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## Participation for transformative learning in development management: The case of a Master in international development projects in the *Universitat Politècnica de València* (Spain)

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### Abstract

There is a growing concern about the role of the university in the education of international development professionals. For a number of actors, it should play a central role in order to move current managerial trends in the international development sector towards a more transformative and reflective practice of international development projects management. In the paper, we depart from the idea that postgraduate courses can promote the emergence of more critical and reflective professionals, if they assume participation as a key issue in the curricula and in the methodological approach.

We will deep into a particular case study, a Master in development management in the Universitat Politècnica de València. We will see how participation is considered at different levels, as a key pedagogical strategy, for the emergence competences for a reflective and transformative practice of international cooperation. We will also see the outputs of this Master in terms of the learning experienced by students in this regards, and we will address the limitations and opportunities that the Master faces in its strategy. Results are built on interviews to students, teachers and other relevant stakeholders, as well as in the results of external and internal evaluations and reports on the Master's performance.

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## 1. Introduction: Learning for critical thinking and practice in development cooperation management

There is a growing concern in development management about the role of the university in educating development professionals. Underlying the debate are clashing conceptions about what a development professional is expected to become and what are the core capacities that he or she needs to develop during education (Clarke and Oswald, 2010). Nowadays, mainstream university programmes in development cooperation management remain dominated by rationalist, non critical perspectives of learning and the production of knowledge (McFarlane, 2006; Gulrajani, 2010). University curricula are premised on linear processes of acquisition and subsequent application of a rational-modernist ideology, as well as on a blind faith in scientific and rational knowledge (Johnson and Thomas, 2007). As described by Peris et al. (2013), this perspective upholds that learning processes should equip students with the technical tools enabling them to deliver the most effective solutions aligned with development aims (Clarke and Oswald, 2010). Such approach aptly echoes the emphasize the managerialist ethos which currently underpins prevailing perspectives in the aid industry. Such perspectives put forth managerial, simplistic and purely technical solutions to problems of essentially political nature. As a consequence, power relationships are reinforced, and the underlying causes of poverty and exclusion remain unaddressed.

In this paper we argue differently. To do so, we draw on the notion that development managers should assimilate the complex nature of development processes – as embedded in power relations and shaped by political interests and influences (McCourt, 2008; Eyben et al, 2015). As Belda et al. point (2012), this calls for development managers to engage poverty politically. Doing so makes possible to unveil power imbalances, as well as to challenge widespread asymmetries of power, hierarchies and their ultimate expression, inequality. Engaging politically compels development managers to contest development discourses and the broader modernization projects sustaining them (Townley, 2001; Mosse, 2005). To put it differently, development managers ought to be mainly oriented to the common good (Walker and McLean, 2013; Boni-Aristizábal and Calabuig-Tormo, 2015).

According to our perspective, university programmes on development management would do better to focus on fostering a rich set of competences, namely: understanding and engaging with power; political analysis; navigating complexity; adaptation; and reflexivity (Pettit, 2010; Mowles et al., 2008; Clarke and Oswald, 2010). Such competences, crucial for a critical, transformative and reflective management of development aid, can be strengthened through comprehensive learning processes, and facilitated by means of a diversity of pedagogical methods and approaches. Specific examples abound (Fisher, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Ortiz Aragon, 2010, Pearson, 2010; Pettit, 2010; Soal, 2010), ranging from learning through personal experience to creative methods that appeal to the emotions and the use of the body.

Among the latter, participatory methods and approaches continue to be very relevant to modalities of learning conducive to critical thinking and practice amidst development managers (Pettit, 2010). Specially when participation is not regarded as exclusively instrumental, but also as a process of empowerment and personal and collective transformation for personal emancipation and for the construction of more democratic systems (Gaventa, 2006).

In this paper we illustrate this perspective by scrutinizing the case of *the Máster en Políticas y Procesos de Desarrollo*. The Master, hosted by the *Universitat Politècnica de València* (UPV), adopted its Bologna-adapted structure in 2011, as an evolution from an earlier *Máster Universitario en Cooperación al Desarrollo* that kicked off in 2007. Both Masters reflected the same pedagogic project, and will be subsequently referred to with a unique denomination, namely a- Master in development management (MDM). In our opinion, this case study exemplifies how participation may be incorporated across different arenas, especially when elevated to a chief pedagogical strategy towards developing critical competences in future professionals in the field of international cooperation.

## 2. The case of a Master in development management in the UPV: Participation as a key strategy for creating reflective and transformative development cooperation project managers

### 2.1. The Master

When inaugurated in 2007, the *Máster en Políticas y Procesos de Desarrollo* was conceived as a 66 European Credit Transfer (ECTS) degree, including a specialization in Development Processes and Project Management. The pedagogic proposal, the contents, focus and approach also inspired *the Máster Universitario en Cooperación al*

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