

NETWORKING AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

**Reflections after the Annual Conference of the
European Association for International Education**

Margarita Langthaler

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Experience of international development cooperation has shown that local institutional and personnel capacities are crucial in order to achieve sustainable development and poverty reduction. On a global level, however, the gap between industrial and developing countries in terms of technological and scientific capacities tends to widen rather than to narrow. Consequently, capacity development has become a central focus of international development and educational cooperation. Networking between academic institutions is considered to be an efficient instrument for the creation of high quality scientific institutions in the South. These and other related issues were addressed during a recent panel discussion on “Networking and Capacity Development in Developing Countries” held last September during the Annual Conference of the European Association for International Education in Vienna.¹ The present article draws on the discussion and tries to give an overview of lessons learnt from Austrian and international experience. It furthermore sets out the broader context of education for development on a global level.

A situation of “scientific neo-colonialism”

Despite several decades of development efforts, the disparities between industrial and developing countries are still profound. Yet, what is most worrying is that they are even increasing rather than diminishing. This is not only true for the economic level, but as well for the science and technology capacities of developing countries. There is, as Professor Denny points out, a situation of scientific and intellectual neo-colonialism in many countries of the South. Availability of knowledge, technologies and data is limited in southern countries and scientists have to go to the North to get access to it. However, most of the studies undertaken on the south are still carried out by northern scientists. Frequently, northern scientists come to the South to collect data or undertake studies sometimes relying on services and human resources of local institutions. Yet, the research objectives are those of the North and neither local needs nor local realities are being taken into account. This is what Professor Mathooko calls “research tourism” which, besides not creating capacities in the South, contributes to disseminate a distorted knowledge of southern reality in the North. There is an apparent mechanism of export of information and knowledge from the South to the North for the sole benefit of the latter.

As a consequence of this situation, southern scientific institutions are hardly in the position to reply to the manifold needs in terms of problem-oriented research that their societies require. It is still difficult, if not impossible, for developing countries to create a holistic and self-sufficient scientific culture. The reality is rather that of fragmented and fragile scientific institutions dependent on and subservient to the North. This is reflected, for instance, by the imbalance between applied and

¹ Professor Patrick Denny, UNESCO-IHE Institute in Delft, Netherlands, Professor Jude Mathooko, Njoro University, Kenya and the author were co-speakers at the panel discussion.

fundamental sciences in the South, the latter being considered of little, if any, importance for developing countries. Consequently, basic sciences hardly ever receive any support. However, they are, as Prof. Denny stresses, crucial to form overall problem-solving capabilities.

Can Capacity Development help?

To respond to this situation, capacity development has become a lead approach within international development cooperation. What is, however, “Capacity Development”? In fact, the term has a very broad variety of meanings. Within the international development community it is being referred to as an instrument, a process, an objective, a general approach to development and the reason for as well as the overall solution to the failure of many development attempts so far.

UNDP and World Bank generically define capacity development as the process by which individuals form their abilities to achieve development goals (UNDP 1997 and World Bank 1996). Many donor agencies have adopted that rather vague definition. In general, there appears to be wide spread consensus among the development players that capacity development is an inherently positive concept. However, very few academic studies on the very meaning of the notion exist.

However, critics assert that since capacity development lacks a clear definition it risks becoming a meaningless buzzword. Mick Moore, highly critical of the concept, draws its origin from the more precise notion “institution building” and claims that capacity development is such a vague term that it mainly serves aid agencies to reposition themselves and to refresh their already outdated development vocabulary (Moore 1995: 93-94). Peter Lund-Thomsen argues that capacity development is far from being a neutral technical term, but has deep political implications. It is being used by donors to impose their viewpoints on organisations in the South and by recipients in the South to cover imprecise project applications and improve their possibilities of being eligible for funding (Lund-Thomsen 2003 : 77-78).

Thus, the concept of capacity development risks losing its development potential if it is not being referred to in a precise context and with a clear definition.

For educational cooperation, at least for the Austrian experience, capacity development means to support and foster problem-solving capabilities in the South. This approach leads Austrian Development Cooperation to give great importance to higher education and research as essential institutions where societies form their problem-solving capabilities.

Networking as a an efficient means

Among the many means of capacity development in educational cooperation, building networks has assumed a prominent role. In a world of continuously reduced financial resources networking has sometimes become a necessity to respond to growing constraints. Networks can open up new possibilities and create synergies.

They allow to share information and knowledge and to address similar problems collectively.

There are no precise criteria to define a network. Yet, experience in international educational and scientific cooperation has shown that efficient networks have to have systematic structures and a long-term perspective in order to contribute to the creation of scientific self-sufficiency and sustainability. Networks have to leave a legacy behind them, as Prof. Mathooko puts it. Mostly, a network will be built on the basis of a common professional or scientific specialization and it will link institutions rather than individuals. Also, common regional problems can lay the basis for inter-regional networks since they can help the single countries to address their problems more efficiently. Local researchers increasingly stress the need for such networks, however, they frequently lack the necessary resources.

What kind of Capacity Development?

Capacity development and networking have become fashionable approaches in educational cooperation. They are, however, not always an efficient contribution to sustainable development. What are the conditions that make capacity development and networking successful?

Educational experts and researchers from the South argue that the main focus of developmental education policy has to be increased access to high quality educational facilities in the South. This particularly applies to tertiary education where many developing countries lack strong institutions. The process of knowledge and expertise acquirement tends to be transferred to the North at the expense of local institution building. Also, foreign support to higher education is often channelled through scholarship programmes in the North. While specific training of southern experts at northern academic institutions remains important, experience has shown that developmental effects are higher if the same resources are spent on improving higher education in the South. Lower costs allow for the training of more persons and local offers increase the possibilities of socially vulnerable or disadvantaged groups to get access to education. Thus, women and rural populations, who generally have more social responsibilities, but less resources and are less mobile, are among those who most benefit from locally operating higher education institutions.

Similarly, support of institutions should be prioritised before support to individuals. Highly educated experts without functioning institutions and a favourable environment tend to leave their countries. Brain drain from the South to the North has been one of the most common phenomena in scientific culture during the past decades. Thus, capacity development means not only to train experts, but also to help southern countries to build up self-sufficient scientific institutions and an environment where experts can serve their countries' needs. To that regard, "sandwich programmes" have proved to be a valuable tool. They support the improvement of existing southern institutions and respond to the need of providing scientific expertise available in the North, which often is still a precondition for the creation of high-quality institutions in the South. Sandwich programmes offer educational programmes at different levels combining modules at northern and

southern academic institutions. In doing so, they foster cooperation networks or partnerships between the involved institutions.

Among other experts, Prof. Denny argues that capacity development programmes and scientific networks that are exclusively or mainly North-driven do neither increase local capacity nor do they contribute to development. Consequently, southern ownership of projects and networks has to be more than a word. Programmes and networks have to reflect the concrete needs of the developing countries rather than the research interests of the northern partner institutions or donors. Participation and accountability from the involved institutions in the South have to be ensured to the highest possible degree throughout all stages of the activity, from needs assessment through final evaluation.

Given the limited amount of available resources, increased utilization of synergies has become essential. To that regard, networking is a powerful tool. In fact, the notion of networking does not only refer to the creation of networks as a form of institutionalised cooperation, but to an overall methodological approach. Programmes and institutions generally present numerous points of intersection and developmental effects can be considerably higher if these are used to create synergies. Furthermore, duplications can be avoided through cooperation and dissemination of information between the institutions. Alumni networks can increase the sustainability of educational programmes. They help to keep the graduates updated on scientific contents and ensure wider-spread dissemination of the acquired knowledge.

Similarly, educational programmes should comply with the criterion of the so called “multiplier effect”. This implies the integration of strategies to most effectively use and disseminate acquired knowledge and skills. Programmes should contain didactical units designed to train participants to work as trainers themselves after completion of the programme. Research programmes in the North should accept candidates upon a job certificate issued by an appropriate institution in the South. Thus, application of the newly acquired knowledge is ensured to the benefit of the involved institution. Brain drain is more likely to be prevented.

Crosscutting issues have increasingly become a central focus of development agencies. Gender mainstreaming, support of rural population and socially disadvantaged groups or environmental issues are comprised in many development strategies. With regard to educational programmes they should be reflected not only by a high number of participants from the respective social groups, but also in the curriculum and the teaching methods.

Contrary to what is generally asserted, doubts have been raised with regard to the development potential of Information and Communication Technologies for educational purposes. Among others, Prof. Mathooko as an experienced African scientist and teacher views the application of ICT in southern higher education critically. According to his experience, the implementation of ICT presents unbearable costs to southern institutions and therefore tends to further limit rather than increase access to higher education in the South. Although the South has to try to keep up with these new technologies, there should be no illusions with regard to their overall problem-solving potential. In any case, the application of ICT should not

replace efforts to provide southern institutions with functioning libraries and information centres.

Studies have shown that there is lack of consciousness and knowledge on the importance of capacity development and generally development issues among both the participants in educational programmes and the respective institutions. This is particularly true for programmes in the North. Unfortunately, awareness of and interest for development issues tends to decrease rather than to augment in Western societies. This is being reinforced by neo-liberal and market-driven policies in the education sector which consider economic profitability as the main value and objective. These policies also impact the overall social environment and influence both participants in educational programmes and institutions. Consequently, there is an apparent need to broadly raise awareness and knowledge on development questions and to create a supportive environment, particularly in the North.

What kind of education for what kind of development?

Strategies in educational cooperation should not be viewed separately from the broader social context on a global level. Education for development is, in fact, not an abstract issue, but tendencies and evolutions, successes and failures have to be considered as part of a broader picture.

Currently, the education sector is facing an attack on world-wide level in terms of liberalisation and privatisation. Main advocates of the privatisation policy as well as its main players are powerful international organisations such as the World Bank or the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Education is increasingly being defined through the notion of “employable competencies”, a conception which links education mainly to the objective of economic profitability. The introduction of overall parameters of measurement, like for instance through the *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*, indicates that global policies aim at turning education into a commodity (Seitz 2003).

The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of WTO will be one of the main instruments serving this policy. In fact, through complete liberalisation it aims at limiting or even abolishing national sovereignty over the education sector in a single country. This implies the loss of democratic control over educational content and methods for the benefit of adapting educational offer towards the needs of business only. One of the most immediate outcomes of privatisation of education will be a class system. Access to education at any level – in particular good quality education - will be limited to those who are in a position to pay for it.

In developing countries, this process is already well advanced since the state apparatus is usually weaker and available resources are more limited. International organisations such as the World Bank assert that privatisation will help to deliver on the UN-Millennium Development Goals of Education for All by 2015. However, studies have shown that there is no evidence of positive impacts of privatisation (UNDP Human Development Report 2003), but rather the contrary: Privatisation of education tends to increase inequality and inefficiency (Klees 2002).

In the context of academic mobility and networking, rather worrying tendencies have appeared on a world-wide but also European level. In order to narrow the scientific gap, scientific cooperation with the North is crucial for developing countries. However, the current EU-policy for Higher Education prioritises to increase the attractiveness of the European Educational Market in order to engage in competition over the lead role with the US educational market. Consequently, development issues are to a large extent put aside. European programmes which target the creation of networks hardly include or relate to the development agenda. Programmes exist for all regions of the world, except for sub-Saharan Africa. The planned Worldwide ERASMUS Programme aims as well at “engaging in academic cooperation with those countries that have an equal or similar level of development”², leaving aside the most needy but less profitable regions of the world.

In the framework of strategies for educational cooperation, capacity development and networking have an important role to play. They should, however, be considered in the context of overall tendencies on the educational and economic level in which development cooperation is inscribed. In fact, efficient strategies that aim at building holistic capacities for sustainable development should comprise the capability to reflect global economic and power-related structures.

Margarita Langthaler
Austrian Foundation for Development Research
Department of Educational Cooperation
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² Cfr.: Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on Establishing a programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through co-operation with third countries (Erasmus World) (2004-2008), COM (2002), 401 final, 17.07.2002

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European Centre for Development Policy Management:
<http://www.ecdpm.org/>

UNDP on Capacity Development:
<http://www.undp.org/capacity/>

The African Capacity Building Foundation:
<http://www.acbf-pact.org/>

ADEA – Association for the Development of Education in Africa:
<http://www.adeanet.org/>

The UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa:
<http://www.unesco-iicba.org/>