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# *The Failure of Ethics in Practice: cultural and institutional barriers of a research project in Venezuela*<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Research by western social scientists in less developed countries (ldcs) is inevitably taking place in a neo-colonial situation; most research can be characterised by the term academic colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Research on education is no exception. Neo-colonialism and colonialism do not mean the same thing: the first refers to the fact that ldcs by definition are dependent, powerless, and mostly poor nations in economic, political and cultural terms. One of the consequences is that researchers, authorities and the informed public in a ldc *perceive* the western researcher as a manifestation of dependency relations, and act accordingly, with a mixture of hostility, distrust, greed and subservience. Academic colonialism refers to a situation in which general dependency relations extend to universities and research activities. Researchers from rich countries have more funds at their disposal, more time to spend on fieldwork, often a more sophisticated apparatus of preparation, which enables them to dictate the research agenda, choose the research design and methodology, and determine what will happen to the results. Even in cases where active collaboration is sought with colleagues from the host country, the research endeavour is on an unequal footing. Western researchers generally come with an elaborated research plan which prospective counterparts can take or leave, not adapt to their own research priorities. The division of tasks among participants in a joint research project generally places the researchers from the host country in a subordinate position: the team leader, who controls the research budget, is from the funding country: specific parts of the research are assigned to mixed 'couples' to guarantee the 'proper' collection of data. In an implicit or explicit way, local researchers are

considered to be a 'risk', for which tutorial relations are seen as the most adequate solution. The ideological phrase used is that the project should have a 'built-in transfer of research expertise'. Who the experts are, is beyond doubt (generally from both sides). And with regard to the results of a project, more often than not the feedback of data to the host country is treated carelessly: data-mining, no divulging of publications in the host country, no writing of reports in a way that makes them accessible to interested local people.

Nothing can be done about the fact that the type of research we cherish takes place in a neo-colonial situation. Something, however, can be done to prevent that research bearing the marks of academic colonialism. Part of the problem resides in the set-up of a research project, part of it in the institutional context in which we have to work.

With regard to the institutional context, despite the strong selectivity of all educational institutions, most of our colleagues in western countries are not persons of independent means, but apply for and sometimes obtain grants to carry out fieldwork. The funding institutions have their criteria for distributing research funds, among which perceived quality of researcher and/or research design is one, but not the only one (any more). They have priority areas, chosen by themselves, or imposed upon them by governments or private research foundations. It is becoming quite normal that one of the requirements of research plans submitted to them is some arrangement with a counterpart institution. This criterion may stem from ethical considerations to prevent academic colonialism, but purely practical reasons also bring them to emphasise the significance of counterparts. They are conscious of the fact that the research will take place within the context of dependency relations, and see that the participation of a counterpart may legitimise the project in a ldc. In cases where the research forms part of development cooperation programmes, the incorporation of a counterpart is a formal requirement

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<sup>1</sup> With customary proviso, I would like to thank Hans Brandsma, Tiete Droogleever Fortuijn and Peter Oud for their critical remarks on the draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Much earlier I analysed this situation in a thematic issue of *Sociologische Gids* on academic colonialism [Droogleever Fortuijn and Brandsma 1971].

without which it will not even take place. However, funding agencies generally do not dig deep into the specific characteristics of counterpart relations on which a research proposal is based. Research applicants have accustomed themselves to this demand and generally take great care to produce 'letters of intent' from ldc. The main criteria of funding agencies thus remain their own research priorities and the quality of the proposal. Both are basically judged in terms of values, scientific paradigms and perceptions of relevance *from the point of view* of dominant groups in western countries (universities, governments, or research foundations). They may also reflect the values and interests of dominant groups in ldc, but not necessarily so. Anyhow, funding agencies have no practical means, whatever their intentions, to take into account in more than a superficial way the research priorities of ldc, unless the relevant information is provided by the applicants.

This brings us to the researcher's own role. If he has no intention of combating academic colonialism, there is hardly any obstacle to his having his own way, provided he has some skill in procuring legitimising documentation. For practical reasons he complies with some superficial equality-improving requirements and takes the loss of some autonomy in the preparatory stage of fieldwork. If ethical considerations are playing a role, the situation becomes more complicated. First, he has to find a research problem which reflects the research priorities of colleagues in a ldc. This requires an intimate knowledge of the research scene in which he wants to work, which generally is better developed after than before a research experience. Since funds are scarce for shopping around to find research priorities in poor countries, most researchers rely on previous experience, or on documents indicating priorities that may exist. But even the choice of a 'relevant' research problem from such a list is determined by what the western researcher thinks will fit research priorities in his own country and therefore will have a better chance of being funded. It is an expression of dependency relations. An additional problem might be that research priorities of local research institutes represent more their own interests, or those of the government, than research needs of destitute groups in that society (with whom many researchers identify, in principle at least). That these are conflicting interests is easily assumed and sometimes true. One thing is clear: no research theme directed at the solution of problems of dependent groups in ldc can be elaborated on the basis of written communication, or a quick two-week visit. This pleads against incidental research activities in ldc, and for the design of long term joint-venture research programmes, which might start with a project that is given high priority by the counterpart institute

and includes a search for research priorities, the results of which accrue to disadvantaged groups in society.

Second, a good working relationship with counterparts has to be established, avoiding academic-colonialist overtones. Elsewhere, my colleagues and I formulated some general rules for a joint-venture agreement, which might contribute to more equal relations between western and local social scientists in a joint research project [Droogleever Fortuijn, van Giffen and Oud 1972]. The main dimensions of a real joint-venture are the following. Both partners participate on an equal footing in the choice of a research theme, the consultation and decision-making concerning the design and execution of the research project. In the case of a larger research team, there is dual leadership, each part choosing its own leader who acts internally as coordinator, and externally as a representative, diplomat, liaison officer or whatever. All decisions concerning the research design, implementation, spending of research funds and ways of publication are team decisions. In situations of disagreement about procedural questions a majority of team members decides. In case of decisions that have important consequences for the course of the project, each team member has the right to veto. Division of labour among team members should take into account the specific capacities and interests of each. Each team member is responsible for the execution of her or his specific part and should regularly inform other team members on the progress being made. Each team member has free access to the research data of the other ones, with due respect to the privacy and anonymity of informants and the confidentiality of the information they have given.

A third problem refers to the management of data and publications. Publication of results is the responsibility of the whole team, but the way in which results will be presented is the individual responsibility of each member. Each team member has the right to publish on his or her specific subject, after consultation of and review by the other members. If necessary, a translation of each manuscript in an agreed language must be given to all. A final report on the project will be written under collective authorship. A condensed version, containing the most important data, conclusions and possibly policy recommendations will be published in the official language(s) of the host country, in a style that makes it accessible to interested laymen. The major libraries in the country where the research takes place will receive a copy of each publication. Both parties receive a complete set of the research data, if possible in the original form, but in any case the finished data (punch cards, tapes, computer output, interim reports and notes, etc).

As one can imagine, a researcher working together with colleagues from ldc according to these general principles is not taking the easiest way. In the following sections a case study is presented of a research project which was based on a joint-venture agreement according to these rules, with comments upon the cultural and institutional barriers encountered.

## Short History of a Research on Education in Venezuela

### Preparation

The idea of the research had its origin in the Institute of Applied Sociology of the University of Amsterdam, and was inspired by the economic bias in development planning of the sixties. The aim was to construct and elaborate a research instrument which might enable planners to collect data for the design of a long term national development strategy for ldc that paid attention not only to economic growth, but also to political development, education, health and international dependency relations. The complete staff of the institute would participate (five researchers), and for both ethical and practical reasons collaboration was sought with like-minded research institutes in several ldc. Three consecutive research projects in different countries were planned.

In July 1971, we sent a four page note on our research idea to 86 research institutes all over the world,<sup>3</sup> with an invitation to participate in a joint-venture. We received about 40 replies, 20 of which were positive. To these we sent a larger discussion paper, indicating our preference for focusing on four main research topics: the analysis of the power structure and organisational networks in the economic system, the political system, the educational system and international relations. It should be a macro-sociological evaluation study of the functioning of a whole society, with the intention to formulate general policy recommendations for a development strategy. Several rounds of exchanging discussion notes and letters finally reduced the number of prospective participants to three, one in Kenya, one in Nigeria, and one in Venezuela.

In the meantime working relations within the Institute of Applied Sociology deteriorated, because of fundamental differences of opinion on the research design. This led to a loosening of the cooperative bonds; the general objectives of the project remained, but not the idea of a team project with shared fieldwork, research design and methodology. Two team members, Peter Oud and I, both with a special

interest in the political and educational aspects of development planning, continued along the course begun, trying to find a research institute to cooperate with. After discussions in Paris (April 1972) with the Director of the Centro de Estudios del Futuro de Venezuela (CEFV) of the Catholic University Andrés Bello (UCAB) in Caracas, in October 1972 we reached a formal agreement to start the project, focusing on the educational aspects of national planning — which reflected to a high degree the research priorities of both the CEFV and the Venezuelan Government. In the meantime, we had applied in April 1972 for research funds from the Netherlands University Foundation for International Cooperation (NUFFIC).<sup>4</sup> They declined even to consider the application; because of budget cuts new projects could not be funded in that year. We pleaded, with success, that they at least examine the programme, with the argument that a positive evaluation would make it worthwhile to continue preparations with CEFV, even if we could not get funds for 1973. Moreover, a positive reaction would make it easier to apply elsewhere for funds covering costs in 1973 (and — not said — would lay a strong claim on the 1974 budget). The judgement was positive, although there were some reservations as to the scope of the project and the political context in which it would be carried out. NUFFIC wanted to receive a much more detailed research design, in order to assess its feasibility. A second barrier was put in front of us: although we could draw up a detailed research design, we did not want to do so without our Venezuelan colleagues. A necessary condition for writing it together would be intensive discussion. NUFFIC would not pay for a trip to Caracas; CEFV could not afford a trip to Amsterdam. The stalemate was broken by a grant from the research funds of our own faculty. In the spring of 1973, we went to Caracas and had a most fruitful series of discussions, which resulted in a research design, a detailed budget, a division of tasks among the two Dutch and three Venezuelan team members, and the signing of a formal agreement based on the principles mentioned in the introduction. Our Venezuelan counterparts considered this agreement quite unnecessary, but since we insisted on it they made no objections (and proved to be very skilled in the subtleties of contract formulation, in accordance with Ibero-Hispanic legalist tradition so widespread in Latin America). The Director of CEFV managed to get the director of the Venezuelan national planning office CORDIPLAN to write a letter to the Dutch Government, requesting that the Dutch team members be sent as technical experts to Venezuela

<sup>3</sup> Addresses were obtained from UNESCO's *The World of Learning*, which gives short information on the research interests of the institutions covered.

<sup>4</sup> A government agency which considers applications for programmes and projects of cooperation between Dutch and ldc universities, funded by the Dutch Government from the budget for development cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate-General for International Cooperation).

(May 1973). In April 1974, the Dutch Government decided to pay for the research costs of the project for 12 months (salaries and minor administrative costs would be covered by the participating universities). The fieldwork could start.

### Fieldwork

In September 1974 we arrived in Caracas. In the months before, we received vague indications that the CEFV was in trouble, although the exchange of opinions on the operationalisation never faltered. We even postponed our departure, to get a clearer idea of the situation, but finally decided to go (with the idea that our presence would be a *fait accompli*, which might help the CEFV solve its institutional problems). On our arrival, we found CEFV had virtually ceased to exist: the only persons left were the Director and his secretary; the rest of our counterparts had taken other posts and were unable to work on the project. A combination of two factors had contributed to this inconvenient situation. First, CEFV had tried to disengage itself from its university, UCAB. The direction of UCAB had tried two years earlier to incorporate the staff of the research institute into normal teaching activities (we were informed of that during our preparatory trip, one and a half years, earlier). Since it is a private university, it depends to a great extent on student fees and considered the 12 full-time researchers of CEFV a luxury they could not afford any longer. The director of CEFV saw the risks, looking at normal Venezuelan university life: there would be no time left for research. CEFV received about 10 per cent of its budget from the UCAB, the rest coming from contract research for ministries and private institutions. The director thought the CEFV could lead an independent life, and disengaged CEFV from the UCAB in the second part of 1973. Relations with the government were excellent, among other reasons because one of the staff members (also one of our counterparts) was a daughter of the then president. However, in December 1973, the reigning Christian Democratic government of Caldera lost the presidential elections, and Carlos Andrés Pérez of Acción Democrática took over in March 1974. With the reigning spoils system, this meant a collapse of CEFV's network of relations, at least temporarily. No governmental agency dared to start new projects for many months before and after the elections, so research contracts withered away. But not from one moment to the other, so the director believed that it could be a temporary slack period with a recovery in due course. Nothing of the kind happened, however.

The first months of our fieldwork were mainly used for filling in the last loose ends of the research design and drawing samples of educational institutions, while waiting for the recovery of the CEFV. In the beginning

of 1975, it became clear that we had to look for a new counterpart, since one of NUFFIC's and our criteria was to have one. Much time was devoted (in hindsight, one could say, lost) to finding a new counterpart institution. One month before the official end of NUFFIC-sponsored fieldwork, the director finally found one: the Division of Educational Research of the Sector Office of Planning and Budgeting (OSPP) of the Ministry of Education. Not a real university counterpart, as NUFFIC stipulated, but from the viewpoint of the research objectives a most strategically placed governmental organisation. Three staff members were assigned to the project, and a new division of tasks could be made, although in a situation we loathed to be in: the research plan was completely finished, our own tasks well delineated, so the only thing the OSPP could do was to take or leave it. It appeared to be our problem, not theirs. They took it.

Although formally we had a new counterpart, it did not work in practice. After a few months, one of our new colleagues retired for health reasons and could not be replaced. And to the other two were assigned so many other tasks, that little time was left for the project. One, a party activist of the new government party, had to do a great deal of party work in and outside the ministry. The other was graduating from the university and much involved in other research projects of the Office. In fact, the research tasks of five persons for one year had to be done by the two Dutch team members. Some cuts and rearrangements were made, and outside assistance was sought.

In November 1975, we got the assistance of the Centre for the Study of Education in Developing Countries (CESO) in The Hague, to supervise a number of case studies in a small selection of Venezuelan schools. Interviews and observations of classroom activities formed the main part of this task. Originally, it would have been carried out by the CEFV, but CESO was most helpful in filling this gap. It paid for a three-months consultancy, in which a staff member, with the collaboration of a Dutch graduate student, supervised a team of 14 Venezuelan students, who were paid out of our research budget.

In May 1976 the NUFFIC contribution came to an end, with the fieldwork well underway but still far from finished. NUFFIC made clear that an extension would be out of the question. The Venezuelan Ministry of Education wanted to extend the period of fieldwork and tried to get funds, first from the National Planning Office, without success, later from the Venezuelan National Council for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICIT) to pay our salaries for 15 months. In November 1976 a contract with CONICIT was signed for a period of 12 months

(June 1976 and May 1977), with a possibility for renewal for three months.<sup>5</sup>

In the middle of 1977, we contracted a private research bureau, Tecnológica Internacional CA, to carry out a survey among a representative sample of about 800 Venezuelan households, to get a hold on the latent social demand for formal and non-formal education. The director, part-time professor in statistics and research methodology at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, was approached in an earlier phase to become a team member. Since the CEFV could not find the funds to pay him, this had not happened. But now he was able to participate, without salary (he considered our project as professionally stimulating), but we had to pay for the interviewers. Our budget did not include these additional costs, since in the original plan this would have been part of the contribution of the CEFV. But NUFFIC once more appeared to be most generous in providing the additional funds. From an organisational and technical point of view, this survey ran smoothly, under the competent supervision of the director of Tecnológica Internacional.

In June 1977, the Ministry of Education submitted the necessary information for the renewal of our contracts with CONICIT (three months for myself, one year for Oud). Our fieldwork was nearly finished, but Oud feared that the data processing and write-up would meet with insurmountable difficulties once we were back in Holland, so he wanted to finish the job on the spot. It would, moreover, enable him to discuss the results and recommendations with policy makers. Administrative procedures took too much time, so we both had to return to Amsterdam to resume our teaching tasks. In August 1977 we left Venezuela.

### Writing

In October 1977, CONICIT approved the prolongation of our contracts, but it was not until April 1978 that this information was passed on to us. In June 1978, the Ministry of Education reiterated its interest in the continuation of our work. Oud returned to Venezuela in October 1978 to write his policy reports, which he was able to discuss with the authorities. In July 1979, he finished his part of the research project, dealing with non-formal education. For personal reasons I chose to stay in Holland. Problems with CONICIT over the contracts remained until the end, and we never received the salary for the last three months of 1977. At the end of his stay, Oud had to 'rescue' the data of the household survey. The Director of Tecnológica Internacional had subcontracted the data processing of the questionnaires, but had not

sufficient money to pay his partner. This person refused to return the material and took it hostage. Oud had to pay him from his own purse to get everything back. We divided the loss.

Oud proved to be right: additional teaching tasks compensating for our long absence, and much organisational work for the faculty, prevented any prolonged investment of time in processing my huge amount of data.<sup>6</sup> NUFFIC was not prepared to pay any additional costs. For them, the project had been closed in January 1978, and since, according to new criteria for the selection of projects, Venezuela was no longer considered as a ldc,<sup>7</sup> no new application would be taken into consideration. Once again, the research budget of the faculty came to the rescue: a team of coders was paid out of it, and they did in a few months what would have taken me one and a half years of full time coding. The faculty also paid the printing costs of one of my policy reports. Nevertheless, it was only in 1981, that the processing of data was more or less finished, and that I could start writing. During the academic year 1981-82, I had a sabbatical leave, which however was largely spoiled by an internal reorganisation of the faculty. A commission which had to formulate recommendations to cut the teaching staff had chosen to eliminate the Institute of Applied Sociology. The struggle-for-life took two years, in which research activities reached virtual stagnation. I was finally transferred to another department, which did not want to have anything to do with research in ldcs. One policy report could be finished, but pressure to dedicate all research time to the production of 'scientific' publications prevented me from continuing writing policy recommendations for the Venezuelan Government.

### Some Cultural and Institutional Barriers

From the organisational point of view the research project encountered a good many problems. Some were our own fault and perhaps we could have prevented them, but most were due to adverse circumstances in which we were as powerless as anybody else involved in the project. They will be discussed under four headings: finance, counterparts, fieldwork, and data.

<sup>6</sup> This included the coding of nearly 2,000 questionnaires from pupils from primary and secondary schools, 66 extensive questionnaires and interview protocols with teachers, and about 250 large interview protocols with educational authorities (among them school directors, inspectors, representatives of teacher unions, educational pressure groups and private organisations; and high civil servants in the Ministry of Education).

<sup>7</sup> Considering only the old fashioned criterion of *per capita* income, they of course are correct. From the viewpoint of distribution of welfare — however measured — Venezuela is among the most unequal societies in the world, with large parts of the population living in miserable conditions.

<sup>5</sup> CONICIT could only subscribe to contracts of a maximum of 12 months.

### Financing the project: who is dependent on whom?

Many agencies were involved in the funding of the research. Taking into account our normal university salary, the biggest funding institution was the University of Amsterdam. This part of the budget was provided independently of the characteristics of the research project. The second largest, but most crucial one was NUFFIC, which provided most travel and fieldwork expenses, and the paying of two substitutes for nine months. Third in importance was CONICIT, which paid nearly three man-years of salary and some travelling expenses. Smaller contributions came from the CEFV, the Venezuelan Ministry of Education and the National Council of Human Resources (CNRH) (mainly in the form of administrative facilities and office room), CESO, and our own faculty.<sup>8</sup> This last contribution, although relatively small, was most important, because by paying for our preparatory trip it broke the vicious circle created by the combination of our basic approach — not to impose a ready made research plan on our prospective counterparts, and the norms and criteria for subvention of NUFFIC, which only considers fully elaborated research designs. It triggered the whole project.

Each of the important contributors presented its own barriers, through which our negotiating skills were probed (and sometimes their flexibility severely tested). Looking back on the whole episode, I think we were rather successful — but at what costs! A tremendous amount of time went into redrafting again and again documents to legitimate new or old requests, new proposals, or overdrawn budgets. The basic mistake we made was to submit too low a budget to NUFFIC, especially with regard to data processing, time required for writing policy reports, and getting these reports printed. Another miscalculation (I still doubt whether it can be called a mistake) was our reliance on the financial contribution from the CEFV. In the pre-fieldwork stage, NUFFIC proved to be very exacting with regard to our project. Our approach was new to them, and they considered it rather ambitious (with reason, I should add). They therefore asked for much more information about the counterpart and much more details about the research design than normally is the case. A quite unfortunate circumstance was the lack of research funds in the year we wanted to start the fieldwork. And after approval, red tape in Holland to obtain *agrément* with the Venezuelan Government took an additional six months. The delay of one and a half years certainly deterred our first

counterparts from putting much time into the preparation of their part, being unsure whether it would lead to anything and the long period of uncertainty probably weakened their position in the struggle for independence they were fighting (and eventually lost). When NUFFIC finally decided to support the project, it proved to be a most lenient funding agency during the fieldwork. Of course, it was not *only* leniency; they would have lost all the money already invested if they had forced us to come back after one year. It was not only in our interest to get fieldwork to continue: it would have been for them a project that failed, not something a government agency (or any other organisation) likes. But real empathy with our adversities was the dominant theme in all communications we had with them.

Relations with CONICIT about the payment of our prolonged stay were of a different kind. Our own role was subsidiary to the role of the director of the CEFV, the director of the Planning Office, and the Minister of Education. We were mainly observers and providers of information on the fieldwork, not negotiators. In Venezuela, fundraising is never done by the fieldworker himself, so we remained back stage. Our only task was prodding the actors to keep moving, by being a permanent, friendly but insistent nuisance. The main argument used with all force, was that the Ministry of Education was most interested in the results of the research, but had no funds to pay for the prolongation. 'What a pity it would be to lose everything, if CONICIT would not help.' It was and remained a strong lever. They finally did consent after six months of frequent pressing. They did it again more than a year later. Decision-making in CONICIT was so slow that their second decision (to keep Oud for one more year) came too late. We both returned to Holland. After a year, Oud could come back to Venezuela. Not until the end of his stay did he get his contract, and then on worse terms than promised. We never received everything which was formally promised, but nevertheless the contribution of CONICIT was considerable and vital for the whole project, since it enabled us to finish the fieldwork.

In a formal sense, the largest part of the funds came from Holland, which might be an indication of academic colonialism. However, two considerations mitigate this picture, in such a way that one may ask who depended on whom. The first is that 'Holland' is an abstraction: the University of Amsterdam, NUFFIC, and our own faculty are separate institutions, each with its own decision-making structure and its own interests. The central office of the university, as the biggest provider of funds (salaries), was only formally involved and did not play any active role. The faculty acted as a research entrepreneur by taking the risk of paying for our

<sup>8</sup> Although forming part of the University of Amsterdam, it has a separate small research fund, on which decisional power rests with the Faculty Council, not the central administration of the university, so I count it as a separate institution. There were some miniscule contributions from a Dutch organisation (WUS), which subsidises fieldwork in ldes of graduate students. Two students who participated in the case studies received a small grant from this source.

preparatory trip to Caracas (about 10 per cent of the annual budget for about 3 per cent of the staff). With more foresight than NUFFIC,<sup>9</sup> they saw our point that a personal encounter with a prospective counterpart was a necessary condition to establish joint-venture research relations (that it is not a sufficient condition, our own experience proves). So, the faculty gave us the benefit of the doubt, as NUFFIC did at a later stage. We were the initiating and asking party, dependent on the goodwill and arguments we were able to mobilise. In Venezuela, the situation was not very different. To a great extent, we were dependent on the positive judgement of our research and on the personal goodwill we could establish, to influence first the director of the CEFV, and later on also the director of the Educational Planning Office. Although both most certainly had their moments of regretting that they ever got involved in the project, personal relations remained excellent during all those years. Together, we were dependent on the Minister of Education and CONICIT to bring the fieldwork to an end. If they had said no, the project would have collapsed. There was never any pressure from the Dutch Government on the Venezuelan Government to provide for the necessary additional funds. The only assets we had were our sheer presence and 'prodding-power', and the attractiveness of the results they could expect.

### **Establishing cooperative relations with counterparts: how the West was lost**

In fact, we never got a counterpart, only a rather influential network of strategically placed people who saw something of value in our project. The preparatory trip seemed promising: relations with the staff members of CEFV were excellent, and stimulating from a professional point of view. Our 'ethical stance', although considered a bit queer, was accepted without reservation or any attempt to exploit it. On our arrival in September 1974, the situation at CEFV was most delicate: nearly all staff members, among them all our counterparts, had left, but the director expressed (and probably had) good hope of finding funds at short notice to pay the counterparts. We had to be patient, 'since, as you know, these things are normal in less established societies like Venezuela'. We were patient and got ourselves settled. When in December nothing had happened, we suspected that something was really wrong, and suggested taking active steps to find another counterpart. We explained that their participation, apart from practical considerations, was a formal requirement of NUFFIC, so the continuity of the whole project was at stake. But

<sup>9</sup>This was 10 years ago. Now, NUFFIC and other governmental funding agencies are more open to investing in preparatory trips, in order to get well elaborated research designs and well established counterpart relations.

no, 'there were some promising contacts'. In April 1975, we became active ourselves in the search for new counterparts. In the following months we started conversations with all kinds of official and private research institutes, to which we presented our project. This distracted us from the fieldwork proper. Nothing came of it, until the director of the CEFV found a most ingenious solution: CEFV would be integrated (with its few remaining projects) into the Planning Office of the Ministry of Education (OSPP), and our project would be the responsibility of both, while three staff members of the Division of Educational Research would be added to the research team. Meanwhile, we had dropped our nice ideas about joint activities on the basis of equality, and, because of professional self-interest, were primarily interested in a formal partnership which would meet the minimum requirements of NUFFIC. NUFFIC approved of this construction, and we decided to carry out the research on our own. Any assistance that might come our way would be most helpful, but we did not count on it. That proved to be a wise, although lately arrived at, decision.

Hindsight suggests that we were very naïve in counting so much on our counterpart, and that we were too passive in finding another one,<sup>10</sup> or discarding the idea of an effective counterpart altogether. Hindsight, however, makes judgements easy. One can agree that our own interest in getting the project started had brought us to accept CEFV too easily as a viable counterpart. The political situation (Christian Democratic government; CEFV forming part of a catholic, private university; the daughter of the president as a team member) may have been assessed in advance as something that would work against the continuity of the project, instead of promoting it. But three years of active participant observation in Venezuelan society and bureaucracy has led me in second hindsight to a more qualified vision. Of course, a country with a strong tendency to a spoils system in the filling of political positions lacks continuity in all kinds of networks. There is, however, a mechanism working in a contrary direction (after all, the lack of continuity is a daily problem for all Venezuelans). Every higher civil servant is, from the moment he occupies a government position, preparing his private alleys to other positions, in case the political tide changes. Much of his time is dedicated to the maintenance of a wide-ranging network of instrumental friendship relations within and across party boundaries. So did the director of CEFV, throwing out many small fish in the hope of catching a big one. He caught one; after one and a half years he became secretary to the president of the newly created National Council for Human Resources (CNRH), a body created by the

<sup>10</sup>This is the opinion of the evaluator who tried to assess the cooperation side of our relations with the counterpart [Jansen 1976].

Acción Democrática government to make studies of and to advise on the long term human resource development of Venezuela. He disengaged CEFV from the Planning Office of the Ministry of Education and passed it over to the council. The only thing that was exceptional was the time it took him to find a new institutional base; it came too late to provide the project with new team members. So, the fact that he promised us an early recovery of CEFV might appear at first hindsight to have been a smoke screen, but on second thought was a real probability within the Venezuelan context, which just did not materialise in time. No intervention on our behalf could have changed our ill luck by a jot.

My conclusion is that the general way the political system functions, formed a structural barrier to establishing good counterpart relations. Our problems might have been foreseen, but our relatively powerless position did prevent any effective intervention. Venezuela is not a country in which any foreign researcher, in simple virtue of being that, has free access to top decision makers.

One could say that our (typical western, or should I say Dutch) ethical approach was a barrier to the decision to drop the search for effective counterparts. I estimate that we lost more than one man-year of fieldwork time in order to get a counterpart and to get things financed from the field (not to count the time the director of CEFV invested in the management of the project, which was considerable). I still do not regret it, and I still regret that our private interest in getting the project moving, finally interfered with the principles on which it was based. Ethical principles should be maintained, but they never replace the private, professional motives of western researchers.

Relations with our second counterpart, the research department of the Ministry's planning office, have always been cordial but superficial. Through our experience there, I remain convinced that effective cooperation can be established only if a research project is their 'own' initiative. Readymade research designs can never function as a motivating force, attractive though the results foreseen may be to the counterpart. However, one has to be more specific on this point. Within CEFV, working relations between staff members and director were not outspokenly hierarchical, so our wish to establish democratic relations with the counterpart was congruent with the subculture of that institution. The Ministry of Education is another affair. Venezuelan public bureaucracy is highly centralised and hierarchical, with a strong tendency to concentrate decisional power at the top, even on seemingly unimportant issues. Thus, the agenda of the direction of the Educational Planning Office is crowded, while

subordinates — among them research personnel — are waiting for orders. In such a situation the expectation of establishing equal working relationships with colleagues is wishful thinking. One is placed in the 'expert' role, whether one likes it or not (we didn't). To get the motivational investment of people working in a hierarchically organised counterpart institution, one has to work on two levels. With a director, equal relations can and should be established. With regard to colleagues, the western researcher has to swallow his democratic ethos (if he has any) and accept the hierarchical norms of the host institution, or to teach them gradually to take the initiative — which may take at least half a year of intensive collaboration. Formal agreement on an equal input is perhaps necessary, but of no practical use; the practical consequences should be constantly negotiated, which takes a lot of time.

### **Carrying out the fieldwork: the field is dangerous and dirty, but diverting**

The most significant cultural barriers between Dutch and Venezuelan academic communities refer to ideas about the way fieldwork should be carried out. The social sciences in Venezuela are taught in two separate ways. On a theoretical level, dependency theory dominates; leading social scientists are inclined to this theoretical approach, and generally find a willing ear among their students. Apart from serving theory building, this has an important political function: university autonomy permits teachers and students to express freely all kinds of criticism on the present capitalist regime, without the risk of economic sanctions. Most leftist parties draw their cadre from the (public) universities, students and professors alike. But there is a deep cleft between theoretical discourse and empirical research. Even field research which departs from dependency theory is characterised by the most crude forms of empiricism. Methodology courses impose the idea that fieldwork is equal to standardised survey research. The creativity of the researcher resides in the design of sophisticated questionnaires, and computerised data analysis. But the collection of data is considered as dirty routine work that possibly should be contracted out to non-academic interviewers.

We had considerable difficulty in combating the emulation of North American empiricism of the fifties and sixties. The main research instrument we proposed to use was the qualitative interview, non-standardised, and focusing on the coping strategies which educators and authorities used to solve the problems of their profession and of the organisation they work in. Participant observation and structured observations belonged to our tools as well. It was hard to explain that we wanted to circumvent the methodological individualism of survey research, by



making organisations the primary unit of observation and analysis, not individual persons. They considered us mildly insane to take the trouble of travelling two days on unpaved roads to a one class village school in the jungle, to interview a primary school teacher who in their opinion was only semi-literate. 'How could such a person give interesting information on the functioning of the Venezuelan school system? What a waste of time for a qualified researcher!' For us it was an amazing experience to see one of our counterparts writing a Masters thesis on the planning of educational services in a sparsely populated area in the South of Venezuela, without wanting to observe on the spot. Even the idea did not occur to her. Planning is desk planning.

There are other aspects to this attitude, not related to the profession. Among urban middle class people like our counterparts, the countryside ('the interior', as they say) is dangerous and dirty. When paved roads stop and airports don't exist, one can hardly travel. There are no lodging facilities, no clean restaurants, there is the risk of a break-down of transport, or getting lost in the jungle with hundreds of unknown vile animals. I do exaggerate a little, but the common idea is that, with the exception of large provincial towns, the country is uninhabitable for civilised city people (we of course are the romantics who indulge ourselves in the hardships of fieldwork).

Nothing is more beyond reality. Venezuela has an excellent system of roads that reaches to the outer parts of the country, mostly paved, and if not, of reasonable quality (except in the rainy season). The sparsely populated area mentioned before could be reached by car in six hours, for the most part along a good asphalted road. In three years our cars never broke down. In most small towns there are modest but clean hotels and restaurants and simple repair workshops with few tools but the most ingenious mechanics. More than 10 poisonous snakes and centipedes I did not see, during all this time. And the impassable jungle is far away and of marginal interest to those who study the educational system.

The fieldwork itself presented hardly any complications, besides the eternal point of appointments on time. Patience is one of the things I learned, punctuality one of the things I lost. The management of introductions needed some investment of time, but with the local customary paraphernalia of the fieldworker it went smoothly (visiting cards heavily titled; a folder with a short description of the objectives of the project, the sponsoring agencies and the origin of the funds, to hand out to informants; and a nice collection of letters of recommendation).<sup>11</sup>

In getting our letters of recommendation we worked up and down the hierarchy of educational authorities. The first letter was from the director of the National Planning Office, CORDIPLAN, who formally invited us to Venezuela. With this letter, we obtained a letter from the director of the Educational Planning Office (OSPP). For most private schools I had a letter of the Venezuelan Association of Catholic Education (AVEC), of which most private schools are members. The first step in visiting a specific state, was to obtain with the above mentioned letters a permit to visit schools from the director of the state Bureau of Education (the highest chief of the inspectorate on the regional level). Entering a school and asking collaboration started with the production of the folder and a short explanation of the aim of my visit. Generally, this was sufficient. In case of some hesitation, I presented one or more of the letters. In no case did I meet any refusal, or even hints of annoyance. I always made clear that I was not working for the inspectorate, but collecting information about the school system in general, in which the specifics of the particular school would be made anonymous. To my surprise (and disappointment, because it indicated how subdued an atmosphere reigned in Venezuelan education) I met hardly any resistance to the project. A secondary school student of the highest grade refused to fill in a questionnaire, because I could not convince him that this project was not a second Project Camelot (which in his perception had led to the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile). The rest of his class found him queer, and was angry that our discussion prevented them from starting to answer my questions. Of course, I respected the student's opinion, and tried to explain to a very nervous under-director (not sure how I would react to this 'offence') how pleased I was with encountering such a critical attitude. I must admit, however, that my pleasure would have been much less, if this had happened on a large scale. Another case was a short article in *Punto*,<sup>12</sup> with strongly critical remarks on the 'Venezuelan education being planned by and sold to foreign powers'.

Of course, the lack of overt criticism is no proof that it did not exist. But if it existed, it was not present among the people I had to deal with. They did not show evasive behaviour, and were generally most helpful, and pleased to get so much attention. The only barrier we experienced in the field, was in getting access to high level policy makers and bureaucrats in the

<sup>12</sup> *Punto* is a small weekly newspaper, related to the largest (but politically still not very important) left wing party, MAS.

<sup>11</sup> In other societies other methods may be more convenient: personal telephone calls, personal visits, or otherwise. Generally, one should follow the hierarchical lines of that society in getting legitimation. This is what people expect. The risk of being identified with power holders has to be taken — and can be dealt with, once contacts are made.

political and educational field. With some of them we could not get an interview, but were relegated to lower level functionaries. If anything, we were considered by them as a *quantité négligeable* not representatives of neo-colonial powers who should be treated with 'due regard'.

### **Data, tape and paper: a cri de coeur on the write-up**

The worst mistake we made was to have a three-year period of data collection, without sufficient means to process them. It has taken an extraordinarily long time to organise all material: four years with full-time teaching passed until I could even start writing. If anything was badly assessed, it was the time needed for post-fieldwork activities. On a full-time basis, it would have taken about three years after the end of the fieldwork to finish the project. Since this was not in the budget (and couldn't be, according to NUFFIC rules), it became a long march along the paper mass. Since most material is in Spanish, assistance in Holland was difficult to get. NUFFIC had closed its books, and apparently it was none of their business to see whether reporting on the results would take place or not. After the flexibility of NUFFIC during fieldwork, their formalism afterwards was a disappointing obstacle.

Once more, the faculty came to the rescue, by paying for all coding work on the questionnaires. But this leniency came to a harsh end after the reorganisation commission recommended the closure of my home base. From that moment (May 1981), the faculty has done everything to prevent me from finishing the research project. In the beginning, they wanted me to stop all work on it immediately. After two years of fighting, the only thing it permitted me to continue was the writing of a dissertation on the theoretical aspects of the research, which to me was of secondary importance. The writing of my policy reports had to be stopped half way. So, the realisation of the main objective was blocked. Definitely blocked, since I am even forced to discontinue any involvement with research in Idcs, after finishing my book.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Perhaps this case presents a comical coincidence of adverse circumstances, but most of the problems mentioned are part and parcel of working in Idcs. I still adhere to the ethical principles on which the project was based, although I learned to see a formal agreement with counterparts as an indication of intentions rather than as a contract that can be relied upon. Since sanctions are lacking, western researchers as individuals remain dependent on a host of circumstances they can hardly influence. Local conditions determine to a great extent whether the position of the researcher is strong or weak (and this is more or less a sign of academic colonialism).

Grudgingly, I prefer the weak position, throwing everything on one's negotiating skills in the field. That is as it should be. Looking back, my conclusion is that institutional barriers at home and the political situation in Venezuela were more important in determining the success or failure of the project, than cultural discrepancies between counterparts, or even academic colonialism. In other countries it might have been otherwise.

Something can be said about improving the chances of success:

- 1 Adequate budgeting is crucial. A good budget should include, apart from normal items: preparatory trip, to establish personal contacts between counterparts; flexibility in using funds for fieldwork; full-time salaries during data processing and writing; assistance in data processing; multiplication of reports; translation costs; and if the research is policy oriented, dissemination, which may cover the costs of seminars and workshops to discuss the results and recommendations with policy makers in the host country. Good budgeting saves a tremendous amount of fieldwork time. A necessary condition is of course that funding agencies recognise these budget items.
- 2 Even more crucial is establishing the personal involvement of the counterpart(s). They should consider a research project to be their own, wherever the funds come from. The best approach is to accept their research priorities, at least in part. Second best is presenting to them a research idea, and elaborating it together into a research plan from the first moment on. Bad is any finished research plan, which they only can take or leave. Even if they accept it, it is no indication of what they would like. A necessary condition for this is a rather long preparatory trip, during which all counterparts are available, at least half of their working hours. This trip should take place well in advance of the fieldwork. Agreement should be reached on at least the following points: general objectives of the project; theoretical approach; basic research strategies; the kind of results aimed at (book, articles, policy reports — for whom? — etc); division of tasks which gives each participant a clearly delineated task over which he or she has full responsibility; and project organisation and decision-making.
- 3 In the case of larger research teams, one or more project managers in the field should be nominated, who have time at hand for 'network activities'. Of course, this should be budgeted for, since it interferes strongly with data collection.

- 4 Planning the data processing and (at least the first) write-up should take place on the spot. After leaving, there is no guarantee that researchers have sufficient time to finish their task without undue delay.
- 5 Fieldwork should be planned in rather short stages and small parts, if it is a large project. A period no longer than one year at a time should be dedicated to fieldwork; still better is a split-half for each team member (although international travelling costs will double, which funding agencies may not like), with an intermittent period for reflection and first data processing, in order to spot lacunae or points worthwhile exploring in depth.
- 6 Long term agreements on research programmes, instead of temporary relations for one specific project, are to be preferred.

There is no guarantee of success, however.

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