of 1973 he called for targeted support of the poor, more specifically he proposed large-scale rural development aimed at

---

[145] At the invitation of African Governors, at the 1979 Annual Meeting in Belgrade, the World Bank undertook a special study of the crisis emerging in Africa in the late '70s. The enquiry was led by Elliot Berg and, together with a program of remedial action, published by the World Bank, 1981. More than 15 years later this highly controversial survey of Africa's development crisis was to be singled out by *Foreign Affairs* as the *".. most important economic diagnosis and prescription in the continent's history";* see *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, Nr. 5, 1997, pp. 237-238.
[146] "...however...enlightened, the maintenance of such high levels of assistance will continue to overwhelm local administrations and impact perversely on local ability to manage resources". Berg, E., "Contradictions in the Aid Process", in Gwin, C. and Nelson, J.M. (eds.), 1997, p.83.

subsistence agriculture.[144]

The inconsistency that incentive-based policies could only work for those producing marketable surpluses was ignored as was the fact that the new preoccupation with social objectives would not add to resources available for development, nor would it compensate for adverse terms of trade resulting from the oil-price shocks. Additional borrowing, often at inappropriate terms and from commercial sources, began the build-up of excessive debt, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America. The second oil-shock at the end of the 1970s finished the job and threatened the global economy with a major debt crisis. The highly centralized rural development recipe and other basic needs approaches failed and were quietly abandoned; many of the schemes had collapsed under their own weight. The Bank, nevertheless, remained preoccupied with the lot of the poor, changing its approach to that of improving access to health, education and resources to integrate the poor into market economies.

The Bank's structural adjustment concept, originally intended to introduce growth-oriented policies focussed on increasing self-reliance, met its first and critical tests in the context of sustaining highly indebted countries embarked on ambitious social welfare programs. Only those early starters, sufficiently far along in the liberalization of their economies, dared to proceed with domestically demanding adjustment measures. While they succeeded, many African countries[145] even today suffer from the excessive debt loads acquired in consequence of oil-price shocks and ill-advised social welfare experiments they could not afford and found little help to sustain. The failure to quickly and sufficiently adjust led to ever greater aid and debt dependency in an effort to maintain unsustainable living standards. In these cases larger aid-flows impacted adversely on the absorptive capacity of the slow reformers.[146]

This experience once again drove home the point that *policies mattered*. While the Bank began to condition its rescue programs accordingly, it met with stiff resistance from a variety of sources. Vested

---

[147] It should be noted that the Bank's Board of Directors took nearly two years to agree to the extension of structural adjustment loans. By then the debt crisis was full-blown and the price extracted was a steep increase in conditionality. See Wapenhans, W.A., "The Political Economy of Structural Adjustment. An External Perspective", *in* van der Hoeven and van Kraaij, (eds.), 1994, p. 39. Only gradually was structural adjustment accepted as the only realistic strategic option. This change in attitude became known as the "Washington Consensus"; see also J. Williamson (ed.), 1990.

[148] See Wapenhans, W. A., "Efficiency and Effectiveness: Is the World Bank Group Well Prepared for the Task Ahead?", in Volker, (ed.) 1994, pp. C-289 ff.

interests, aligned with socially and environmentally motivated NGOs, agitated against the belt-tightening implicit in the recovery programs. The slogan "Adjustment with a Human Face" was born. The financing of social safety nets was called for to avoid confronting the politically dangerous dismantling of special favors and privileges. The Bank was accused of returning to the trickle-down effect as its main source of support for the poor. While it was blamed for the malaise in many quarters, no plausible alternative to deal with the crisis, short of providing more money, has been advanced. Instead, countries were encouraged to disregard agreed conditionality and thus slow down or negate completely the intended effects of the programs. Subsequently, the inevitable lack of persuasive results was used to demonstrate that structural adjustment did not work; a perverse learning experience.[147]

In many countries institutional development did not keep pace; recourse was taken to etatist management of economic activities. The system of centralized economies could cope even less; nor did it prevent the emergence of new classes, corruption, or the formation of rent-seeking societies. Countries in transition from centrally planned and administered economies to market economies can barely cope with the challenges of globalization. Those slow to respond with institutional reforms and structural adjustment are threatened with marginalization. Others have yet to put in place the very basic wherewithalls to dare to compete in global markets. The cold war retarded the emergence of civil society as a countervailing force to demand transparency, representation, and recourse. Add to this the reemergence of ethnic strife, religious resentment, and historical hostility and it should not be surprising that the syndrome of *Failed States* today occupies many a statesman as well as social scientists.

Making Operational Policy

Nolens volens was the Bank confronted with challenges far beyond its originally intended reach. Today it is expected to proficiently handle the entire range of challenges facing government with the possible exception of security, defence, and external affairs. This stretches not only its

---

[149] The Development Committee's Task Force on Multilateral Development Banks is a good example of the lack of willingness to consider major reforms; see its report "Serving a Changing World" published by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Monetary Fund, 1996.

resources, human and financial, it also stretches its mandate.[148] Members jealously guard the restrictions on the Bank's powers; they show little inclination to any review and revision of the Bank's mandate in the light of major changes occurring since the end of the cold war and the onset of globalization.[149] That then shifts the burden of policy formulation and of resetting the guide-lines along which the Bank can bring to bear its potential to other parties.

The making of policy is, by default, mainly in the hands of the Board of Executive Directors. Under the Articles it is formally reserved for the Governors, i.e. the ministerial level; but, if not explicitly handled there, it reverts to the Executive Directors; a provision entirely practical for the demands of a simpler time. Frequently, Executive Directors are middle-level civil servants, placed in their positions by ministries of finance or treasuries, often to gain experience rather than to guide management. Only occasionally does one encounter free and courageous spirits of relevant background. Once in a while this Board will even revolt against usurpation of its policy privileges by management. And it can be observed to wax profound on matters of the Bank's finances. But in the formulation of development policies the initiative is in the main left to the management who, then, have to "sell" it to the Board and to the governors.

Earlier attempts (initiated immediately after the Smithsonian Agreement to delink the US$ from gold) to provide political guidance to the making of policy for both the IMF and the Bank failed completely in the case of the latter. The ministerial Development Committee of the Bretton Woods Institutions has become ever more ritualised in its behavior; today even its Executive Secretary is no longer independent of the Bank's management, being a member of the staff and holding other staff responsibilities. Only occasionally will the Committee take a more activist stance, especially when opportunities arise to shift burdens from national budgets to the financial resources of the Bank (e.g. the financing of the debt initiative, to be done in part from the surpluses of the Bank at the expense of either IDA or the build-up of reserves). Repeated calls to "strengthen the international financial architecture"

---

[150] So called because they deputize for Ministers of Finance (or where applicable for Ministers of Economic Cooperation) on matters of IDA replenishment. Usually, these deputies outrank their Executive Directors and have thus little compunction in bypassing or overriding them.

[151] See also Kapur, D. *et al.,* 1997 pp. 1148-49.

[152] Telling illustrations can be found in the discontinuities regarding the Bank's approach to supporting manufacturing industries or its population policies.

have renewed official considerations of the shape and functioning of the Development and the Interim Committees to better reflect the new international economic environment. Little practical outcome aside from procedural improvements can as yet be discerned.

For the Bank, this situation continues to make it possible for a select group of *deputies[150]*, operating in the shadows of IDA replenishment negotiations, to assume major influence on policy formulation. This group, or parts of it, representing Part I (donor countries) only, has taken to specifying policy changes as conditions of replenishment of the soft loan window (IDA).[151] These conditions, once approved by the Board and incorporated by management into operational policy, affect Bank borrowers as much as IDA clients. While in earlier days the Bank's management resisted the imposition of such strictures as inconsistent with the authority of the Board, of late this remote manipulation of policies has become acceptable practice. Not only does it convey a major burden of extraneous conditionality, it also reflects the agendas of NGO pressure groups in donor countries. Pressure on national policy makers is thereby diverted onto international agencies. Deficiencies of development assistance, often arising from lack of coherence of national policies, can conveniently be blamed on the Bank.

In conditioning policy thinking it is not, therefore, insufficient recourse to experience, or lack of lessons learned but the exercise of influence through less transparent channels that muddies the waters. Indeed, incentives at work are such that experience is ignored in the articulation of policy to give ample room to extraneous interests. It is not insufficient political control or lack of transparency that is the real issue; the real issue is that those mandated to exercise political control and ensure transparency have shown insufficient inclination to do so. The opaque process currently in place remains an open invitation to attempt policy making by lobby. That threatens the coherence of policy, causes a multiplicity of objectives to confuse the agenda, and its overloading. Continuity is impaired as priorities are reordered.[152]

Measuring Results

Measuring results, be it in the end-use of resources, in the compliance with contract, in the achievement of returns, or the efficiency of project implementation, also took its cue from experience with public utility projects. After all, the Bank started as a public utility bank, turned into a

transportation bank, and only then with attention increasingly shifting to agriculture and human resources did it become a full-fledged development bank. But even today the traces of its origin remain visible.

The Bank's accountability for the use of the resources it makes available to its borrowers stems from the obligations imposed under its Articles as well as from loan and related agreements entered into with borrowers, guarantors and executing agencies. The Bank's policy and its practice in regard to the supervision of the end-use of its financing thus derives from:

a) the Bank's Articles; here the scope of its mandate is stated in broad, general terms subject to interpretation. These constitutional requirements cannot be changed except by formal amendment by the Board of Governors.

b) contractual arrangements formally agreed upon under the loan/ guarantee agreements between the Bank and the borrower/ guarantor or executing agency. These documents impose obligations on the parties regarding implementation of the agreement and the reporting on progress and outcomes. By mutual agreement these contractual arrangements may be changed subject to the approval of the Board of Executive Directors.

c) the direction given to staff under Operational Directives and other relevant instructions; to the extent that these are broader then those of the Articles and/or the obligations accepted under loan agreements they can be changed as Bank policy evolves.

This triad of instruments – Articles, Contracts, Directives – defines both the mandate and the obligations of the management and the staff regarding the supervision of project/program implementation. It leaves sufficient scope to adapt procedures, practice of monitoring the end-use of resources, and measurement of results to the evolving mission of the Bank.

The healthy suspicion, present at the creation of the Bank, that, where there are huge amounts of capital available to finance lucrative contracts, the temptation of corruption could not be far away remained into the operational life of the Bank. In addition to the blueprints for construction the Bank began to insist on detailed plans for project implementation, the lay-out of a critical path for timely construction and efficient site management, a program of purchases, mainly to be made under international competitive bidding for which the Bank retained critical veto rights, and a calendar of financing requirements giving the Bank a

reasonable base on which to estimate its own liquidity requirements. Regular progress reporting was instituted and on-site inspections by Bank staff also became a regular feature of Bank surveillance of and reporting on progress.

This practice is still in place; though its content has changed greatly, depending on what kind of project is involved. Early experience and information flows initiated demonstrated three major critical areas: i) costs were consistently underestimated; ii) time allowed for project execution was consistently insufficient; and iii) the temptation to circumvent the Bank's procurement rules was ever present and manifested itself increasingly in the 'creative' formulation of procurement documents. Technical design deficiencies were not frequent causes of failure. Where applicable, minimum economic rate of return expectations were generally met in 3 out of 4 cases. Today it is realized that return criteria alone are insufficient to demonstrate success or failure of development activities supported by the Bank. A more comprehensive set of criteria is in use and continuously under review. Without reservation it can be said that the Bank is in the vanguard of ever more refined monitoring of the effectiveness of its support. There are not many national or international programs of development assistance that enjoy similar and continuous scrutiny.

Even where strenuous efforts are made in the implementation of projects, complexities arising from conditions of extreme scarcities, present in many countries, make management and administration of project implementation exceedingly demanding. If international contractors, supervised by consultants, are on site, problems tend to remain manageable. Increasingly, local politics demand execution and management by local authorities. In the past these arrangements were not particulary successful and caused considerable concern. The Bank responded with intensified *project-supervision* which gradually turned into technical assistance in project implementation – free of charge – often in the guise of *facilitating assistance*.

As projects became more people-oriented and less a matter of bricks-and-mortar the complexity increased and extended to an increasingly comprehensive set of actors and institutions. Prices and markets have been added to service charges and self-financing as financial concerns, beneficiaries, including women and the poor, are to be counted, policies to be amended and introduced to ensure greater equity in the distribution

---

[153] "Effective Implementation: Key to Development Impact", *Portfolio Management Task Force Report*, 1992, Internal World Bank Document also known as the *Wapenhans Report*.

of benefits, environmental restrictions are to be observed; all of which was laid down in legal contracts as obligations for borrowers to execute and Bank staffs to monitor. The Bank's realization that development is a comprehensive process unfortunately found its expression in the emergence of increasingly unrealistic project conditionality. This practice arose from the fact that policy advice of the Bank not linked to lending could be ignored by borrowing countries, and often was. No other lever for making the Bank's concern felt was available. After policy-based lending became acceptable the nature of the conditionality changed; it also became far more intrusive. Here too the Bank's stakes increased as borrowers' performance or lack of it, had an immediate impact on the Bank's reputation. And the vexing question remains: should the Bank act in the absence of an adequate framework of institutions and policies; or should it try to help build those in the context of the commitment of its own resources? And if it engages in the latter, how much responsibility for the outcome must it accept? A partial answer is attempted with its renewed effort at *capacity building*.

The record of compliance with contract leaves much to be desired. In many instances staff had resorted to calling for conditionality to meet dictates imposed by operational policy which it feared would not and could not be implemented by borrowers. The ensuing practice of looking the other way soon spilled over into other more germane areas of project supervision. The Sardar Sarovar (Namara river) project in India is a telling example of this tendency. The independent review of its implementation revealed failures to i) incorporate Bank policies into loan contracts, and ii) require adherence to enforceable provisions of the agreements. The Bank kept careful records of performance of projects under implementation and closely monitored the regime of reimbursement of expenditures and payment of debts. It also had a reasonably reliable data base on compliance with contract which, somehow, was largely ignored. It fell to the Task Force on Portfolio Management to draw attention to this situation and to highlight the risks entailed in generating such a massive credibility gap regarding the quality of supervision of project implementation and country portfolio management.[153]

Digesting this lesson is a process which is still underway. The initial reaction of the Bank's management was the further issuance of even more detailed and bureaucratic instructions to staff. The existing rules

[154] Kapur, *et al.* 1997, p.1203.
[155] *World Bank News Release No. 2000/015/S*, dated July 27, 1999.

and regulations are already formidable and tend to invite compliance rather than commitment to the Bank's mission. The element missing is not instruction; it is incentives. The Bank's lending was stronger on take-offs than landings.[154] Management's and the Board's focus still seems to be on making loans rather than on the implementation of projects and their effects. The recent News Release, announcing the results of the fiscal year for 1999, again gives prominence to the record commitment volume; it refers to the quality of lending in a throwaway quote from the President: "...I am cheered to see the increase in the quality of loans we have provided, as this points to real results on the ground".[155] Even that misses the point: the record volume results from large scale re-financing of crisis economies, surely not fertile ground for long over-due structural reform.

Conclusion

There is scant reason for hope that the culture of compliance and approval is on the way to being replaced by one of commitment and accomplishment. Recent initiatives, such as the *strategic compact* and the *comprehensive development framework*, have yet to prove their efficacy. Development is a risky business; it does require stamina, resilience, entrepreneurial spirit and prudent optimism. A portfolio that returns on average more then 10 per cent in economic terms does not suggest lack of competence or diligence. Care must be given to avoid the emergence of risk aversion as a survival tactic on the part of staff. Poverty is once again on the rise, the job of accumulation of adequate human and social capital in developing countries as yet incomplete. With all its blemishes there is no better organization to address the remaining challenges than Bretton Woods. But the threefold question remains; i) does it adequately learn its lessons; ii) how experimental can institutions, operating in a fiduciary capacity, afford to be; and, iii) how is its future mission to be shaped between a changing role for the Nation State, the preeminent presence of the private sector, and a crisis-prone global environment?

This account may serve to demonstrate that continued attention is needed, and imaginative forms of assistance must now be directed at problems resulting from earlier neglect as well as success.[156] Surely,

---

[156] Even in the stubborn field of population growth we are experiencing a very gradual reversal of trends. In his 1977 address to the MIT R. S. McNamara predicted a total population of 6.3 billion by the year 2000; today we expect to cross the 6.0 billion mark by Oct. 1999, i.e. 5 per cent below prediction. *McNamara Years at the World Bank. Major Policy Addresses,* 1981, p. 377 ff.

none of this suggests that the world can afford to relax vigilance in the field of development, to which has now again been added crisis management of global proportions. We must learn to reckon realistically in the context of the evolution of the human condition around the globe; not against exaggerated expectation of what development assistance – financial and otherwise – can do or, worse, a depressive interpretation of past progress. That realization needs to be reflected in both operational policies and mandate. Ten years after the end of global ideological conflict, institutions such as the World Bank ought to be entrusted to discharge this mandate with adequate autonomy.

References

Adler, H., 1987, *Economic Appraisal of Transport Projects*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

Baum, C. Warren & Tolbert, M. S., 1985, *Investing in Development. Lessons of World Bank Experience*, Oxford University Press.

Balassa, B., 1989, *New Directions in the World Economy*, London: The McMillan Press Ltd.

Balassa, B. and Berlinski, J., 1982, *Development Strategies in Semi-Industrial Economies*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

Berg, E., "Contradictions in the Aid Process", in Gwin, C. and Nelson, J.M. (eds.), 1997, *Perspectives on Aid and Development*, ODC.

Eckstein, O., 1958, *Water Resources Development. The Economics of Project Evaluation,* Harvard University Press.

Ehrlich, P., "Paying the Piper" *New Scientist*, December 1967.

Foreign Affairs, Vol. 76, Nr. 5, 1997, pp. 237-238.

Gittinger, J. P., 1972, *Economic Analysis of Agricultural Project*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

Grant, E. L. G. & Ireson, W. Grant, 1960, *Principles of Engineering Economy,* 4th Edition, New York: The Ronald Press Company.

Hirschman, A.O., "A Dissenter's Confession: 'The Strategy of Economic Development' Revisited", in G. M. Meier and D. Seers, (eds.), 1984, *Pioneers in Development*, Oxford University Press.

Hunt, P., Williams, C. M. & Donaldson, G., (ed.) 1961, *Basic Business Finance. Text and Cases*, Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., revised ed.

Kapur, D., Lewis, J.P. and R. Webb, 1997, *The World Bank: Its First Half Century*, Washington D.C: Brookings Institution.

Kapur, D., Lewis, J.P. and R. Webb, 1997, *The World Bank: Its First Half Century*. Vol 1. History, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution.

Mason, E.S. & Asher, R. E., 1973, *The World Bank since Bretton Woods*, Brookings Institution.

The McNamara Years at the World Bank. Major Policy Addresses, 1981, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

Meier, G. M. and D. Seers, (eds.), 1984, *Pioneers in Development.* Oxford University

Press.

Meier, G. M. (ed.) 1987, *Pioneers in Development.* Oxford University Press.

Moggridge, D., (ed.), 1973, *Keynes, John M., The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol.VII, The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, London: Macmillan for the Royal Economic Society.

Neusner, J. 1992, "Lend me your ears", introduction by William Safire, New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Picciotto, R. & Wiesner, E, (eds.), 1998, *Evaluation and Development. The Institutional Dimension*, *The Institutional Dimension*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Report of the Committee on Interpretation approved by the Executive Directors on Sept. 20, 1946 (IBRD Basic Documents A-1-30).

Rosenstein-Rodan, P. N., "Natura Facit Saltum: Analysis of the Disequilibrium Growth Process", in G. M. Meier and D. Seers, (eds.), 1984, *Pioneers in Development*, Oxford University Press.

Sachs, J., "Helping the Poor", *The Economist*, August 14, 1999, p.19.

"Serving a Changing World", International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Monetary Fund, Washington D.C., 1996.

Stiglitz, J. "Evaluation as an Incentive Investment", in Picciotto, R. & Wiesner, E., (eds.), 1998, *Evaluation and Development. The Institutional Dimension*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Tinbergen, J., "Development Cooperation as a Learning Process", in G. M. Meier and D. Seers, (eds.), 1984, *Pioneers in Development*, Oxford University Press.

US AID, 1967, "Food vs. People", US Agency for International Development, Washington D.C.: Department of State.

Wapenhans, W. A. "Some Aspects of Agricultural Development and International Capital Flows", in A.H. Bunting, (ed.), 1970, *Change in Agriculture,* London: Gerald Duckworth & Co.

Wapenhans, W. A., 1992, "Effective Implementation: Key to Development Impact", Portfolio Management Task Force Report. Washington: Internal World Bank Document.

Wapenhans, W.A., "The Political Economy of Structural Adjustment. An External Perspective", *in* R. van der Hoeven and F. van Kraaij, (eds.), 1994, *Structural Adjustment and Beyond*, The Hague.

Wapenhans, W. A., "Efficiency and Effectiveness: Is the World Bank Group Well Prepared for the Task Ahead?", in P. Volker, (ed.) 1994, *Bretton Woods: Looking to the Future,* Report of the Bretton Woods Commission, Washington D.C.

Williamson, J., (ed.), 1990, *Latin Amercian Adjustment: How much has happened*, Washington D.C.

World Bank, 1981, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action*, Washington D.C.: The World Bank Group.

World Bank, 1997, *Large Dams. Learning from the Past, Looking at the Future*. Washington D.C: The World Bank Group.

World Bank News Release No. 2000/015/S, dated July 27, 1999, Washington.

World Development Report, 1999, *Knowledge for Development*, Oxford University Press.

250

World Bank, 1998.

When Do We Ever Learn?

Anna Wieslander

"Those who think they already know will never learn"

This paper consists of some of my own experiences of 30 years work, primarily as a training and information officer, with Sida, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, interviews with a number of Swedes with long experience of development cooperation with Sida as well as with Swedish NGOs and international organisations, and various points which are the result of reading.

People may have different opinions as to whether we learn primarily from formal training, from books, from hearsay, or from doing, that is to say from our own experience. I believe that useful learning is built on personal experience. The experience of other people is hard to internalise. By training and reading new ideas are added, but we "learn" only in so far as these ideas can be incorporated into our previous knowledge and when we try them out in practice.

Technical Assistance

After eighteen months of administrative work for Sida in Tunisia in the late 1960s I returned home, rather humble. I had learnt a lot about the aid relationship between "donor" and "recipient", about the relationship between "us" and "them". First of all, I realised that I had not, as I had hoped, much to contribute within Tunisian society. Secondly, I found that most of the Swedish experts in our small community had little contact with the surrounding society. Thirdly, and maybe most important, I realised that aid was granted according to the plans and preferences of the donor, not of those in need. My conclusion was that aid must start from the needs of those concerned. "Our" inputs can only support what "they" want to do.

In a World Bank report, Assessing Aid[157], aid is reduced to two factors – money and ideas. Money, as I see it, can be transferred through cheques – but ideas first and foremost through contacts between people. Since

---

[158] Forss, 1987.
[159] Wieslander, 1993, p. 227.

the start of aid relations it has been thought that this would be achieved either by sending experts from the North to the South, or sending individual people from the South to the North for training. In the international jargon, experts are called "technical assistance", TA, a term which exposes a stumbling block in the system; the task of foreign experts should not solely be to transfer technical solutions.

Maybe it is only natural that the issue of TA is a problem area in Sida, as presumably in all other aid organisations. Learning takes place between people, and TA means employing people from one country to improve learning in another country. People are individuals with varying capacities and needs, and they do not fit easily into bureaucratic norms. TA was, as I saw it, a continuous problem – experts cost a lot and the output of their work was hard to measure. Sida's solution to the problem of efficiency in TA was often to cut down or to give up, when attempts to improve it failed. The early scholarship programme and the Swedish Peace Corps were both too much trouble for the aid bureaucracy, and were abandoned.

An assessment of Nordic TA was made in 1987.[158] The results were discouraging. It was found that only a few of the experts really managed to live up to the goals – to make themselves superfluous by training local staff.

An Ethiopian said in 1990:

> Ethiopians ask the Swedes for help, and the Swedes will always help, quickly, and efficiently. Ethiopians get used to thinking that only experts from outside are those who know. So when they leave, nobody knows how things work. [159]

Sida consequently made changes over the years. Today, the number of experts directly employed by Sida has been dramatically decreased – it has dwindled, from hundreds in the 1970s to some ten people. Exactly how many individuals are hired instead on long term contracts for consultancy firms or institutions is not known – maybe as many as the former experts.

But everything has not changed. Lage Bergström, filmmaker and training specialist, says that before experts were supposed to train "counterparts" working side by side with local experts. This was seen as inefficient, and nowadays consultants are told to broaden contacts in the

organisation to influence groups of people, not individuals, through institutional building programmes.

Bergström found in a recent study of TA that this change was "basically cosmetics". In practice only the recruitment procedure is different. The study shows that the counterpart system is still very much alive. While many Sida officers have learnt, Sida is obviously not always capable of transferring its own experience to the consultants or members of institutions they hire. Lage Bergström concludes that this is a difficult matter. There is learning, but it is slow in permeating organisations. And ten years after the Nordic assessment on TA, most of the technical assistance is still "donor-driven".

Briefing of Experts

At Sida I have primarily dealt with the preparation and training of experts. I believe training is important, as it permits Sida to introduce future experts to its goals and rules, but also to some of the experience gained over the years. It should also result in experts being less ethno-centric and more open to problems – and possibilities – in their respective jobs. But briefing is also a field where results are hard to measure. Course evaluations show if people are happy with a course, and cannot predict how the training will impact achievements in the field.

I often felt training was used as an alibi, and perceived as a disturbing and time-consuming activity rather than a valuable way of transferring Sida's experience to newcomers or experts. While experts employed directly by Sida were obliged to follow briefing courses, this is no longer included in the Terms of Reference for consultants, and Sida loses a chance to share its experience with them. But briefing in Sweden, organised before experts have experienced problems in the field, has its limits. There have been attempts to organise training for Swedish experts after their arrival. An experiment was carried out in 1993 at a technical college in Mozambique where a number of Swedish experts were employed as advisers to the local teachers. Seminars were held for the Mozambicans before the arrival of the Swedes, and then for both parties when the Swedes arrived. The goals of Swedish aid were discussed, as

---

[160] Nilsson-Wieslander, 1993.
[161] Wieslander, 1982.

well as cultural differences and the future cooperation. The result was encouraging.

One of the Mozambican teachers said:

> Many of us have asked what is the goal of the cooperation. Now I understand what my Swedish colleague does, and what you can and cannot do in the aid cooperation. While other "cooperantes" just teach, the Swedes can influence the school organisation.[160]

But this experiment to train experts and their local colleagues together was virtually unique and has not been developed further.

De-briefing

Like briefing, de-briefing of staff is also a problem area. Sida never really found a satisfactory way of learning from the experience of returning experts, nor of dealing with their need to hand over experience and ideas to successors and Sida. De-briefing reports were seen as more useful to recipient authorities, than to Sida. I sometimes felt that de-briefing was also perceived as threatening, as if the experience of former experts would prejudice successors, rather than enlighten them. Over-lapping, another way of transferring experience to new experts and staff, tended to be impracticable. So, what Swedes may have learnt during their work abroad is often lost and rarely recovered by Sida.

However, if, as according to a study I have made for the Nordic Africa Institute, around 50,000 Swedes, including spouses and children, have worked in Africa, and they have all privately told ten people about their experiences, then about 500,000 Swedes should have learnt something about aid and Africa.

Contacts

Many of the Swedish experts I interviewed in four African countries in 1981 enjoyed their stay and their jobs and felt they were useful. But, as I had seen in Tunisia, many of them had few and superficial contacts with local people. "Swedes live just like at home," said one Swede, "they run and drive too fast and do not see what happens around them. They hardly notice all the positive people around them. There are Swedes who never walk in the streets of Dar-es-Salaam, just drive, and they will never see anything."[161]

Many Swedes really wished to have deeper contacts after work, but

---

[162] Wieslander, 1983, p. 206.

did not see how. Barbro Johansson, a Swedish teacher and missionary who came to Tanganyika in 1946 and stayed there as a citizen, teacher, politician, and missionary, says:

> If Swedish experts are slow in learning from Tanzanian colleagues, it is because of this lack of contact. Swedes feel closer to their own compatriots and their own country than to people in the country where they work. They often say they want more contacts, and regret that they are never "invited". But in Tanzania you do not wait for invitations as you do in Sweden – you just go to see your friends, especially at big family events. I tell the Swedes – Just go! And they say: But what should I say, or do? I tell them – Just sit there! This means so much more than foreign experts can understand. International cooperation, it is a culture clash – but it is important to remember that it is mutual!

Contacts between experts and local people are hampered by differences in attitudes to both friendships and work. Swedes often regard personal relations as a useful tool to promote work, not as an end in themselves. When the job is done many see no reason for continuing relations. But in many countries personal relations are the meaning of life, and friendships are made to last for ever. Experts thundering in for a short period may make friends, but when they disappear and never return, their local colleagues get frustrated. Next time a stranger comes, they may not want to make new "friends" of this kind. Even on a different level broken relations may cause frustration. Villagers used to regular contact with an expert, or with a consultant team, may lose heart when the aid relationship is over. The discouragement may mean a loss of the gains and learning from the earlier contact.

Differences

Differences between experts and their local colleagues both in attitudes and living conditions do not, of course, favour contact and learning. The difference in economic status is obviously an obstacle, as was also pointed out in the above-mentioned study of Nordic TA. A Zambian psychologist said:

> Experts and volunteers have good cars, houses and work conditions. A counterpart has nothing at all, and this causes inhibitions and frustrations for our elite. When experts are no good, and still kept here, our people ask themselves what was the use of their own long education. There are more expatriates here today than before independence. What is it – a new kind of colonialism?[162]

---

[163] RRV, 1988.

Barbro Johansson points at some other factors impeding learning. Swedes are too individualistic. They may have many splendid ideas and really want to do something good – but they want to do it on their own. Tanzanians are group beings, their strength is not in the individual but in belonging to a group. The individualistic attitude of the Swedes makes it hard for them to work in a group with local people – as well as with experts from other countries. This hampers learning.

From her "receiver" angle, Barbro Johansson also points to the problem of the high salaries of foreign experts, leading Tanzanians to demand the same standard. Tanzanians employed by aid organisations get salaries many times higher than they would have as Tanzanian civil servants. This distorts the labour market. Aid organisations and consultancy firms say they need people who can work 100 percent, and that this is impossible if they are only paid normal Tanzanian salaries. This makes it hard to keep competent people in the administration, and so much learning is lost.

Partnership-Friendship

Sida and other aid organisations have learnt, and TA is changing. Institutions and consultancy firms are now sending their people on many assignments of short duration, rather than on long term contracts. "Twinning" between institutions is developing. Sida is also increasingly urging NGOs not to send out volunteers to compete with the growing number of local experts, but rather to find ways for young Swedes to go to poor countries to learn. Maybe this can promote the kind of "partnership" which is now advocated by Sida.

The development of friendship associations is perhaps a more hopeful development in creating partnership. Here former experts – and their families – can validate their commitment in forming networks with their former colleagues in e.g. Africa, and so friendships and learning started in aid relations can continue.

Sida Staff

In its study on learning within Sida in 1988[163], the Swedish National Audit Bureau, RRV, states that while there is an obvious interest in learning, Sida is better at changing its thinking than its acting. Among the problems mentioned is that Sida is incapable of describing "good aid projects". Expressed goals are conflicting, and one goal – disbursement

– is not even included. The bulk of its activities is too large, as is the flow of information. Evaluations are not effectively used, the rate of internal staff turnover precludes learning, and there are no useful routines for transferring the experience of TA. Learning at Sida is said to take place mainly by doing, it is top-down, and promoted primarily through changes in routines.

Some of the recommendations of this study have been followed. Sida has tried to analyse the needs for competence, define the roles better between the various actors in aid, increase contacts with other donors, etc. The strenuous process of formulating strategies, involving the whole staff, may also have been a fruitful exercise. But many of the problems mentioned by the National Audit Bureau are still not solved, notably the problem of moving from words to actions. My respondents point to a number of factors impeding real learning.

Too much, too loud

Håkan Falk, formerly Sida's legal expert and now retired, confirms there has been learning, individually, in that "a lot of people have learnt a lot", and administratively, in that experience has been synthezised in guidelines and handbooks. Håkan Falk himself has produced some of Sida's handbooks. When, after retirement, he was employed by Sida as a consultant, he found that the young officer in charge did not know how to formulate his contract. "He did not even know about my handbook!" said Falk, "Sida must teach newcomers that routines exist, and how to use them."

The diversity of activities at Sida is in his view the first impediment, combined with a tendency to be overzealous and to use rhetoric. There is a lack of realism in the code language, and goals and objectives are exaggerated, as if there is always a need to "increase the voltage". In the abundance of detailed rules and rhetorical messages at Sida, they have to learn to "decrease the voltage", for some of the rules are in effect impossible to follow. The level of ambition, the rhetoric and the inflated words hamper the process of learning. Håkan Falk believes this problem is encountered in all bureaucracies. So is the fact that many projects are undertaken, even though everyone knows they will be ineffective. Fighting crime, for instance, much is done at high cost, and yet there is crime. The work is ineffective, and yet it continues. Sida may also have learnt that programmes are a waste of time and money in certain countries – but they cannot stop for political reasons. Sida is given its objectives

by the government, and it is often politically impossible to decrease the number of countries and fields of activity in order to find a balance between capacity and the number of projects. Productivity has probably increased by 1,000 percent since I started to work at Sida, because people have learnt. Meanwhile tasks have increased by 2,000 percent!

Learning takes time

Bureaucrats notoriously lack time. They do not always seem to accept that lack of time is not an absolute fact, but a question of priorities. But the lack of time they experience precludes adequate thinking and hampers good decisions – and learning. Time is an important factor in all aid projects, but the attitude to how long development cooperation should continue changes. Folke Albinsson, expert in Adult Education for Sida and the Swedish Cooperative Centre in several African countries, gives an example to illustrate this point:

> Sida's support to Adult Education in Tanzania in the early 1970s, started with many experts and vast sums of money. It ended abruptly, when the wind had changed in Sweden and Sida wanted to decrease the number of experts.

The result was that it was hard for Tanzanians to suddenly replace the Swedes with local professionals and several programmes had to be discontinued. The Swedish support to the Tanzanian programme for developing Folk Development Colleges, on the other hand, was given more time. The agreement stipulated that Tanzania should take over after a few years. When this proved impossible, Sida could have stopped its support, but instead it continued – for 20 years.

Competition

Learning can also be made difficult by the prestige and competition inherent in development cooperation, as illustrated by the following situation described by Barbro Johansson:

> Once I was approached by a delegation from Norway. The Norwegians knew very well that I was Swedish but represented Tanzania. And they asked me to propose a suitable project for them – provided the Swedes did not know about it!

President Nyerere asked her to write the request for support to Tanzanian Folk Development Colleges. They were inspired by Swedish and Danish examples, so she recommended that a Tanzanian delegation be sent to Sweden *and* Denmark to study the system there. And the Swedes were

upset because she had included Denmark! So prestige often obstructs learning.

Ideas or money?

The very distance between Africa and Sweden influences thinking, and learning. Lage Bergström insists that as aid is governed from headquarters, those who work there, are far from the reality of poor countries. Whether they want to be or not, they are guided by Swedish preferences in their decisions. Loyalties are also important. As long as you work within an aid organisation, you may hold back some of your own critical conclusions, for fear of challenging the system. There is also the question of fundamental values. Those who joined an aid organisation out of solidarity and a wish to help the poor, and have found that aid can really be a hindrance for the receiver, may disregard facts that go against their dream.

The objective of aid is to "to make oneself superfluous", to contribute for a short period and then withdraw, to guide partners to sustainability. Lage Bergström, however, says that this process is difficult, for once you have made yourself superfluous you have to find a new raison d'être. This problem is not tackled, maybe not even realised, in aid administrations.

He takes the example of NGOs created to send out volunteers, and when the volunteers are no longer needed, they have to find a new cause, or new member commitment, and in the end the whole organisation could disappear. He believes that these organisations in Sweden are slow in changing their orientation. Maybe it is always like that – learning is easy if you just fill new things into the old lines of thought. But to rethink altogether, because conditions have radically changed, is tough, intellectually and emotionally.

Lage Bergström insists that the catalytic effect of international cooperation is crucial as when people meet each other over cultural boundaries, processes generating learning and development effects can start. But these processes are hampered by the money involved in aid. All the money coming in due to the "disbursement goal", makes it impossible for the receiver to act on the learning in the encounter with partners. Money is meant to speed up the process, but in reality it delays it, because people at the receiving end have no time to think. And the delays strengthen the impression of donor superiority. But he thinks efforts are being made to avoid repeating mistakes, and mentions the development of sector support. In the 1970s the term meant coordination of the Swedish support to a

given sector. Now several donors attempt to coordinate their inputs within a given sector. This means that the support is no longer seen from the donor side, but from that of the receiving country.

Lage Bergström maintains that both money and ideas are needed in poor countries, but that if money is sent directly, as budget support, donors would have to compete with their ideas – and then they would have to be really *good* ideas. Such a development is a threat to donors, for it is hard to get ideas through, without the power of the purse. The crucial question in aid is – how much should donors be allowed to decide in aid just through their economic power?

Written Documentation

Evaluations

Evaluations are, or should be, the obvious method to promote learning about aid. When I started to work at Sida (NIB) in 1964, the word evaluation was not frequently used. Evaluation has now grown into a big issue, involving researchers and consultants.

Jan Eriksson, an agricultural economist, with extensive experience of field evaluations, for Sida as well as for international organisations, states:

> While all development cooperation today is about capacity building, it is doubtful whether efforts lead to the expected results. Unfortunately, very few attempts are made to measure if better capacity really leads to improved service. Does training of health staff mean better health services? Does training of school staff lead to better education of children? This is why it is hard to learn what was really good or bad. Evaluations are often too superficial, do not go deep enough. They should be more systematic and measure for a longer period of time, with hard data and interviews with those affected.

Most of the evaluations he has taken part in have dealt with output rather than impact. Terms of References have been a restriction, but also the fact that base line data are deficient.

Eriksson thinks the World Bank and IFAD are better at drawing conclusions, and more ready to learn, than bilateral organisations. Their evaluations are more analytic, more methodologically correct, and much more reliable.

Barbro Johansson agrees that evaluations of aid are often too narrow, and she thinks that evaluations are too academic. They meet few of the people concerned who could give them an overall picture of what has

happened during the project. In evaluating one must be open, and think historically. Measuring methods used in industrial countries cannot always be applied in her country.

...And other documentation

In the 1970s we used video material produced by Gerald Belkin, a Canadian film-maker. He had lived with Tanzanian farmers in the Ujamaa era, and registered their lives and opinions in video sequences that were later carefully translated. In normal films, the film-maker sorts out through editing what he/she thinks is important, and draws the conclusions for the viewer. Here, the "target group" gave unedited answers to many of the questions Sida might have put about their attitudes and philosophy. We showed these films at our briefing courses, and the future experts had to watch and listen to them. Here, many of them met for the first – in some cases perhaps the last – time those they were to help. They were astounded by the level of these discussions among illiterate farmers, some felt threatened, but most were impressed. The discussions following the films were in themselves an interesting learning process. But it was next to impossible to make Sida staff watch and listen to the video sequences. They never had time to listen and learn about the reality they were supposed to change.

As a writer I also asked myself why colleagues at Sida normally did not read books, nor Sida's own magazine, describing the reality of aid relations. Their reading, as in fact often my own, was many times restricted to "urgent matters", and did not normally include contextual or background material. It is of course a question of priorities; their reality was day to day relations with colleagues and bosses and an overwhelming amount of bureaucratic procedures. There was no time, I think, to search for content in their work, or to learn about the needs of their "target groups".

A study from 1995 by Mariken Vaa on the use of information in development agencies, indicates that there has not been much change. She quotes findings from organisational research claiming that organisations on the one hand systematically gather more information than is used, and on the other suppress data, so as not to be overwhelmed. She studies how information has been gathered – and neglected – in the field of Water Supply and Sanitation and thinks that the body of knowledge pertaining to how to promote health through water development

[164] Vaa, 1993, pp. 66, 69.
[165] World Bank, 1998, p. 22.

is stored on shelves and presumably figures prominently in the minds of professionals, but is in many cases persistently ignored by decision makers and implementers of projects.

She studies how Nordic development agencies have used evaluations in the water sector, and to what extent they have been influenced by these evaluations. She says:

> Project personnel...rarely reported that they had learned much from evaluations of the project they were involved in. Evaluation reports were not used as material for systematic discussion and study in project teams or by technical assistance personnel, they were merely "recommended reading", if available at all.[164]

Vaa asks herself, whether this is an example of suppression of information that would make decision-making difficult, but also whether the numerous evaluations are an example of an "irrational scramble for information that the organisation is not able to use". Vaa also points out that in her study of the Nordic agencies, no one refers to the existing agency libraries as "instruments for institutional learning". It is not evident, whether this is due to lack of adequate classification in the libraries, to inadequate content of the books and papers, or, simply, to lack of awareness and interest on the part of the consultants and the aid officials.

Popular Participation

"Beneficiary participation can quintuple project success"[165]

It is invariably stated in writings on aid today, that successful cooperation requires that those who are to benefit from a development programme should be involved. It used to be called 'popular participation', further evidence of donor superiority, as if it is not self-evident that people should take part in their own development! My informants confirm my impression that this is a field where the distance between words and reality is enormous.

In aid organisations, popular participation usually means that the people concerned should be consulted about a given project and take part in it. In Ethiopia where I documented a water project for women, based on popular participation, in the early 1980s, I realised that the words meant that people had to work for the project when they were told to.

---

[166] Johansson-Wieslander, 1989, p. 316.

The term was used by both parties, but its meaning was not analysed.

Barbro Johansson recalls an incident from the early days of Swedish-Tanzanian cooperation. During the preparations for the Nordic Tanganyika Project, a delegation was sent out to Kibaha near Dar-es-Salaam, which had been selected for a regional project. Barbro Johansson was representing Tanganyika on the tour. At Kibaha, the eminent visitors rushed through the premises, but Barbro Johansson was stopped by an old man, who was upset. The delegation was in a hurry, but Barbro Johansson sat down on the roadside with the man, and listened to what he said:

> White men come here and put up pins and poles and measure here and there – what is it all about? A rich European who is going to take my land?

Later she made the following comment on this:

> He was representing the people who lived in the area, I had to explain to him the plans for a school, agricultural development and health services and that they would get other fields if their land was taken. He was very grateful. So far nobody had talked to the farmers there![166] Unfortunately, this happens, both with foreign donors and my own compatriots. They forget this basic part of the job. And I am not sure they have learnt the lesson yet.

Sida and popular participation

Maj-Britt Amer, retired from Sida but previously representing Swedish aid in four different countries says:

> The most important factor for developing knowledge and attitudes within an aid organisation is the attitude to the receivers of aid. We must learn to understand and respect the will and needs of the recipients, a theme which crops up again and again at Sida, but has never really gained a foothold.

She recalls that when Swedish aid was criticised in 1969 by a parliamentary investigation for neglecting project reports, Sida tried to explain that Sweden could not take responsibility for everything done by the recipient country. Maj-Britt Amer thinks this was the first time Sida confronted the question: – Who owns the projects? She goes on to say:

> Before Swedish project directors phoned Stockholm for decisions. Then, the idea gained ground in Sida that the problems as well as the results and reporting of projects belonged to the receiver. One consequence of this new attitude to the recipient was the country programming that started

[167] RRV, 1988, p. 130.

in the early 1970s. But, I am not sure that the notion of "local ownership" really improved our work for good. Younger members of the administration today are no better than we used to be. The fundamental problem is that we are deeply and unconsciously convinced that we know best and are not really prepared to listen. So, the negligence is probably instinctive. Some officers may be prepared to listen, others do not understand the issue, or are incapable of finding ways to explore the will of the recipient. And recipients are forced to accept things they do not want, just to get the money.

The fact that popular ownership (participation) is constantly mentioned in Sida's work points to a genuine will to improve methods and results. But the repetition of the mantra is not the same as implementing it. There is also a change in focus. Maj-Britt Amer notes that Sweden used to support practical projects that produced concrete and reasonably good results. But Sida stopped building schools and health centres, providing farmers with credits for seeds and fertilizers, useful things for the poor that were not too difficult to produce – and started to work with curricula and institutions. Now Sweden has gone even further – and is supposed to achieve democracy in other countries – but how is that done?

Håkan Falk states that popular participation is most relevant in projects where the recipient can be identified, as in rural development projects, but in the reform of the Lithuanian judiciary, which he has been working with, it is hard to see what popular participation would mean. The process by which Lithuanian authorities explore the will of the people as regards the courts of the country is too complicated for aid partners to be involved in.

One of the problems pointed out by the National Audit Bureau is that rewards within the bureaucracy are not correlated to responsibility or results.[167] It is doubtful whether those who have proved particularly good at promoting popular participation and learning from experience, have been particularly successful either at Sida or in the partner administrations. Promotion in an aid bureaucracy has to do with expediency and readiness to listen to superiors, rather than with adherence to the essence of aid philosophy.

Jan Eriksson, a specialist in agricultural economy, sees the lack of popular participation as the fundamental problem in supporting the development of agriculture. He states that as in the case of participatory planning, a considerable apparatus for assessing data from the target group, has developed only recently. He thinks that this is a big step

---

[168] Albinsson, 1996.
[169] Vaa, 1993, p. 80.

forward. But in reality very few from the real target group take part in those workshops – most of the time the participants still represent administration and government, not farmers. And when a project starts, there is no mechanism for the target group to control how resources are used. Individual people have no chance to influence projects, nor are they ever encouraged to do so.

He also thinks there should be a continuous and automatic feed-back from the target group in the planning and running of projects, where people's opinions could be given and acted upon. But while farmers gratefully accept gifts like seeds and credits, they often dare not criticise. They are also independent, and normally not used to cooperating. But in Tanzania, the state has handed over land, pastures and forests to some villages. When the villagers have to manage something together, they see their common interests and find routines for cooperation. They realise their own strength and become capable of bringing their claims to the authorities.

Although NGO projects are not as troubled by the "disbursement goal" as Sida, they do not really provide more examples of popular participation. Why is this?

Folke Albinsson says that whoever donors are they always know best and want to decide about projects on their own. But even NGOs are expected to produce rapid results – and popular participation takes time. Normally project periods are too short.

Albinsson also feels that Sida's bureaucracy hampers attempts at popular participation in NGOs receiving funds from Sida. Albinsson's advice, as developed further in his book Dialog[168], is to start all project planning with a period of creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding, to give time and scope for contacts with the people concerned.

This is also Vaa's conclusion in her study on change of technology in the water sector:

> Projects that seriously take users into account take more time both to plan and to implement than interventions based on blueprints drawn up in technical ministries. The conflict between involving users and speedy implementation is usually resolved in favour of the latter. To prepare for users' participation, and to let it actually happen is time-consuming. The strengthening of local institutions suffers in a parallel manner. Expatriates tend to bypass them, because it is easier "to get things done" that way, rather than to spend time finding out how these institutions function and what their constraints are.[169]

It took time, but that time was needed

The Matara Integrated Rural Development Project, IRDP, in Sri Lanka, started in the late 1970s in a traditional manner with financial inputs from Sida, mostly hardware, into roads, electrification, health clinics etc. An evaluation in 1981 showed that very little had trickled down to the poor. Sida then made its aid conditional – funds should be used for the poor and project activities planned with popular participation.

The project reoriented and tried, among other things, various forms of mobilisation as well as support to village and women's associations. The next evaluation showed that the academic mobilizers were not accepted by the poor and that the associations had favoured their own, mainly well-to-do, members. The poor had still not been reached and there was still no popular participation. Since other efforts had been positive, the Swedish support to the project continued, however, and money was set aside for research and experimentation. Sida's demands on "reaching the poor" and "popular participation" were reiterated.

The project director saw it as a challenge. Villages with a large number of poor were selected. A programme for selection and training of local "social mobilizers" was set up, based on experiences from other Asian countries, e.g. the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, adapted to Sri Lankan conditions. Young people without an academic background started to work in the villages, to help villagers organise self-help groups and start micro-enterprises. The groups gave small loans to their individual members, and a credit service at project level granted larger loans, provided the groups had qualified, (by showing their credit worthiness through their own loan system) and guaranteed the repayment of an individual's loan.

The time was now ripe. Project activities in this field grew into a popular movement, and inspired state poverty alleviation programmes as well as other donors. A new evaluation in 1991 was very positive.

The social mobilisation part of the project was not run by Swedish experts, and cost very little. The interesting part of the story of Matara IRDP is seeing how donor and recipient learnt from each other in the process. Sida functioned as the social mobilizer did in the village – as a catalyst for improvement in ideas and systems. The commitment of individuals, at Sida as well as on the Sri Lankan side, added favourably

---

170 Wieslander, 1994, p. 8.

to the success of the programme.

I asked one of the women in a group why they needed a social mobilizer to realise they could make money from simple things like broomsticks or ropes. She answered: "Well, perhaps we had all those ideas inside us before, but we didn't know it."[170]

References

Albinsson, F., 1996, Dialog, *Biståndets nav*. Stockholm: Forum Syd.

Forss, K., 1987, *Evaluation of Technical Assistance Personnel from the Nordic Countries.* Stockholm: Sida.

Johansson-Wieslander, 1989, *Hem till Tanzania.* Stockholm: Rabén and Sjögren.

Nilsson-Wieslander, 1993, *Nu förstår vi äntligen helheten.* Stockholm: Sida.

Riksrevisionsverket (RRV), 1988, *Lär sig Sida?* Stockholm: Riksrevisionsverket.

Vaa, M., 1993:1, *Information – Ritual or Tool?* Oslo: Forum for Development Studies.

Vaa, M., 1993, *Towards More Appropriate Technologies? Experiences from the Water and Sanitation Sector*. Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute.

Wieslander, A., 1982, *Ett slags gåva.* Stockholm: Sida.

Wieslander, A., 1993, *Var kom skruvmejseln ifrån?* Stockholm: Sida.

Wieslander, A., 1994, *Reaching the Poor.* Stockholm: Sida.

World Bank, 1998, *Assessing Aid*. Overview. Washington D.C: The World Bank Group.

Part IV

Annex

Notes sent to the Authors

A proposal for a book on "Learning in development aid"

During recent years there has been a lot of interest in the subject of organisational learning in development co-operation. By learning we mean a process of interaction within organisations through which lessons from experience are accumulated, synthesised and brought into the development of policies, activities and modalities of work of the organisation. Although there is significant research on organisational learning in general, there are not that many studies which discuss learning within development co-operation. The idea of EGDI has been to contribute to this particular aspect of organisational learning. There is a particular need for learning studies which are policy relevant for development co-operation. A study has already been done and been published as a working paper by EGDI (1998:3). Although extensive and thorough, its relevance for policy formulation/development remains limited. Here we propose to approach the issue of policy relevance from a somewhat different perspective than is common in other studies.

For scholars specialising in the field of organisational learning the people working in aid administration, or very close to it, appear as the subject – the empirical material. The researcher doing the learning study transforms their experiences through his/her analytical perspective. The approach proposed here would allow actors in the field of development co-operation to present their own accounts of how they experience learning. In other words, it will provide them with an opportunity to tell their own story.

A book which is based on such a narrative method approach should become more accessible to a wider audience, not only to learning specialists. Thus, the book we intend to produce has the ambition to target all those who work in development co-operation, or have an interest in this field, but who are not necessarily prepared to go through a full-blown academic study on learning.

Our idea is to invite people with long experience of working with development aid inside and outside donor and recipient agencies to present their very personal reflections and ideas about learning in 10-15 pages. The contributors would have a rather free hand to approach the subject of learning as they think is most relevant. There are six simple questions that should guide them in their writing:

- Have they or the organisation within which they are/were active learned anything?
- Have they seen or evidenced that learning has taken place in the overall

development co-operation business?
- How and from what sources did they or their organisation learn?
- Did the organisation produce an environment conducive to learning?
- Were they able to apply their new knowledge in practice? If not why not?
- Was learning reflected in new policies and strategies? If not why not?

In order to help the contributors to focus their writing, and also provide an idea of the intention of the book, we would like to give a background to the debate on learning and some of the issues currently being discussed.

Is it correct to say that development co-operation has not learned from experience? If learning is evidenced by changed development practices, then learning has occurred. Since the early 1950s, the theory and practice of development co-operation have changed dramatically. What is driving these changes? Are actors responding mainly to the impact of external events, or are changes the result of actors' increased knowledge about what works and what does not in aid practice?

Learning is a process and is defined by us as changing knowledge structures. It begins with the acquisition of knowledge and ends in changed behaviour. We are interested in learning as something that changes the way things are done in an organisation.

There are many ways in which new knowledge is acquired. For development aid the evaluation system is an important means for acquiring new knowledge as well as distributing it. But the evaluation system has its weaknesses as a learning medium. In a study of learning in the Norwegian aid administration it was found that few learned much from evaluations. This is particularly so if evaluations do not address specific aspects of knowledge. An organisation is weak when it comes to more abstract knowledge: political, social and cultural. Even if the information is of high quality, it is not likely that the members of the organisation will be able to absorb it and transform it into new knowledge structures.

What kind of learning is regarded as important for an individual in an aid agency? In most cases people place a high value on knowledge that it directly related to their work tasks. You are interested in knowledge that enables you to perform better. Usually, but not always, this means knowledge which is practically useful, but sometimes even more strategically oriented knowledge.

What are the weaknesses of aid evaluations? Briefly one could summarise them as follows:

- Not enough is being evaluated.
- The analytical tools are not good enough, and are not fully utilised.
- The objectives of aid are not always measurable.
- The beneficiaries of aid are seldom asked about their opinion.

- The evaluations carried out do not possess enough quality to function as a reliable and accurate base for new knowledge.

If the evaluation system is not fully equipped to provide new knowledge, and we can conclude that learning has taken place, the question is perhaps not only whether we learn or not, but how we learn. What are the sources from which individuals learn? Studies have shown that people learn from a multitude of sources, not least from their own practical experience.

Furthermore, for development aid the issue is also: Who is learning? Aid is a relationship between two parties: a donor and a recipient. Do both learn, do they learn the same thing? These questions point towards another important dimension of learning in development aid – effective learning might require that both parties learn, and that they have an opportunity to share their experience and to work out an agenda of action.

Perhaps the fundamental question is not to develop systems and procedures that generate new knowledge but to analyse what the conditions are for effective learning. Can they be improved? The point of departure is the fact that aid agencies are administrative bureaucracies, requiring stable environments in order to function in an optimal way. Development co-operation works in complex and turbulent environments quite far removed from the ideal environment of the typical bureaucracy. In addition, the practice of development co-operation is probably one of the most complex activities undertaken. How can these conflicting situations be reconciled in order to provide a setting conducive to effective learning?

Contributors

Elliot Berg received his Ph.D. degree from Harvard, and was Assistant Professor of Economics there in the early 1960s. He was Professor of Economics at the University of Michigan for many years and Director of its Center for Research in Economic Development. He ran his own consulting firm, then was Vice President at Development Alternatives and now divides his time between consulting, writing, and teaching at the University of the Auvergne, in France. Mr. Berg has spent many years in developing countries, as adviser, researcher, and visiting professor, has served on many advisory bodies and panels, and has written extensively on development issues. He was the main author of the 1981 World Bank report, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, which was recently named by *Foreign Affairs* magazine as one of the six most influential books on Africa in the past 75 years. He edited a 1988 volume *Policy Reform and Equity, and* was also the main author of a 1993 United Nations-sponsored book, *Rethinking Technical Cooperation: Reforms for Capacity Building in Africa* and has published numerous articles.

Louk Box is director of the Maastricht based European Centre for Development Policy Management and professor at Utrecht University's Institute for Development Studies. He has continuously moved between academia and public service working in the Ministries of Planning (Brazil), Education (Netherlands) and Foreign Affairs (Netherlands), as well as at California State University, Nijmegen University and Wageningen Agricultural University. His past research has dealt with organisation of educational broadcasting, planning in higher education, experimenting cultivators and traditional researchers and agrarian knowledge networks. He is currently interested in the transformation of European development policies, and in issues at the interface of cultural change and international co-operation. He is a board-member of the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development.

Jerker Carlsson is Associate Professor in Economic History and Adjunct Professor at the Department of Peace and Development Research at the University of Gothenburg. He is currently engaged by the Nordic Africa Institute to work with the research programme "Aid Effectiveness in Africa" and "EU Aid for Poverty Reduction".

Kai-ming Cheng is Chair Professor of Education and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Hong Kong, and also currently visiting Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Professor Cheng received his PhD at the University of London Institute of Education. Over the years, he has undertaken various studies and consultancies commissioned by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, IIEP and other international organisations. He is internationally known for his research in Chinese rural

areas and in cultural comparisons, which is one of the courses he teaches at Harvard. He is also known for his interest in higher education administration, IT development in education, and qualitative research methodology.

Gus (Gösta) Edgren holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics and Statistics from the University of Stockholm. He is a labour and development economist with experience from Swedish trade unions (TCO) and from international labour organisations. He has worked in aid administration for thirty years in different parts of the world, for UNDP, ILO, Sida and the Swedish Foreign Ministry. He is currently Sweden's Ambassador to Vietnam.

Margareta Grape has a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Uppsala University, Sweden. She was employed by the International Centre of the Swedish Labour Movement for 16 years (1978-95), and since 1995 she has worked for the City of Stockholm, at first developing a municipal programme to combat social and ethnic exclusion and after that as director of the international department of the City Hall. She is currently the Director of Stockholm's Official Convention Bureau. She also served as a member of the board of directors for Sida during the seventies and the eighties.

Jacques Hallak holds a Ph.D. (Doctorat d'Etat es Lettres) from the University of Caen and a Ph.D. (Doctorat es Sciences, Troisième Cycle) from the University of Paris. He has had many years experience in the field of economics and planning. After a period with the Ministry of Finance he joined IIEP in 1965 as a programme specialist until 1980, and later after having held posts with the Bureau of Studies and Programming, and the Division of Financing of Education at UNESCO, as well as being Senior Economist at the World Bank, he became Director of IIEP in October 1988 where he served until November 1999. He was also appointed as Director of the International Bureau of Education, Geneva in March 1998. Mr Hallak is the author and co-author of numerous books and articles on educational costs and finance, human resource development, planning the location of schools, and policies for educational change and development.

Kenneth King is Director of the Centre of African Studies and Professor of International and Comparative Education at the University of Edinburgh. His research interests over the years have focused on aid policy towards all subsectors of education; on technical and vocational education and training; and on the special character of micro-enterprises and the informal economies of Africa. He has just completed a DFID-funded research project "Learning to Compete: Small Enterprises in the Age of Globalisation", which has a particular focus on South Africa, Kenya and Ghana. He has recently commenced a three year ESRC-funded project on "Learning to make policy: Donor agencies and international development".

Kirsti Lintonen received her Masters in Political Sciences from Helsinki University in 1969. She has worked in the Finnish Foreign Ministry since 1971 both in Finland and abroad and from 1990 to 1994 she was the Finnish Ambassador in Namibia. At present she is the Under-Secretary of State for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Finland. Since 1996 she has been on the Board of Governors for the African Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, International Fund for Agricultural Development, and Asian Development Bank as well as having been Chairman of the Board for Finnfund since 1998.

Narciso Matos has since January 1996 been Secretary General of the Association of African Universities, an association of 151 universities and equivalent teaching and research institutions in Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Organic Chemistry/Natural Products/Medicinal Plants (1985) from the Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany; a B.Sc. (1973) and Licenciatura (M. Sc.) 1976, from the University Eduardo Mondlane (UEM), Mozambique. He was Vice Chancellor of UEM from 1990 to 1995. He has published over 50 papers on chemistry, university management and other higher education issues, and on development and international academic co-operation. His main professional interests are in education, specifically higher education and research policy and management.

Thandika Mkandawire received his Masters degrees in economics at Ohio State University 1967 and the University of Stockholm (1970). At present he is Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) in Geneva. Previously, he was, for 10 years, Executive Secretary of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Dakar, Senegal. He has taught at the Universities of Stockholm and Zimbabwe, and is author of several publications on social sciences in Africa and on problems of policy making, adjustment and democratisation.

Ernesto Schiefelbein graduated in Teaching from the Universidad Técnica and in Economics from the University of Chile, and later received an Ed. D. from Harvard University in 1970. He has previously been the Chilean Minister of Education, Director of UNESCO's Regional Office of Education for Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as Educational Planner for the World Bank, and ILO-PREALC. At present he is President of Universidad Santo Tomás and also a member of several editorial boards of professional journals and boards of educational associations, and has published numerous educational research findings relating to Latin America.

Paulina Schiefelbein has a teaching degree and "Licenciatura en Educación" from the Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación (UMCE), Santiago, Chile. She has previously been a consultant for UNESCO, OAS and

UNDP and Assistant Researcher for the Corporación de Promoción Universitaria (CPU). In 1997 she became a Researcher at the Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educación (CIDE) in Chile. She has contributed to several publications on education in Latin America.

Astri Suhrke received her Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Denver (USA) in 1969. She is a Senior Research Fellow at the Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen. Previously a Professor of International Relations at the American University, Washington D.C. she has written widely on subjects concerning the humanitarian consequences of conflict, and their management. Her recent studies include Early Warning and Conflict Management. Vol. 2 of the Joint Evaluation of International Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, 1996 (co-author), and The Kosovo Refugee Crisis: An Independent Evaluation of UNHCR's Preparedness and Emergency Response, 2000 (project leader and principal author). She is currently working on a study of organisational learning in the UN system, supported by the Norwegian Research Council.

Naoki Suzuki holds a doctor's degree in City and Regional Planning, from Cornell University. He is currently a Researcher at the Foundation of Advanced Studies on International Development (FASID), Tokyo, and teaches Planning for International Development at Waseda University. He has been interested in progressive and critical planning in international development with a special focus on the organizational dynamics/learning of international development organizations. He recently published "Inside NGOs" through Intermediate Technology Publications in the UK (1998).

Willi A. Wapenhans holds degrees in agricultural sciences and economics. He earned a doctorate, qualified as a professor, and taught economics at the Justus-Liebig University in Giessen before joining the World Bank. Appointed to the President's Council in 1975 he became Senior Vice President in 1987. After retirement from the World Bank in 1992 he served as economic adviser to Belarus, and as secretary of the IMF/World Bank Development Committee's Task Force on Multilateral Development Banks. He is a member of ODC's Board, and of the International Advisory Board of the Center of Development Research in Bonn, Germany.

Anna Wieslander has a BA from Lund and Uppsala Universities and is a trained teacher. She worked for many years for Sida (Swedish International Development Authority), as Director of its training centre and as Information Officer. She has written several books and numerous articles on international aid, especially in Africa, and produced video films for educational purposes, primarily in Ethiopia. She worked as a Sida officer in Tunisia, and as a member of a video team in Haiti. Retired from Sida she now works as a consultant.

Lennart Wohlgemuth has been the Director of the Nordic Africa Institute since 1993. Prior to this he worked for many years for Sida, most recently as Assistant Director General and Head of the Sector Department. From 1989 until 1999 he was a board member and chairman of the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) and between 1992 and 1998 a board member of the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), Harare.