

Book Review Published in

***Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal* 19/4 : 329-330**

by Kim Forss, Andante, Stockholm Sweden

Even though technical cooperation has been debated for decades the subject remains enigmatic. Books, articles and web-based discussion groups struggle to come to terms with the complexity of current developments in the practice of technical cooperation (TC). Most fail because they are either so general that they lack practical interest, or so particular that they have no relevance outside the object of study. Thomas Grammig's contribution to the discussion is very focused on specific objects of study, but it draws a number of sharp and distinctive lessons of general relevance.

The study is set in the context of the global discourse on development cooperation. In particular, it brings together critical analysis of technical assistance from several agencies. There is an overview of the discourse on the subject (chapter 1), as well as an introduction to specific project and programme evaluations (chapter 5). The latter in particular is quite useful. Development agencies commission large numbers of evaluations, but there are few who bring them together. The impact of one critical evaluation is naturally less, than a combination of hundreds from several bilateral and multilateral agencies. It is like comparing the effect of a sniper to that of an armoured division, if I am allowed a military comparison. The mass of evaluation findings quoted here is devastating.

But if it were just to learn about another few projects of TC that met limited success, we need not bother about this book. The reason to devote a day or two to Dr. Grammig's book lies in the painfully unfolding analysis of the two case studies the book centers on. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 take us on a journey further into the complexities of technical assistance. Through a process of participatory observation, the author tells a vivid tale of two projects. Both fall within the field of industrial development cooperation, though they differ in scope and context. "Appui technique" was a project in Tchad, which trained and supported artisans to produce ox-carts, grain mills and other agricultural implements. "Autogeneracion" was set in Mexico, where a financial assistance package to the national utility company also contained a technical assistance component for cogeneration feasibility studies. So one project was "low"-tech" and the other "high tech", but both involved cooperation between teams of foreign experts and local counterparts, and both were financed by the World Bank.

Chapter 4 starts by describing project implementation. There is an important observation early on (page 54), namely that *"what the foreigners called "the project" remained insufficiently defined for the local actors; it did not correspond to a precise activity"*. Consequently foreign and local actors moved on different stages. This implies that the actors face great difficulties in defining their roles in relation to each other. In fact, the analysis in chapter 4 suggests that they are hardly even aware of the challenges they face, and hence they do not mobilise any capacities to move beyond the initial confusion in project implementation. Sadly, but convincingly, the chapter ends by concluding that none of those concerned could draw any lessons from what happened. As implementation was so far removed from many of the organisations that cooperated, the latent processes did not reflect differences in planning and political interest, and the institutions were blind to the difficulties.

At this point it would be relevant to consider the organisational attributes of the World Bank. Many other agencies have a stronger local presence through field offices and embassy personnel. They devote more manpower to project monitoring, and liaise more closely with local counterparts, as well as with experts, consultants, and NGOs. It is quite possible that they still often fail to learn, but the reasons must be found in a more detailed organisational analysis. The systemic treatment in the next chapter (5) pushes beyond the first description of events towards a general analysis. The chapter defines three latent processes in TC; content process, exchange process and interface. The tight structure of the argument makes it possible to move beyond clichés about TC. When communication (or the lack thereof) is analysed with the help of these concepts, new meanings emerge. What first seemed simple is actually quite complex, but there is no choice but to engage this complexity. Where practitioners of TC often resort to abstract generalisations, the analysis here shows that a constructive engagement must start in actual practice of TC and push for deeper levels of understanding in each case.

Chapter 6 takes us from latent processes to event management. This is a brave and necessary chapter; however, at times the analysis goes further than the empirical data allows. The methodological focus has been on the actors on the projects, and this is the "forte" of the book. However, in event management we move to the mindsets and activities as well as the organisational culture, of the international agencies. Dr. Grammig's analysis is perceptive, but whereas the projects were closely observed through the participatory method, it is not quite clear how the World Bank was approached as an object of study.

The book concludes with an outlook for the future, which in its distanced pragmatism is refreshing. Grammig is sceptical about the aid agencies', indeed, the aid systems', capacity to reform itself. The analytical tools employed in chapter 4 through 6 convincingly demonstrate the idiosyncrasies of TC. It is through understanding particular events, with the aid of sophisticated research tools, that practitioners can improve their performance. However, management practices focus on universal tools, and hence any real learning is

actually undermined. Present management thinking leads the agencies further and further away from being learning systems.

But if the outlook for practice appears bleak, Grammig has more to say about future TC research. The most important is that he draws attention to academic fields that can be brought to bear on TC, such as science and technology studies, learning organisations, and evolutionary economics. Personally, I could not agree more. TC is a subject that requires interdisciplinary approaches. Dr. Grammig has shown the way by providing a very rich description of TC cases and has shown an imaginative application of new theoretical perspectives that broaden our understanding of TC and that enable learning to take place.