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The human factor in development cooperation: An effective way to deal with unintended effects

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ABSTRACT

Development policy and implementation are a human endeavor. Too often, however, the human factor is relegated to an input or an externality in a quasi-technical process for transforming public funds into measurable results. Within the Weberian rational-legal order, policies and bureaucracies are impersonal and objective. Policy objectives tend to get depersonalized and the human stories get filtered out of impact evaluations. This article, on the basis of case descriptions, argues that following the human stories in development policy and implementation can offer surprising insights into why at times policies may work or not work. The article explores how the idiosyncrasies of individuals' agency impact on achievement of policy outcomes and what the unintended effects are. It describes how the human factor can give rise to beneficial unplannable, unforeseeable, and thus unintended policy outcomes. This article argues that, instead of negating this, policy makers ought to embrace the human factor of development cooperation.

1. Introduction

Development cooperation is a human endeavor. It reaches out from one society in the global North to work on problems in the global South because there is a political interest in doing so. As such, funded intentions try to reach from one human context (cultural, economic, social, political, and ecological) over great distances to connect to various other human contexts. Along a chain of human intermediaries working in organizations, human and financial resources are used with the aim of changing things.

This article will start with the story of one man. This will give us insight into how a development intermediary has shaped his life within an arena of shifting development policies and approaches. It shows how people create development results, but also shows that the most lasting beneficial results are not necessarily those that had been planned for. After this introductory case, I will set the stage for a further exploration of the human factor in development, leading up to an argument for a more human-oriented, culturally appropriate way of structuring development cooperation from the Netherlands with partners in the global South.

1.1. The Mzee's impact on human development

When working at an embassy in East Africa, I got to know a bit of the life history of a local colleague I called *Mzee*. His history spanned the entire duration of the independence of his country as a sovereign

nation-state. He was one of the fortunate ones of his generation, who were among the first in their families to go to university and thus escape poverty. The *Mzee* had received a bursary to study civil engineering at Patrice Lumumba University, the Peoples' Friendship University in the Soviet Union. After graduating, he of course joined the public service, the primary employer in his country at the time, as in most recently independent African countries. He became a district civil engineer in a semi-arid district in his home region, a remote and relatively poor part of the country.

Because of the increased involvement of international development cooperation since the late 1980s, government officials increasingly interacted with international development agencies. They were beneficiaries of training, counterparts to expatriate technical advisors, or local expert advisors for projects. This was also the case for the *Mzee*, who became part of a rural development program supported by the Dutch. As he talked with me, he recounted with fondness some instances during this period when he had interacted with certain Dutch development professionals. He had been inspired and learned—and taught and inspired in return—in a process of knowledge exchange.

At the same time, he saw the fads and fashions follow each other in the development policy context which governed his work: shifting priorities, changing approaches. From a direct professional engagement in policy implementation, his work became more remote from the realities of the intended beneficiaries. At the turn of the century, a shift from integrated rural development programs to the sector-wide approach meant the *Mzee* would need to engage in policy discussions with

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government officials and help negotiate the conditions for budget support. Gradually, donors' preoccupation with good governance emerged. Their endeavor to fund and work through government systems in order to obtain development results came into doubt. Lack of government effectiveness and control of corruption meant donors' confidence to continue with this approach would eventually disappear.

For the *Mzee* personally, this was difficult. He had come to see the system he had helped to build as deficient. Donors and government were stuck in a macabre discursive dance. The objectives of helping the poor and transforming the nation seemed elusive. Was this all for nothing? Was this time, effort, and money all wasted? As I got to know a bit about the *Mzee*, he seemed to have experienced an eclipse of idealism: a sobering reflection for me as a young development professional.

But there is a silver lining: people take care of themselves and their families. To change the world, one must start with oneself. By the time he was about to retire, the *Mzee* owned an old colonial mansion where he lived with his family, a former civil servants' house sold off during Structural Adjustment. He also had inherited a piece of land in his rural village, where he had tried with marginal success to have caretakers breed goats and grow crops. He had also purchased a plot of land not too distant from the capital city, where he had planted trees for lumber in anticipation of a better plan after retirement.¹ In addition, he and his wife had invested heavily in the education of their children.

In fact, his eldest daughter had recently graduated as a pilot. She had just gotten a job for a regional charter airline. Could he have imagined as a young boy in the latter days of colonialism that foreign and local tourists would one day be flown around by his daughter? A young African woman saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your pilot speaking"? Imagine now what impression she would make on my young daughters and their African friends. If that is not empowering girls, if that is not gender impact, what is?

2. Setting the stage: methods and theory

This narrative sets the stage for my contribution to this journal's special edition on "The Unintended Effects of International Cooperation." This article will discuss the human factor in development policy and its effects—intended, planned, or otherwise. It will carry a positive bias,² while striving for objectivity, due to the focus on serendipity. Serendipity refers to the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way.

Of course, the case of the *Mzee* is the story of but one individual,³ but it is surely not unique. In fact, it resembles the highlights of a study following nearly two decades of an integrated rural development project in Bukoba, Tanzania (Kamanzi, 2007). That study demonstrated that, despite a critical impact evaluation about the lack of impact on the livelihoods of the target group, the project had a direct positive impact on local development intermediaries. They in turn provided a more indirect "trickle down" effect on poverty alleviation. The present article will focus in part on such development intermediaries, and explore the broader impact that they may have in the long term to societal transformation, an impact broader than the *Mzee's* indirect contribution (together with his wife and community) to gender equity by raising and educating a positive role model for young girls.

During my academic, policy, and development work, I have heard numerous such stories: life histories of persons of the lower and upper middle class who only a generation or two ago were semi-subsistence smallholders. These people may not have been the poorest of the poor, but rather those who have moved from a subsistence livelihood to a

position of relative wealth: owning an asset base in the form of land and real estate, and most importantly the social capital based on a well-educated next generation with the skills likely to ensure one's human security.

The case above and other case study data in this article compel one to take a human perspective on development. Development is a human endeavor. Development policy and development interventions are the products of human initiative, and they should and usually do affect the lives of children, women, and men. But there is a fallibility to humans: we are far from perfect. Whereas humans are knowledgeable agents, our knowledgeability is bound by unconscious, unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences. As the sociologist Giddens put it:

The flow of action continually produces consequences which are unintended by actors, and these unintended consequences also may form unacknowledged conditions of action in a feedback fashion. Human history is created by intentional activities, but is not an intended project; it persistently eludes efforts to bring it under conscious direction. However, such attempts are continually made by human beings, who operate under the threat and promise...that they are the only creatures who make their history (Giddens, 1984, p. 284).

Yet in the discourse of public service prevalent across the world, such as New Public Management, these creatures, these human beings, are dehumanized. Discursively, the public service has a need to distinguish public from private interest. This means that people get anonymized and standardized—often clustered in groups. People's faces and identities are thus taken away by the discourse of impersonal rational-legal authority (Weber, 2006). Within the Weberian rational-legal order, policies and bureaucracies are impersonal, structural, and objective. The human factor is often relegated to being merely an input or an externality in a quasi-technical process of transforming public funds into measurable results.

This article will, on the basis of brief case descriptions, argue that following the human stories in development policy making and implementation can offer a surprising insight into why, at times, policies may work or not work; how the idiosyncrasies of individuals' agency affect the achievement of policy outcomes; and how the human factor can give rise to beneficial unplanned, unforeseeable, and thus unintended policy outcomes: serendipity. This article will appeal for a look at the human factor in relation to public discourse: policies, but also public practice; policy implementation and its effects, intended or otherwise. It will reflect on the interaction between agency and structure, on how key individual agents interact, and how they challenge and accommodate events and decisions and thus shape and negotiate institutions.⁴ As such, people give shape to their history through conflict and collaboration.

Theoretically, this article is not based on an extensive literature review, though it takes note of and can be considered a specification of the effort of Koch and Schulpen (2017) with regard to exploring unintended effects of development cooperation.⁵ Methodologically, the article is not based on any quantitative analysis or numerical justification. Disciplinarily, it is firmly rooted in the humanities with a strong focus on human livelihood development in relation to policy and institutional structure. This paper is based on the inspiration of individuals encountered, conversed with, and interviewed in the course of two decades that included academic fieldwork, policy work, political analysis, development program management, recreation, and everyday life in several countries across Africa and in the Netherlands.

Due to my own involvement in Dutch development cooperation, the

¹ The *Mzee* was indeed a "telephone farmer"; see Leenstra (2014).

² This positive bias by no means denies the negative aspects of human agency.

³ Though quantitatively oriented social scientists may be inclined to dismiss single cases as anecdotal, these are acknowledged research approaches in anthropological and historical disciplines.

⁴ Refer to the works of Norbert Long on the actor oriented approach an overview of which is given in (Hebinck & Verschoor, 2001).

⁵ In addition, it connects with the sociological structure agency debate as seen in the paragraphs above.

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