Introduction

Practitioner-led research in Africa

Rinus van Klinken SNV Ghana

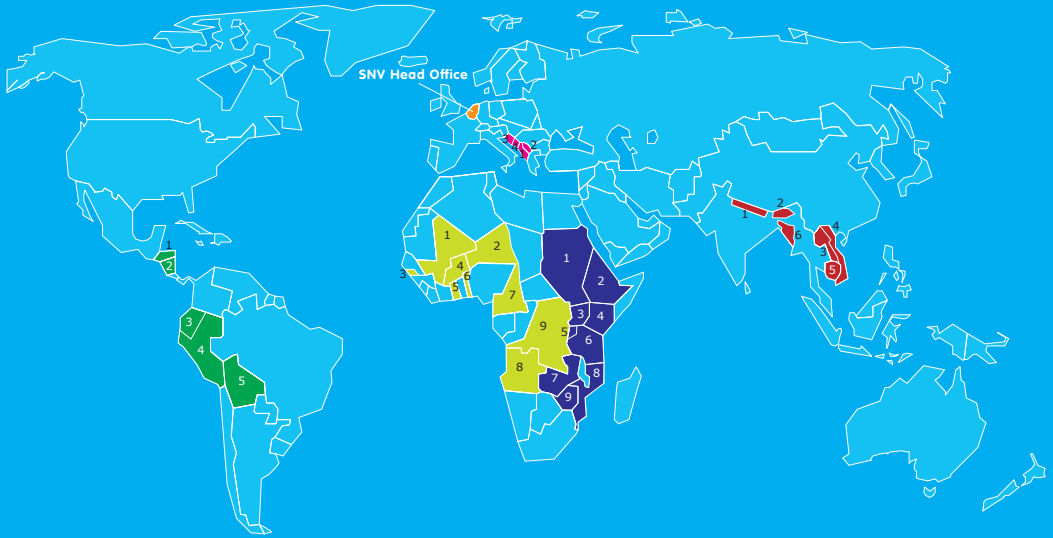**Gerard Prinsen** Massey University New Zealand

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Foreword

SNV, the Netherlands Development Organisation, is active in Africa since the early sixties. The evolution of its services reflects the changes in Africa and the changing demand for support. Early on, throughout the seventies and early eighties it was basically a service of Dutch volunteers to contribute actively to Africa's development. They would construct schools or health centres, water systems and roads or bridges. In the eighties the organisation changed into an organisation sending Dutch professionals, working in development programmes financed by the Dutch Government. They were usually responsible for the management of projects that hired local expertise to construct what was called "social infrastructure". The growing potential and quality of African technical and management capacity led SNV in the nineties to rely more and more on staff from African origin. Collaboration with local governmental structures and with Non Governmental Organisations was intensified. And it was realised that also project management and the handling of funds for public investments is the responsibility of African structures and institutions. That is why SNV focused from the year 2000 onwards to capacity strengthening services that would support, but not replace African development institutions. The main challenge for its advisors became to support existing African organisations, in local government, or in the NGO-sector at regional or national level, to find solutions for their development challenge, making optimal use of the existing human and financial resources.

The current publication is a proof of the continuous reflective role of SNV advisors. They do not only provide advisory services in many African countries, they also reflect on the systems they are assisting, they do research the effectiveness of development interventions and question their own role. This publication is a fine proof of this effort, a current "state of the art" of what SNV is doing and is engaged in.

We wish to thank professor Patrick Chabal and Gerard Prinsen who acquainted our advisers with the current academic debate regarding development issues in Africa and supported them to do research that would meet academic standards. The result is a very interesting

crossover of practitioners contributing to the academic debate. The papers address different issues like the positive or negative aspects of the introduction of positive discrimination in the election process in order to support women to enter the political arena; or the factors that matter when local governments want to increase internal revenues; or the role that decentralisation and partnerships can play in improving basic services in communities. One study showed that evidence of the effect of capacity strengthening services on the performance of local authorities is difficult to obtain. But results like this enable us to underpin the need for more focus on partnerships that do target visible outcomes, results and impact in the improvement of the economy, a better health situation, on equal and full access to education for boys and girls and on improvement of the living conditions of people in under-serviced communities. Because that is where SNV has committed itself to, that African organisations at governmental and non governmental level will show visible, measurable and remarkable results in improving incomes and public basic services.

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1 Introduction

Few doubt that Africa's present record of social and economic development is poor. Following the high expectations and confidence in the period after Independence, the last two decades have seen a deterioration of many social and economic indicators. Almost all African countries had a lower Gross Domestic Product per capita by the turn of the millennium than at independence. Although the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s have now been replaced by policies that focus on poverty reduction and an increase in donor funding of expenditure in the public sector programmes for health and education, no clear impact can be discerned yet. In its review of the Millennium Development Goals, now broadly accepted as reflecting desirable outcomes of development, the UN Millennium Project under its director Prof. Jeffrey Sachs noted: "Sub-Saharan Africa is the epicentre of crisis, with continuing food insecurity, a rise of extreme poverty, stunningly high child and maternal mortality and large numbers of people living in slums, and a widespread shortfall for most of the MDGs" (2005: 9).

It is debatable whether this poor record is mainly due to internal factors ('bad governance, corruption') or external ones ('globalisation, unfair trading'). Unsurprisingly, analysts recommend possible solutions that are in line with their views on the balance between internal and external causes of Africa's poor developmental record.[1] The Commission for Africa (2005) basically argues that Africa's poor record is explained by both internal and external causes when it pleads for three key measures: more donor funds to support better services and build infrastructure, a better international trading system to support African exports as well as improved governance in the form of policies and capacities. With respect to the latter it brings together the dominant views when it notes: "At the core of the governance problem in many parts of Africa is the sheer lack of capacity of national and local government ministries, and the problems of recruiting and keeping skilled staff, equipped and motivated to do their job" (2005: 155).

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1   What is surprising is that there is rather limited debate on the role that development aid has in explaining Africa's development record.

So, as part of the wider governance debate, capacity development has assumed an increasingly important role in addressing development issues over the past few years. In the early years of the development industry, in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus was on creating the necessary skills and abilities through knowledge transfer in order to stimulate development. But even as educational levels improved and technical skills became available on the local market, development outcomes did not improve. The planned and duly completed development projects had little catalytic effects. Within development aid a shift took place from creating local effects through development projects to aiming for macro-impact through building national capacities. Yet, the underlying instrumental assumption of the necessity of transferring knowledge from North to South has hardly changed.

Within the instrumental approach, "weak capacity is a matter of poor systems and incentives, poor information, technical inability, untrained staff and lack of money" (Commission on Africa, 2005: 12). The current sector programmes in many African countries - consisting of a mixture of policy reforms, organisational improvements and training programmes - mostly operate on the basis of this instrumental approach to capacity development. Integral to this approach is the concept of 'roll-out'. On the basis of a design concept (usually informed by international experiences), a particular piece of organisational innovation is introduced to a target audience of 'street-level bureaucrats' through a large training programme.

However, many past and current capacity development approaches are criticized for undermining local capacities by displacing local alternatives, distorting local priorities and accountability systems, causing confusion by initiating simultaneous and uncoordinated reform initiatives, giving preference to foreign and donor-country based expertise, ignoring local wishes and with a fixation on tangible outputs rather than process dynamics (Fukuda-Parr et al, 2002: 7-8). The underlying assumption needs to be addressed, which takes for granted "that it is possible to ignore existing capacities in developing countries and replace them with knowledge and systems produced elsewhere – a form of development as displacement, rather than development as transformation" (8).

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As a result of these criticisms, a more transformative approach to capacity development has emerged as an alternative to the dominant technical approach. This approach is based on the notion that "development is fundamentally about transformation" and that its role must be "to facilitate the transformation of society by identifying barriers and catalysts for change." To play that role, a close understanding of how societies work is crucial. Capacity development approaches will then go beyond being "task-driven and mission-oriented", taking a systems-view of development (Malik, 2002: 24-27). Within this approach, there is more attention paid to process, rather than to product.

The Dutch development agency SNV/Netherlands Development Organisation[2] has been moving towards this transformative approach since 2000. Its teams of experts, posted within developing countries, no longer have the task to fill gaps, get projects implemented or transfer knowledge, but have a mandate to provide advice to local organisations by helping them to acquire knowledge. The initial demands for advice are often task oriented (e.g. requests to assist in the development of a strategic plan or in getting the finance department performing better) but these initial advisory services build the trust and goodwill which serve in a subsequent phase as the basis for joint reflections on the efficacy and effectiveness of the local organisations' operations and the fit between the external environment and the local organisations' mission, structures and capacities. The basic question for SNV has moved from: 'how to improve the income of citizens and how to bring services to people' towards 'how to increase the capacity of a society to improve its economy and to bring basic services to its population'.

In order to equip SNV and its advisers better for the demands of the transformative approach to capacity development, SNV established a series of four Learning Platforms for its local governance advisers in Africa. Taking an academic perspective, Prof Patrick Chabal (King's

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2   SNV is an independent organisation, which obtains the overall majority of its funding from the Dutch government. It employs 1.200 experts in more than 33 countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Balkan (Europe). It is a subsidised provider of advisory services to local organisations and serves clients who would otherwise lack advisory support. SNV is active in three thematic areas: private sector development, local governance and natural resources.

College London) and Gerard Prinsen (Massey University New Zealand) were asked to accompany 53 senior advisers into research within their own working environment, relating their operational activities to the currently salient issues within the academic governance debate. This publication presents 10 research papers, describing the 'state of the art' of research within SNV Africa, that were presented in the 2005 AEGIS London Conference and in the 2006 ASAUK London Conference.[3] It also includes two contributions from the two academics. Patrick Chabal was kind enough to allow us to include his public lecture delivered at the invitation of SNV at the Norfolk hotel, Nairobi, on 22 March, 2005. Gerard Prinsen included a research presented in the AEGIS conference mentioned above.

2 Academics and practitioners

Research is carried out by academics. Practitioners apply their knowledge and skills in practice. If this neat division ever reflected reality, it is less true now than before. Research is indeed sometimes carried out by academics purely for the purpose of advancing theory. This approach is exemplified by the anthropologist, who after years of study publishes a thick monograph on the relations between successive generations in a small Kenyan village (Spencer, 1988). His conclusion that "The Maasai have certain practices relating to the family that would have intrigued Freud, and an age organisation whose cumulative wisdom associated with the divisions of age resembles Plato's Divided Line" (270) may reflect a theoretical breakthrough, but has otherwise little relevance for development practitioners. It merely feeds the stereotype, much beloved by development workers, of the 'ivory tower' researcher.

On the other hand, development practitioners hardly document their experiences or seek to contribute to a wider body of knowledge; their writings primarily serve reporting purposes. And if practitioners do write for a wider public, many tend to locate their experiences

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3   AEGIS is the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies, a network of nineteen academic research centres from twelve European countries. ASAUK is the Africa Studies Association of the United Kingdom.

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within current orthodoxies, write uncritically about the successes of their interventions, often with a short time horizon and based on narrowly-defined indicators. Leaving out the wider and historic perspective, the 'best practice' genre can rightly be criticised for its shallowness and self-praise. This easily suits the academics' perception of development workers as being uncritical.

And yet, there is an increasing awareness that practitioners and academics can mutually benefit from a closer cooperation. The academics' wider, historic or comparative views can gain in depth and incisiveness by the practitioners' intimate knowledge of detail. The development practitioners' understanding of – and advice to – a particular local organisation would be enhanced if it was contextualised and build on a wider and thorough analysis of similar cases. In the last few years there have been quite a few fruitful efforts to bridge this theory/practice divide.

Examples of these bridges can be found in the use of research in the formulation of policy (e.g. Ehrhart, 2004). The recent rise of research think-tanks is an indication of this trend (e.g. ESRF in Tanzania, EAPP in Kenya and numerous others). Also the use of academics as consultants in (more or less) independent project or programme evaluations is a well-established practice. Researchers are also used by development organisations for studying and solving particular problems, as trainers to improve organisational skills and to document organisational practices (Roper 2002). At a more general level, there is an increasing concern for making academic research more relevant to practitioners, as "(m)elding the best that academia can offer with the knowledge needs of practicing managers is the way to build a knowledge base…" (Streib et al, 2001). Similarly, development practitioners regularly trod off to universities on (sponsored) trips for professional courses to be exposed to a wider set of views, unrelated to today's policy guidelines.

More recent are efforts to move beyond the bridging of the theory/practice divide by merely the occasional crossing-over to the other side. This can be in the form of 'joint learning', in which on the basis of respecting each others role and logic, a process is devised to develop "an organisational culture that promotes and rewards inquiry that tests basic assumptions, practices and beliefs on an ongoing

basis" (Roper, 2002: 341). In other instances, research plays a role in the monitoring of (the impact of) development interventions, particularly where it concerns projects with a process-oriented character or more policy-based interventions (examples are Uphoff 1996, and Mosse, Farrington and Rew, 1998).

The project reported on in this paper, a so-called Learning Platform, takes the efforts one step further by seeking a certain fusion of roles. Development practitioners carry out research of their own accord, with the academic support concentrated on the contextualisation of research design beforehand and afterwards in the write-up of a paper. The research carried out by practitioners in this learning platform may, first, make a contribution to the academic debate (i.e. by presenting a few studies in an academic conference). Second, the research thus carried out by practitioners may have improved their analytical skills as advisers to local organisations, or even have been part of their involvement with local organisations.

3   The learning platforms

With its decision to move towards a transformative approach to capacity development in 2000, SNV looked into the possibility of supporting its professionals to make this shift. Several ideas finally merged into a model, called a Learning Platform. In all, four Learning Platforms were held; two in 2004-2005 in East and Southern Africa, and two in West Africa in 2005-2006. A Learning Platform consisted of a set of successive and inter-linked events that started with a one-week seminar in which academics presented the "state of affairs" on selected key topics[4] in the academic debate on governance in Africa and discussed the implications of these topics with SNV advisers. These seminars were as much the start of an individual training trajectory for the over 50 participating advisers, as they were the opportunity to set up a web-based knowledge network of advisers in the field of local governance for SNV in Africa.

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4   The key topics were: state in Africa; civil society in Africa; changing paradigms in aid and technical cooperation; cultural ethnicity, ethnic nationalism and political tribalism; legitimacy and representation in local governance; and decentralisation, public services and accountability.

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As a second step, the participating advisers designed research proposals to be carried out with the organisations with which they work on a regular basis. The research proposals all revolved around one of the key topics of the seminars. The design of these research proposals was supervised by two knowledge network leaders and the two academic staff. This was followed by a period in which the advisers carried out research, usually in cooperation with the advisers' clients. This new way of working together offered to both adviser and client a practical way of giving shape to new aspects of their existing relationship. A research report was drafted for the client and finally a research paper was presented in a workshop. A total of 31 research projects was carried out. The best six from East and South Africa were presented in the 2005 AEGIS conference in London, the best four from West and Central Africa found their way to the 2006 ASAUK London conference.

In summary, the Learning Platform addressed three objectives. First, it aimed to expand the professional profile of the SNV advisers. Until three or four years ago, SNV was mostly involved in community development processes and supporting community groups. When SNV raised its level of ambition in 2000 by moving from grassroots and village organisations to intermediate organisations at municipal or district and regional level and aiming to influence (national) policy processes, it required advisers with more and different capacities. By exposing a group of its advisers to current international academic debate and having them carry out research, their professional skills would be enhanced at several levels. Thus the Learning Platform was designed to support better skilled advisers, but above all turning them into broader looking analysts of local organisations.

As its second objective, the Learning Platform aimed to establish the organisation structure of knowledge networks in which advisers could find easy access to academic research(ers) and that would also contribute its own experiences and research findings to the wider academic analyses. This ambition was predicated on the fact that SNV advisers through their long standing and wider relationship with local organisations have been able to build levels of trust and detailed insights that is hard for academic researchers to obtain.

Thirdly, the Learning Platform tried to offer structure in which SNV adviser and client organisations could develop their existing relationship into new forms of cooperation. For the advisers this means quite drastic role change from being an adviser, transferring knowledge, to one who assists organisations in acquiring knowledge. It requires making knowledge available in such a way that "a two-way flow of knowledge can be established. When knowledge is shared in this manner, local ownership of development processes becomes a reality." (Fukuda-Parr and Hill, 2002: 199) This changes the rather asymmetrical relationships of the 'one-who-knows' and 'the one-who-learns' into relationship of two partners sharing and discussing views, creating a two-way flow of knowledge acquisition.

4 The outcome

The selection of papers from the Learning Platform gives a fine overview of what it is that occupies SNVs' governance advisors in Africa. The first contribution is from Patrick Chabal with "State and Governance: the limits of decentralisation". It summarises a great deal of what has been discussed in the different seminars. He questioned the all too easy way in which decentralisation is sometimes considered a panacea for a state failing to deliver basic services. In fact it is the other way around: only a state that can assure basic functions or services like security, law, education and health care, transport and communication infrastructure, will successfully be capable of decentralising responsibilities. In other words: only a strong state will be able to decentralise successfully. The practitioner though, is often presented with a reality of decentralisation policies that cannot be questioned at the level where he or she works. The ensuing papers therefore take decentralisation as a starting point and examine not only its limits but also its possibilities.

Three of the eleven research papers discuss how female candidates enter local politics, manage to get elected and how they influence the political agenda. The research draws attention to the pre-conditions required for making particular institutions work. Democracy is not just the presence of the institutions of liberal democracy for

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representation. If used to protect the interests of established dominant groups, as is often the case in Africa, it has more the appearance of a 'virtual democracy' (Joseph 1997). Gender equality is not just achieved by aiming for equal representation in democratic institutions. These three debates are linked in respectively Kenya, Tanzania and Niger by examining the informal rules and procedures, which make female aspirants for political posts likely to succeed in competitive electoral politics. The papers rely partly on Chabal and Daloz (1999) to explain that the formal political system of competitive elections is intertwined with informal relations. On the surface the formal system works, with elections following formal procedures and aspirants being open to compete. Thus, elected representatives 'can be held to account'. In reality, however, elections are decided on other criteria than 'being held to account for performance', for which the institution of competitive elections was designed. The research papers provide detailed evidence of these 'informal' criteria, which make the system 'work', but with perverse outcomes.

This particularly affects women negatively, as Sabdiyo B-Dido and Annie Francis document in the two East African studies. The researchers set out to find gender biases in the local society, creating barriers to equal women participation in competitive politics. The few women, who are successful in getting elected, face additional hurdles not experienced by their male counterparts. They overcome these hurdles, by exploiting their link to male leaders within the party, occupying leadership positions within the women wing of the party and getting actively involved in community activities. Not being married also helps in getting elected as is found by Sabdiyo B-Dido. The contradiction is, that while seeking election for women goes against the inherent gender bias of 'traditional norms and values', women can only be successful by adhering to these 'norms and values', i.e. by accentuating their caring role and by making themselves acceptable to the male leadership and male-dominated community. Will support for female elected leadership then really contribute to challenging gender relations?

The West African study from José Tegels on Niger comes to a rather different conclusion. Although she also found evidence for gender bias and additional hurdles, she argues that women use the space that is reserved for women to enter into the private homes to gain support.

The informal conditions therefore do also permit women their own space to campaign, a space that is closed to male candidates.

All three cases discuss the results of the formal system of positive discrimination to assure that women candidates do have access to posts in the local councils. In East Africa the special women seats are considered of less value than women that manage to be elected for the general seats. In Niger, on the contrary, the formal system that promotes access for women in politics did allow women to enter politics where they gained recognition at their own force.

Local representatives who want to perform and 'make a difference', need resources. The two following contributions tackle the issue of local tax collection, more particularly at the local markets. Following the reasoning that tax can only be collected where money is earned, collecting at markets seems a logical step. This money is not necessarily to improve the marketplace or to provide services to the traders and their clients. It is for the functioning of the local administration and for public investments. Charles Magala and Alphonse Rubagumya investigated the motivators for payment of local markets dues in Rwanda and Uganda. Their research fits with recent insights that effective taxation is a core aspect of governance, and that "taxation finds its legitimacy not in an enactment of the day, but in a clear expression of consent by the people" (Luoga, 2002: 51; cf Moore and Rakner, 2002). The paper offers practical insights to the analysis of factors that underpin or undermine citizens' willingness to pay or dodge taxes. It may contribute to the debates on tax payment as a reflection of the relationship between citizens and governments.

It provides some proof for the proposition that the willingness to pay taxes is enhanced by improved service delivery. An interesting finding in this context is the role of the private sector in revenue collection. While effective in the short-run, the research warns of negative effects in the longer term due to increased perceived unfairness (corruption and tax handling). Joachim Boko in his contribution underscores the importance of leadership. He showed, by comparing the functioning of two tax collecting systems in similar markets, that convincing leadership is the key factor for improved revenues. But he also shows that this is a vulnerable situation: when the leaders' attention slackens, the old habits prove not to die so easily.

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The next three papers contribute to the analysis of the factors that impact on the delivery of public services as a means to reducing poverty (Commission for Africa, 2005: 23). Each of these papers does so by offering detailed operational insights in how generally advocated accountability mechanisms and partnerships actually unfold in practice. The research on Public Expenditure Tracking (PET) in Tanzania at district level by Kees de Graaf uses the accountability framework from the World Development Report 2004 to argue that if there is transparency and decisions are in the public domain, than service delivery will improve and is more likely to be pro-poor (World Bank 2003: 6). By comparing how this instrument has been used by different organisations in various districts, it tries to gain deeper understanding of Public Expenditure Tracking as tool. This leads to a number of practical recommendations on how it should be used, e.g. that the community should not be treated as a resource for information, but should be facilitated to carry out the survey themselves. Similarly, it reconfirmed the importance of feedback at the end of the exercise and that Public Expenditure Tracking should not be carried out in isolation but ought to be part of "a creative, demanding and at times political process of developing and shaping an approach that, along with other initiatives, gradually will change relationships at district level in favour of the poor". The most interesting insight emerging is possibly related to the character of the tool. Whereas the research process aimed to making the surveys used in Tanzania uniform, by using the 'intimate knowledge of detail' of the people involved in the surveys, it emerged that the different methods of application are actually strength. The paper therefore recommends to "involve the different stakeholders in the design of the methodology" in order to do justice to the different contexts. By using a participatory research process, the adviser as researcher engaged in a mutual learning process, not only enriching and broadening his own knowledge, but equally assisting the organisations implementing Public Expenditure Tracking at district level in Tanzania to be more aware of the strengths and limitations of the approach.

Using the same concept of accountability, papers by Suzan Boon and by Gerard Prinsen study the assumption that if users are included in public service management, responsiveness will increase. Suzan Boon investigates the establishment of joint management institutions in the health sector in Tanzania. These joint committees are now standard

prescriptions in donor-driven sector reforms. The research finds that the committees were established to meet conditionality, rather than as a tool for generating a more responsive service delivery. It concludes that how joint management boards are established is as important as the fact that they are established. Its approach can be located within the theoretical framework developed by Paul (1992), that exit (increased competition) and voice (participation) are insufficient to improve service delivery. It needs to be reinforced by 'hierarchical controls', in order to create the right incentives for providers to improve services. Joint management committees create these incentives, by bringing customers into management. However, if due to the appointment process these stakeholders start seeing themselves as representatives of government, rather than the constituency they are supposed to represent, then the voice option remains ineffective.

Gerard Prinsen looks at accountability and elite capture in management committees for schools and clinics in Uganda and Tanzania. His findings are more differentiating. Accountability exists first and foremost towards those who appoint the members in management committees. In the health sector the role of the district administration and central authorities seems more prominent than in education. And when discussing elite capture, it has been found that parents often seek the involvement of local and national elites in their boards, but often in vain. All in all it is concluded that management committees do keep citizens' interests in the back of their mind.

Bertram van der Wal; Jean Marc Sica; Aline Congo and Karim Zone investigate the relationship between policy makers, service providers, beneficiaries and donors which permits to focus on the disrupted mechanisms of accountability. Decentralisation in Burkina Faso risks not to bring improvement in service delivery in the health system is their conclusion, which is proof of Patrick Chabals position taken in the presentation on the limits of decentralisation in this publication.

The last two papers take a close look at the dynamics that underpin the potential for effective and credible partnerships between local government and local actors. Jackson Wandera looks at local level partnerships between local government and civil society as a means to improve service delivery in Awassa, Southern Ethiopia. He

investigates another emerging development orthodoxy: establishing partnerships at local level between NGOs and local government to improve service delivery. Just transferring the concept of partnerships to the local situation is not sufficient. Jackson Wandera discovers the consequence of other local processes, e.g. donor dependence and government dominance, which creates the unanticipated outcome of a partnership, lead by government and paralysed by the need for donor funding.

Sef Slootweg, Jolanda Groen and Xavier Llopart examine the concepts of social capital, leadership, participation and ownership to the background of the performance of municipalities in Benin to implement their development plan. In fact it questions the whole capacity development discussion as has been raised in the introduction paragraph of this chapter. The reasoning is as follows: the research could not find proof of a relation between the performance of municipalities to implement their development plan at the one side and the existence of social capital, the perception of leadership, the level of participation or the feeling of ownership over the development plan at the other. Capacity development programmes of the international community have accompanied municipalities to become performing. Participation is much advocated to plan and implement development, leadership programmes try to improve the capacity of municipal leaders and administration and the NGO-sector to perform better, non governmental organisations and other organised civil society are facilitated to take up responsibility for local development, all in an effort to create 'ownership' of the development process. Does the result of the research means that capacity development programmes did not show results? Well it looks like it. The research suggests that the way capacity development has been taken up - fragmented between many actors, a bit of everything and nothing, following a general approach, process oriented and not content related, no shared responsibility for outcomes - will inevitably not show measurable results. One might expect though that this story will change when the capacity development is related to fixed targets and objectives and shared responsibility of capacity developers, authorities and non governmental organisations and, why not, the private sector, for getting concrete and measurable outcomes.

5 Transform relationship client-adviser

Is there evidence in the papers that the carrying out of the research contributed to a change in the relationship between SNV advisers and the local organisations, whose capacity they are aiming to build (their 'clients')? Such a change can be brought about, if the asymmetry in the relationship is acknowledged (thus paving the way for mutual learning) and if there is a search for the "drivers of change' (which can guide the transformation process).

For mutual learning to take place, advisers need not only to question their individual knowledge, but also the way in which this knowledge is framed. Practitioners have acquired over time a toolbox of interventions, and there is a tendency to put the reality in which they operate into categories that fit these tools. "Their problem is to find the right kind of problem; the kind of 'problem' that requires the 'solution' they are there to provide" (Ferguson, 1990: 70). Thus, the research on taxation of Charles Magala and Alphonse Rubagumya and of Joachim Boko sets out to find that market vendors would be willing to pay tax, if only they were convinced that taxes would be spend properly. Having confirmed this, the advisers can now offer their services to the local government to improve transparency and strengthen pro-poor service delivery. Similarly, the research on the constitution of joint management committees in the health sector in Tanzania of Suzan Boon, having proved that selected members do not know their roles, can now offer advisory support to the next district to assist in the selection of members and provide guidance on their roles. And the performance study of Sef Slootweg et al, will lead to a shift in SNV advisory services from general, planning and process related support to result and target related support.

The knowledge acquired through the research is useful to both the adviser and the organisations they support. Interventions can be better designed as a result of it. But it is not clear whether it will fundamentally alter the relationship, and whether the adviser will no longer be seen as a 'provider' of advice and solution. If the same curiosity, which led the adviser to carry out the research, can be applied to their own role in the advisory process, then the possibility

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for this change to occur increases. But from the papers this is as yet not clear. Further questioning and analysis may be required for this.

But if this further analysis and questioning is carried out, it may lead to uncomfortable truths for the advisers. Such truths can even 'disempower', rather than strengthen the advisors in carrying out their tasks. In some research, undesirable outcomes are treated as 'unintended consequences'. Thus the intentions during the planning of the process are good, but it is only during implementation that plans are derailed or subverted. But can these unintended consequences not also be seen as caused by the relations inherent in the project design?

In the research of Kees de Graaf on Public Expenditure Tracking in Tanzania, it is noted that "little use is made of existing and financial data" and that the instrument has "been taken as a tool to be implemented and reported back to headquarters, or the donor", rather than as an accountability instrument. Yet, these effects are inherent to the project approach, which 'boxes in space and time' (Long and Van der Ploeg, 1989). Carrying out Public Expenditure Tracking as a project makes it a discrete activity, amenable to donor funding. But it will then systematically favour 'new' over 'old' data, ignore pre-existing realities and is likely to reflect the situation that the donor provides funding and the local stakeholders are the beneficiaries. Similarly within the research of Jackson Wandera on the city partnership in Awassa, Ethiopia, the fact that partners join in order to access funding may not be a "by-product'. Given the weak capacities of NGOs and their reliance on external donors such an outcome may even be likely or even 'unavoidable'. And the conclusion of Sef Slootweg, Jolanda Groen and Xavier Llopart: "So far there is only belief in the impact of capacity development services but no evidence." can really be called uncomfortable for practitioners.

The research papers reviewed do not appear to go very far in answering the question on the drivers for change within the society they study. It can be argued, that the question is largely a political one, i.e. that it is the African system of politics that is inimical to the type of development currently promoted (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). Development interventions are more conventionally seen as technically defined and politically neutral. From the research

reviewed, it is clear that the organisation has moved closer to politics with the foci of research including transparency and accountability and women in leadership. Yet, more fundamental political questions are not addressed. Presumably the contradiction as noted by Ferguson (1990: 226) still applies: "To do what it is set up to do (bring about socio-economic transformations), a 'development' project must attempt what it is set up not to be able to do (involve itself in political struggles)".

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