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# *Problems of Technical Cooperation in Educational Research: reflections on a Colombian/Dutch research programme*

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## **General Points**

There is equal justification for carrying out independent evaluations of educational research projects (ERP) and for self-evaluations undertaken by persons who have led and/or participated in projects. The latter is bound to be subjective but this subjectiveness is also the reason why a self-evaluation is able to assess which factors have had greater weight and have been more crucial in influencing the progress of an ERP. In fact, both types of evaluations can be helpful in identifying bottlenecks.

The present note is of the latter type. It concerns a research programme on human resources between the Netherlands and Colombia. After a chronological account, we comment on the objectives and background of the research programme and discuss questions involving the relationships between sponsors, coordinators, the research team and users. By choosing to discuss the interactions between the actors, this case study highlights the advantages of looking at an ERP as an evolving process between persons with prescribed roles.<sup>1</sup>

## **Chronological Account**

As is well known, bilateral technical assistance (BTA) from the Netherlands (or from other donors) to Colombia (or other recipients) is allocated on a yearly basis. In several rounds of negotiations the Colombian authorities (Ministry of Planning) allocate specific projects (sponsored by various departments in Colombia) to particular donors and thereby define the BTA of each donor. This little studied diplomatic process has produced a Dutch/Colombian allocation for a research programme on education and training of almost US\$1mn to be paid by the Dutch (1977), and a Colombian contribution which ranges between US\$1 and US\$1.5mn (1979-82). The project is the subject of this case study.

Surely factors other than diplomatic processes played a role in this engagement. Probably the Dutch policy in the mid and late seventies, of relating assistance to target groups, and awareness on the part of the Colombian negotiators and their informants of the existence of Dutch expertise in the area of education and manpower (for example, J. Tinbergen) did have some influence.

In any case, the Dutch Department of Development Cooperation turned to Dutch expertise (the writer of this note, who later became the designer and coordinator of the project). After the usual negotiations on what to study, who should be contracted, at what costs and according to which time schedule, an agreement was reached in less than a year. The project started in January 1978. It completed the methodology phase and some preliminary collection of data in half a year, by July 1978. The progress was evaluated by both authorities in September 1978. Implementation took more time than was planned but did not exceed the funds allocated. The project was in the end extended twice with some extra finance. The production of a large number of internal reports was followed by an all-encompassing project report, in early 1982. An international symposium on the theme of employment and education was convened in April 1982, which celebrated the official completion of the collaborative research.<sup>2</sup>

## **Objectives and Background**

The main objective of the research programme was to identify the conditions under which a more effective planning and execution of manpower training could take place in SENA (National Apprenticeship Service) and in Colombia as a whole.

As background to the project, it may be mentioned that SENA has been the core of manpower training in

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<sup>1</sup> This approach is discussed at greater length in the paper by S. I. Cohen and H. Reiff in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> The final report was edited by the two project coordinators, S. I. Cohen and A. Sarmiento (*Sistema de Planeacion de Recursos Humanos*, SENA, Bogota, 1982).

Colombia since 1957. It is responsible for the organisation in centres and enterprises of instruction courses and upgrading programmes for workers in almost all economic activities. More recently SENA has expanded into mobile training programmes and community development activities. It draws its resource from a tax of about 2.5 per cent on salaries and wages; the tax is collected from all public and private enterprises above a certain size as well as the central government, territorial departments and municipalities. SENA is relatively autonomous in the planning and execution of its activities.

Throughout the period of its existence, SENA has trained rapidly growing numbers of skilled workers to high standards. Its record has been impressive and it is now one of the most effective centres in Latin America. The abundance of resources and the autonomy of SENA have led to the emergence of several needs:

— the need for close links between national development policy and SENA activities. A training agency will be able to judge the demand for its services more accurately when manpower forecasts at the national level have been improved and a place for vocational training in a national employment strategy is formulated. At that time there had been no attempt at that kind of articulation at the national level;

— the need for a system of programming its own allocations to training activities, as well as regular machinery for controlling the eventual results of the programmes, their assessment and feedback.

The project attempted to meet both these needs and fell, therefore, into two major parts. The first part applied models and projections, and the second part relied on tracer and other survey studies. Besides these two major parts, the research programme contained an array of specific studies relating to the functioning of formal and informal labour markets in Colombia.

To help the reader in placing this case study alongside other ERP, it is worth mentioning some stylised descriptions. This project was of the policy type, with heavy elements of institution building. It had a large team of researchers and assistants, large financial resources, full access to related government documents, high prestige — in the sense of promoting bilateral diplomatic relations between donor and recipient, an extensive network of users via the 16 regional offices of SENA spread throughout the country, and frequent exchanges of documents and advisers with the World Bank, UNESCO and ILO. The international symposium which discussed the final results of the research programme was an important national event politically. The President of the Republic delivered the opening speech, and the

meeting was intellectually impressive.<sup>3</sup> But these characteristics, which undoubtedly have beneficial effects, have their costs too, which is in the nature of all activities.

### Sponsors-Coordinator

From the point of view of sponsors and coordinators, the project had three phases.

**First phase** The project had two coordinators, one Dutch and one Colombian. The Dutch coordinator made a start on his functions in January 1978. On the Colombian side it was then not yet settled who would be the *de facto* Colombian coordinator. This was understandable. The position of the coordinator a) allowed its holder to strengthen his position within SENA at the cost of other candidates; b) entitled him to contract Colombian experts as members of the research team, and thereby, increased his network of relationships; c) might bring about such benefits as travel in the country and abroad, and d) attracted prestige.

All these reasons tended to make the race a very vital one for the competing candidates. What was the *impact*? The delay was a godsend, in a sense. It allowed the Dutch coordinator to go ahead, with the combined Dutch-Colombian research team and the officials of SENA, in designing the methodology and laying down the management framework of the project and work assignments, which basically endured throughout the other phases. In short, the first phase was dominated by the Dutch coordinator, with a marginal role for the Colombian coordinator. The situation allowed quick accomplishments regarding design and methodology. In general, if methodological questions are subjected to long arguments of a groping nature, as often happens in contexts which can be described as more liberal and less experienced, it is very likely that most of the researchers' time will be wasted in theorising. The first phase, with strict leadership, avoided such pitfalls.

**Second phase** An evaluation by a combined mission of the progress made directed attention to the desirability of having a strongly supported Colombian coordinator. The competition for that position ended with clear indications as to who was to run the project. The second phase saw a reversal in the role of the coordinators. The Dutch coordinator paid regular but short visits. The Colombian coordinator devoted his full time to the project. The hired Colombian research team was extended and included some of the best

<sup>3</sup> Among world renowned in the areas of employment and education who attended the international symposium were I. Adelman, G. S. Becker, A. Berry, H. Correa, G. Pschacharopolous, D. Seers, F. Welch.

economists in Colombia. They had important links with the Ministry of Planning and top universities and research institutions in Colombia. The team was regularly in the news and in many instances they were able to deal straightforwardly with the Embassy of the Netherlands. What was the *impact*? The project took more time, and eventually more funds, than was planned or considered necessary. This had been occasioned by the inability of the coordinator in charge to enforce demands for output from hired economists, who occupy a very high status in Colombian intellectual circles.<sup>4</sup> The hired economists had other commitments as well, with the consequence that only a minimum of the collected data was utilised by the project (but we later extracted guarantees that the unused data will be taken up by SENA in collaboration with international organisations). The diplomatic weight of SENA, the coordinator and the research team were strong enough to extend the project for a period. Regular extensions have become almost a convention in Dutch/Colombian technical cooperation and this project was no exception. For both sides it is easier to channel more funds into an established venture than to look for new outlets, up to a certain point.

**Third phase** As the time became tighter, the critical point approached. It became evident that the emphasis on the hired experts had to give way to work assignments for four young graduates, as regular employees of SENA. They had the task of completing the studies. They were recruited and paid directly by SENA. The allocation of SENA funds for this purpose was very difficult but was made possible by the promotion of the Colombian coordinator to the position of sub-director of SENA. He kept the position of Colombian coordinator, which helped the project to reach a successful end during its last phase.

The role of the Dutch coordinator, which was both technical and managerial in the first phase, became more technical and much less managerial in the second and third phases.

### Research Team, Output and Input

The project had at different stages four Dutch experts and 12 Colombian experts, in addition to 20 regular assistants from SENA. This project was one of the first experiments in Dutch assistance in Colombia to rely on contracted Colombian experts. This brought up all kinds of issues regarding salary scales, foreign exchange compensation, rights and duties, etc, which will not be discussed here. Rather we will comment on issues of output as compared to input.

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the hired economists in the research team had previously taught the coordinator in charge of the project. A few others were directing fully-fledged institutes, had lists of established publications and/or strong links with party politics.

If the recipient country has well-trained nationals, as is the case in Colombia, then hiring a Colombian expert has advantages over hiring a Dutch expert. The advantages are that the national knows the country, has no problems of adaptation, and above all, is cheaper, so that more can be accomplished within the same budget.

The experience of the project has showed much of the above to be true, but the potential may not be fully realised if the hired experts outrank the management. As is well known, in many countries with a scarcity of experts, we often find such people engaged in several jobs at the same time. Effort tends to be fragmented. The project suffered from this feature. The result is a high unit cost of realised output, in spite of nominally cheap rates of national expertise. This does not mean that, if the project had been more heavily Dutch-manned, the unit cost of realised output would have been lower. Far from that. In fact, the value of the realised contribution of one Dutch expert was also questioned.

In summary, effectiveness depends on the particular persons involved on both sides. To recruit a professional, devoted, disciplined and harmoniously functioning team is very much a matter of luck.

### Users, Results and Feedback

SENA's wide network saw to it that the research process was simultaneously relayed to the central and regional offices. In fact, the medium term plan for the development of SENA coincided with the research programme. The two evolved into one integrated framework. In this way, a high degree of feedback was assured.

At one time at the start, the Colombian counterparts showed that they were highly conditioned by a negative experience with the misuse of copyrights by North Americans. It was difficult to change this attitude, even when it became apparent that misuse was outlawed by the officially signed administrative accord between the two countries. Of course, other things remaining the same, it is true that a donor economist may have more free university time to elaborate on the field research than the recipient economist, who has less facility to do so. Such attitudes continue to survive in situations where inequalities are imposed on equals. The circumstances are exogenous to educational research, but can seriously affect its implementation.

### Benefit-Cost Performance

Performance cannot be compared across projects of different natures. We have described this project in

several terms. The main features are: official bilateral assistance, political prestige, institutional backing, expensiveness in terms of unit cost of realised output. Such a project can be sensibly evaluated against standards set for this type of educational research. The problems encountered here are different from those in

academic or dissertation-type research, evaluatory or incidental projects.

It is to be noted, of course, that the *existence* of intergovernmental allocations to educational research of the kind described above has not been the subject of judgement here. That is a subject apart.