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Title: Developing development studies in North-South partnership: How to support institutional capacity in academia?

Year: 2015

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Kontinen, T., Oinas, E., Komba, A., Matenga, C., Msoka, C., Kilonzo, R. G., & Mumba, M. (2015). Developing development studies in North-South partnership: How to support institutional capacity in academia?. In R. Kilonzo, & T. Kontinen (Eds.), Contemporary concerns in development studies : Perspectives from Tanzania and Zambia (pp. 158-167). Helsingin yliopisto. Publications of the Department of Political and Economic Studies, 23/2015. <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/154641>

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II Developing Development Studies in North-South Partnership: How to Support Institutional Capacity in Academia¹

Tiina Kontinen, Elina Oinas, Adalgot Komba, Chrispin Matenga, Colman Msoka, Rehema G. Kilonzo & Moonga Mumba

Introduction

Institutional capacity building has long been one of the key terms in international development (Kühl 2009). Capacity building of state institutions and civil society organizations is considered an important means to enhance ownership of development processes, as well as take distance from the traditional donor-recipient relationships. Consequently, institutional capacity-building has been on the agenda of North-South partnerships between academic institutions in the so-called North and South. In this context, capacity building has set out to build more equal relationships, for example in research collaboration. Emphasis has increasingly been on the collaborative definition of agendas and joint dissemination of research inputs in academic publications. Such efforts have been seen as a contrast to old practices, where agendas were set by Northern institutions, and Southern partners often played the role of data collectors for case studies. (See Carbonnier and Kontinen 2014; 2015).

Despite quite remarkable changes taking place in North-South relationships in academia, there are still hindrances to genuine collaboration. Most importantly, the funding schemes often attempt to combine the aspirations of both academia and development aid, sometimes leading to contradictory objectives and failures in this particular attempt. Funding from academic research agencies considers first and foremost the scientific quality, leaving little room for capacity building, whilst aid funding is often restricted to institutional capacity and excludes research and teaching activities. A number of North-South collaboration projects have to cope with different logic from these institutional fields (cf. Greenwood et al. 2008) in their search for the best ways to enhance institutional capacity in academia.

In this chapter we reflect on our experience of institutional support to higher education institutions in the context of the project *Developing Development Studies* (DDS),

¹An earlier version of this chapter has appeared as: Komba et al. (2015) *Developing Development Studies: Uncertainty and Curiosity as Institutional Capacities in Higher Education*. In: Hölttä, S., Moore, A. & Pekkola, E. (eds.) *Higher Education Institutions Partnering for Development and Change*. Helsinki: Centre for International Mobility CIMO & University of Tampere.

phases I and II, which was not left untouched by the above-mentioned dilemmas. The project was implemented first from 2011 through 2012, and second from 2013 to 2015, in a partnership between the universities of Helsinki and Jyväskylä from Finland, the University of Dar es Salaam from Tanzania, and the University of Zambia. Moreover, a few representatives from the University of Sokoine and University of Dodoma in Tanzania participated. The project was funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, through the *Finnish Higher Education Institutions Institutional Capacity Building Instrument (HEI ICI)*.

The project aimed at strengthening the discipline of Development Studies at the universities in Tanzania and Zambia, and it had three components: staff development, curriculum development and administrative development. The staff development component involved upgrading the qualifications of the staff members – in the departments for Development Studies at the Southern partner universities – to PhD level. Over the course of the project, six international workshops were held at all partner locations – in Lusaka (2011), Jyväskylä (2012), Dar es Salaam (2012), Helsinki (2013), Bagamoyo (2014) and again in Lusaka (2015). Moreover, the project involved longer study periods in Helsinki, participation in the international conference in Development Research, financial support for fieldwork and conferences, as well as contributions to Development Studies libraries and computer facilities. The Development Studies curricula were developed for BA, MA, and PhD levels, and in Tanzania a national meeting for all institutions teaching Development Studies was conducted, resulting in the establishment of a national association for Development Studies. Staff from the University of Zambia also attended the meeting in Tanzania, to share their experiences. Additionally, an international office was established at the University of Zambia in order to strengthen the capacity to take part in international collaboration for student exchange and research. The project was administered by the University of Helsinki, although the management decisions were made at a project board with representatives from all the participating universities.

While it is quite simple to list the different activities conducted, it becomes trickier to reflect on the contributions that these different activities have made to the very institutional capacity of the participating academic institutions, let alone the capacity to debate the development policy issues of entire countries, as indicated in the objectives of the funding instrument. In the earlier version of this text (Komba et al. 2015), we reflected on the challenges of the institutional capacity building in a North-South context experienced in the first phase of the project. In what follows, we revisit the challenges and related changes that occurred during the second phase. We reflect on the contributions of the project under the following themes: development researchers who assume the role of development practitioners; building a collaborative project management procedures; theories and templates typical for development; and the notion of growth in an institutional capacity. In conclusion, we argue that the best way for institutional capacity building is to enable all academics to be part and parcel of the global academic community.

Development Researchers as Development Practitioners

A particular aspect of the institutional capacity building project DDS was that it was implemented under a funding instrument that followed the logic of development aid. The project planning and reporting followed mainstream development aid tools, such as Logical Framework. Moreover, the objectives of the project were to align it with the goals of the Finnish development policy, and further, with the international development goals. Academics in Development Studies often treat the institutional practices of development aid as objects of critique, rather than their own frames for action. As *development researchers developing Development Studies* through a *development aid instrument*, we were often more than confused about our concept of development in its different theoretical and practical meanings.

Certainly, we had some faith in the possibilities of intentional development (cf. Cowen and Shenton 1996). Without this belief, we would not have begun the effort in the first place, and continued, despite the challenges experienced, into the second phase. At the same time, we were periodically more than conscious about the lessons learned from existing, critical research on development interventions. As research has shown, development projects are continuous processes of negotiations and compromises between different values and interests (Long 2001). They are also crashing points of different logics, such as the intended project logic versus the recipients logics revolving around taking advantage of the extra resources provided by any development project (Olivier de Sardan 2005). For the Northern partners, the awareness of the overall “will to improve” characteristics of development (Li 2007), and the tendency to simplify complex situations into technical problems solvable with project activities (Ferguson 1994), led to overall carefulness of not to simplify the issues.

Moreover, for some Northern partners this was the first experience to step into the shoes of a development practitioner and occupying the role of the thoroughly criticized Northern “partner”, and therefore, it was an experience of immense learning. Overall, we wanted to avoid rigidity and be open to changes. We perhaps aspired to be more *searchers* than *planners* (Easterley 2004), in an effort to react to different needs that emerged during the process. However, we often found ourselves behaving as planners: we had a plan to implement, budget to spend and reports – along the donor guidelines – to be written, on time. In the pressure of implementation and reporting deadlines, it was easy to forget this critical stance and concentrate on the activities without a thorough consideration of the broader picture.

However, during the project we did not turn into full-time development practitioners. In contrast, we continued to be development researchers, teachers and administrators at our home institutions. The institutional capacity building project, thus, was an additional activity for all the participants, including the so-called “beneficiaries”. As the project aimed to improve the quality of Development Studies teaching and research in the partner universities through supporting the qualifications of the staff, the main participants were Development Studies lecturers. Lecturers usually have an enormous teaching load, sometimes with classes of up to 1500 students, and were not released from the regular duties to participate in or work on the DDS project.

At the same time, the lecturers felt the pressure to qualify with PhDs, as most of the participants were not doctors at the beginning of the project. Additionally, there was an increasing pressure to publish in international journals and fulfill the institutional result indicators. Simultaneously, due to budget constraints, there was limited access to these same journals, and no possibilities to regularly update library collections or to participate in international conferences. Therefore, the efforts made to be members in the international academic community and qualified contributors to local development were often hampered by lack of time, means, access and funds, which were all included in the “institutional capacity”.

In hindsight, despite the challenges, our role as Development Studies professionals attempting to “practice development practice” was a positive feature. Being at different stages in our careers also enabled us to cope with, and even overcome, knowledge asymmetries typical to development interventions. As development practitioners and participants in academic institutional capacity building, the Southern partners surely had more expertise and knowhow; but, to some extent, we all were equally newcomers in implementing this particular project scheme.

Towards a Joint Understanding of Knowledge

In most development practices, there are frequent moments of unease that stem from the donor-recipient relationship, the power imbalance and the reluctance to spoil the working relationship by asking uncomfortable questions about the agenda, ownership, and money. There is a wealth of academic, critical literature on development aid and on the descriptions of development partnerships as one of mutual trust, with open communication, shared objectives and joint accounting (Brinkerhoff 2002; Mancuso-Brehm 2004). However, when dealing with a real life project, and partners that we mutually like and respect, discussing the “elephant in the room” was more difficult than expected, despite our insights from literature. These questions were related both to the *nature of knowledge* advocated in the project and the ways the *project management* was realized.

In our case, the major activities were seminars, where local researchers’ own projects were discussed from different points of views. During these long conversations, it became clear that the collaboration could facilitate an enhanced awareness of the importance of transparent and reflexive processes and practices in research. The local scholars had to be the experts of their own research areas, and the group of seniors could witness the journey, hopefully contributing relevant advice on *how* to proceed. The topics of different research projects were so varied that the teachers were not the experts in each and every subject area. Accordingly, the stereotype of a Western professor trying to feed a pre-formulated truth to reluctant recipients, and maintaining a position of an ultimate authority in the classroom, was not the pedagogy of this project’s seminars. During the second phase especially, the classroom interaction consisted only of mutual debates, rather than ready-made presentations.

The teachers encouraged students to constantly pursue new and better knowledge that only open-minded scholars could find, despite pressures to follow paths already taken in previous research. This approach meant enduring uncertainty. At times, the reluctance to provide ready-made answers seemed to disappoint students looking for an exact answer to questions about methodology, such as the “right number of participants” in a focus group discussion. Scholarly uncertainty is difficult for everyone, especially junior academics, to endure. While this is a feature that unites academics everywhere, and at each career stage, university researchers and lecturers in Development Studies are destined to tackle the extra burden by the sheer virtue of the discipline. Development Studies is faced with constant demands regarding societal relevance. We are expected to provide answers in the context of increasing societal expectations. In the workshops, we came to realize that all scholars fight with a sense of inadequacy, and long for certainties. High quality teaching, then, helps participants to cope with the process when answers are slow to generate and may remain only tentative..

Even with an agenda that emphasizes contextualized, locally rooted knowledge production as a key ideal, our project was not left untouched by the struggles over research agendas. The theoretical and methodological frameworks discussed were, at times, those that were of interest to Finnish scholars, and not necessarily that of the students. In the beginning, the themes in a number of workshops were designed merely by Finnish teachers, with little assigned contributions from senior staff from Southern partners. However, this pattern was changed towards the second phase of the project. More complications were brought by the diverging agenda of the local supervisors of the students, following the fact that a number of students were conducting their PhD in a research project, funded for example, by Danish or Norwegian research institutions, with their own agenda. Additionally, with Development Studies being a multidisciplinary field, the epistemic assumptions behind the guidance given to participants not only varied, but conflicted; creating less fruitful uncertainties and tensions. At times, the lack of research ownership and the multiple changes in research topics reflected the conditions set by external research funding.

Therefore, an important part of enhancing the institutional capacity locally was developing the skills on how to cope with the research process, especially the skills of enduring the anxiety when confronting the slowness of progress in research, multiple demands and agendas. This capacity to cope, we realized, should be seen as an expertise in itself. Such expertise needs to be developed and nourished like any other fact-based or practical skill. We did not teach, for example, the ideal role or the number of civil society organizations involved in local decision making in Tanzania, but we did teach skills on how to find out and interpret the number, in the light of selected social theories and empirical evidence. Therefore, important skills involve constant reflexivity, adjust to new interpretations, change perspectives emerging from the interface between existing literature and the empirical realities on the ground, and have the courage to suggest new insights and concepts. This requires the skill to temporarily tolerate the position of not-yet-knowing.

Often such skills are not recognized as expertise, but seen as weakness, and something more tangible is required. Yet, if the aim is to support locally-rooted knowledge practices, the focus on capacity building needs to be on coping with the challenge of openness and constant learning, developing courage to listen to local voices and needs, and interpreting them to a wider audience. These are internationally-shared academic characteristics that are not specific to Development Studies, but, as we argue, Development Studies scholars should be particularly motivated to foster these skills. What became apparent in our project was that an active engagement between local and foreign researchers helps to ask new, challenging questions, and identify new uncertainties in a positive manner.

Collaborative Financial Management

A particular aspect where uncertainty became evident in an unfruitful way was the financial management of the project itself. We could not escape the typical challenges of development project management. These general challenges, which are well-identified in research literature, include delays in money allocations at the beginning of the project, accompanied with non-flexibility in extending the spending, and delays in reporting. The funding institution and the higher education institutions at both ends of the collaboration have their own management procedures to follow, before money allocated to a certain project can be used. In our case, the first delay was over six months. In a two-year project, this meant one quarter of the project duration. There were a lot unnecessary uncertainties and delays in the actual money transfers, reporting and following the budget, especially during the first phase of the project. At times, there seemed to be no accurate information about the money spent and remaining, and further, about the guidelines from the funder to which kind of activities it could be used.

Even if uncertainty might be an asset in academic terms, in financial management such uncertainties are certainly a loss of money and time. Whilst the funding relationship can be criticized as an asymmetrical power relationship, the adequate transfer, spending and financial reporting might also be considered as a joint effort, which we consider as a good example of a need to increase institutional capacities on both sides. It is a downside that there was no capacity-building allocated to the financial administration staff in any university. For sure, academic staff are not usually the best experts in bookkeeping and financial management, but they were in a position of translating the funders demands to the administration staff.

During the second phase, clearer procedures were developed; a budget of each activity was to be planned in a due time, approved by the board, and reported after the activity in order to keep a continuous track of the spending. The project board had representatives from all the partnering universities. During the second phase, the board conducted regular monthly meetings via Skype, as well as storing all the documents in a shared online storage space. Using technology facilitated the collaborative decision making. However, the continuous collaborative management was not without its challenges and frustrations. At times, four busy professionals spent hours trying

to get the Skype connection to work and be able to hear something else than a slow “h..e..l..l..o..o..o” echoing from the other continent. However, at times the connections worked perfectly, and the habit of regular meetings was an important feature of collaborative decision-making. The continuous interaction constituted an important contribution towards everybody’s institutional capacity in dealing with such collaborative management.

Capacity Building as Participation in the International Academia

Capacity building initiatives usually include so-called ‘technical aid’, referring to the contributions of Northern experts in South. In this project, there was also an aspect of Northern expertise provided, especially in the intensive courses. What were the contributions made by the visiting Northern experts? In some situations – for example when students debated about the structure of the thesis, the role of hypothesis in a PhD, or the safe choice of methodology – any professor could have settled the discussion. The professor’s role was to convince the students that they were all correct – but, in different ways – and guide the class to connect with the core questions in methodology, and engage with literature. However, for example, in the department of Development Studies at the University of Zambia, none of the teaching staff held a PhD at the beginning of the project. Therefore, the teachers lacked the authority and experience to comfort an uncertain researcher at the beginning of the PhD process – highlighting the sense that being confused or lost is not necessarily negative, but in many ways may in fact be productive. One can convincingly say that there is light at the end of the tunnel, only if one has made the journey through a tunnel oneself. Visiting teachers can be needed in settings where local PhD holders are not found. As our project continued, however, those who had finished their PhD shared the anxieties and challenges of those still in the process. They provided an encouraging example on how one can complete the task, since everyone had had a chance to follow their progress along the way.

The second reason why non-local teachers may be needed in seminar rooms is the simple fact that non-local participants and teachers are needed in most seminar rooms in the academia. All universities struggle to internationalize in order to gain new influences, perspectives and ideas. Outsiders’ views help one to look at their own case study with fresh eyes, and it may help to contrast one’s case with a similar one from across the globe. This is something academics always do, but development aid funding may be crucial when a university is not adequately resourced. North-South collaboration is needed not for the reason that the South needs lessons from the North, but because academic collaboration and exchange is considered vital for academic development everywhere. The global South should be included in such circuits of exchange as equal partners, be it with aid funding if necessary. Aid funding may be crucial in the creation of these seminar rooms. It can also provide opportunities for the teachers from the partner universities to visit Northern seminar rooms. Importantly, with the project funding, Southern scholars can gain access to libraries and conferences to update their

knowledge on recent development research conducted on their respective countries and beyond.

A third reason for the importance in exchanging expertise has to do with resources and origin: from the stand-point of a Nordic scholar, it is important for us to engage in a discussion on how social science theories that are mainly generated in the West – often in Anglo-American contexts – are translated and transformed. In some ways, Finnish academics are also in the margins of global theorizing, although we have access to literature and contacts. This applies to Development Studies in a specific way, since the scholarship tends to be hegemonized by countries with a colonial past. Together, scholars across the globe can, and should, take the task of contextualizing theory and truly internationalize it in a non-hegemonic and non-imperialistic fashion. This requires reaching the next level of “collaborative reflexivity” in theorizing.

For the Finnish partners, the project has definitely been a much more demanding and enriching experience than a simple outpouring of pre-existing knowledge. New insights and ways of thinking about academic knowledge production, expertise and development practice emerged out of the collaboration. This kind of learning by doing actual development work is extremely thought provoking and inspiring for our expertise in Development Studies in Finland. While the teachers in the Finnish field of Development Studies are an obvious beneficiary, we do believe that a collaboration of this nature could be beneficial to any academic discipline in our era of internationalizing academia. If globalization means genuine engagement with scholars from the global South, and not just transactions of capital and goods, then these projects are a gateway to a deeper engagement and mutual understanding of contemporary challenges and power relations.

As research was not included as an allowed activity, and we had to focus solely on capacity building as defined by development aid funding, the Finnish participants were, strictly speaking, demanded by one Ministry (Foreign Affairs) to practice activities that are not actually included in our work descriptions as defined by another Ministry (of Education). Here, again, we encountered an important reminder of discussions on the lack of policy coherence in Development Studies literature. This lack of coherence created another frustration in our project: the simple lack of time that all participants suffered from – we were not freed from our regular duties to do HEI-ICI work. In universities, time is the scarcest resource, and the funding instrument enabled activities, yet gave no extra hours to a working day, nor made it possible to alleviate the pre-existing workload. Often the choice ended up with doing HEI-ICI work over a night-shift, or came at the cost of our real tasks, own students and research. The lack of time to engage in societal/global impact activities, like HEI-ICI work – which would, however, be a really meaningful activity - is a constant frustration in contemporary academia of growing demands and student numbers, and diminishing personnel resources. Ironically, it seems like the excellent funding idea developed by one government sector, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, was undermined by another key ministry, the Ministry for Education, which, however, has the ultimate power over universities’ staff time allocation.

Participation in Global Academic Community as Main Means to Institutional Capacity

Let us revisit our initial question of how to support the institutional capacity in academia, in the contexts of Development Studies and North-South relationships. First, we should probably do away with the strict distinction between North and South, and strive for a conceptualization of a global Development Studies community. Second, the basic tools needed for academic institutions such as computers, internet access, books and software are important, and should form a natural part of any institutional capacity effort if the lack of such basic means exists.

Third, however, such tangible tools do not wholly suffice in achieving academic capacity. The professionalism in teaching, research and influencing the development policies requires a wide variety of skills and capacities. These, of course, include substantive skills in areas of contemporary research. In order to gain this, the members of the academia should have access to latest research publications and research funding, in order to participate in the creation of the latest knowledge. This partnership is already taking place, and the capacity is being built among institutions; yet, is it enough? Does it service the needs of a North-South relationship? Answers to these questions are rather complex. There is a need to enhance collaborative evidence based research on one hand, to enable collaborators to deal with existing development issues, and different ways of disseminating available research findings while translating them into action on the other hand. This includes both conventional and transformative ways. We would have liked to have deepened our learning through collaboration in actual research projects, yet this is a feature that is not currently allowed within this funding instrument. Such a rigid separation of capacity building in higher education, vis-à-vis research, is unnecessary and frustrating. Our capacities are tightly connected to research, and one learns by working together, rather than being lectured on academic competencies in a classroom.

Fourth, it is not only substantial skills and capacities that are needed. In our current world, crucial capacities include reflexivity, flexibility, and networking skills. Just as these can be considered capacities of individuals, they are also, to a great extent, institutional capacities. Long and non-flexible bureaucratic procedures, as well as laxity to reflect and develop institutional procedures, may hinder efficient collaboration on both sides. Moreover, positive uncertainty and continuous questioning of the nature of knowledge are needed. Additionally, curiosity, courage and patience to produce new knowledge are crucial capacities in academia. We can share the knowledge needed, in terms of teaching and research exchange programs, among academia.

These capacities are not of special concern in the South, but need to be constantly defended and rebuilt everywhere. Yet, they demand resources. Nor are they capacities that can be built one and for all, in any one individual capacity building project. However, individual projects –including collaboration in the core activities of academic research, teaching and societal impact - contribute to the institutional capacities of each participating organization. These have a long duration . The institutional capacities of higher education institutions all over the world are related to the capacities to conduct

quality research and provide excellent education, combined with the struggles related to the adequacy of time and other resources. In our view, the best way to support higher education institutions is to support the staff to be able to engage in global research and the teaching community.

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