Reflexivity and Action
A project sketch

The split between academic research and development practice has been noted as an impediment to development practice. On the other hand, a small but significant stream of action research has developed within academia as a response mainly to problems of organizational development.

Strong expectation expressed by respondents of the LAGSUS research project equally point in the direction of increased active involvement in development efforts. By "development efforts" people on theground understand concrete improvements in their livelihoods, i.e. opportunities for earning incomes (including "Food for Work"), information and inputs for increased agricultural production (improved seeds, improved animals, fertilizers etc.), infrastructure, health care services, education, water and electricity – all of these things the provision of which people in the industrialised countries have come to take for granted. Against this background the occasional calls for "alternative" development[1] appear as idealistic dreams – and the actions following from these dreams fall in line with the widespread suspicion that the "rich" ("industrialised" – "Northern" – "Western") countries deny people in the rest of the world their just share of resources and opportunities. Because these alternative approaches also rest on the belief that the most important resource are people and their own ideas – thus providing an easy excuse for not transfering the very resources these people want, arguing that without water or electricity or tools or markets there is no way to development for them.

These practical considerations alone should suffice to attempt an approach which integrates practical development work with scientific inquiry. There are, however, additional *scientific* reasons for this approach. Research which is not integrated into a development project is usually considered as a disturbing factor by the actors in the project – although this may sometimes be a welcome disturbance, offering a vent for otherwise suppressed views. Views which may ultimately influence further actions through reports and/or workshops initiated by the researcher. While this approach furnishes data on processes which *exclude* certain views from becoming part of the project discourse, it cannot furnish *direct* data on the intentions shaping the project discourse and the relationship between the project discourse and the actions within the context of the project.

By becoming part of the network of actors, the researchers experience the discourse and its effects directly – and they have to reflect on their communicative and other actions both as actors and as scientists. They have to become *reflecting actors*. By getting involved, they have to engage in the kind of *double loop learning* which Argyris emphasized as important for organisational learning (Argyris and Schön 1976). While this type of learning has in the meantime become a standard topic in organisational development in industrialised countries (Senge 1990), it does not seem to have found its way into the practice of development work. Ironically, this deprives the practice of development work (including the development of organisations, called capacity building) of the most developed approaches in the developed countries. This lack is even more notable as many development projects involve intercultural communication which is by default even more in need of such a self-reflective approach. The *practical* benefit from the approach of a deliberate combination of research and development

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[1] For a detailed description of „post development" approaches see Ziai 2004; for the best know critique of development see Sachs 1993

practice would be the development of a model for the application double loop learning to development practice.

Still in practical terms, this might provide a model of how to avoid some of the pitfalls in the implementation of participatory approaches (Cooke 2001) which have become one of the key ingredients in international development practice, particularly with respect to the overriding goal of poverty alleviation which has become a top priority with the declaration of the Millenium Development Goals, a priority which is reflected in the declarations of the latest G8 summit.

The key ingredient in this approach is *reflexivity*, the importance of which has been demonstrated in the LAGSUS project.

Reflexivity was built into the research methodology of the LAGSUS project during discussion in the first year, stating that the replay of video documents to those included in the video would serve as a check on the preliminary hypothesis developed by the project. One result of the application of this method was the discovery of the importance of obtaining blessings in Ivory coast, another the discussion of various relevant aspects of organisation building during a workshop in Namibia. In both cases people reflected back on what happened and drew conclusions for future actions.

Reflexivity also characterised the repeated meetings between the researchers of the project components and the incorporation of these discussions into the next steps of research. What the previous project did not include was *collaborative* self-reflection as a mode to improve both theory and practice. Collaborative self-reflection refers to a practice of allowing another member of the communicative and action network of the project to comment on any given self-reflection – and to use this comment for further communicative acts.

To the extent that this approach would be applied also to the intercultural communication it would offer a unique possibility to *discover* cultural biases in research *in action* – in the researchers' own actions. It would thus offen an empirical method to check on the hypothesis that there are culturally different ways of reasoning and planning.

This kind of cross-check will be built into the project approach: the process begins with a participatory method of establishing the development goal of the project, including an agreement on how the achievement towards this goal can be monitored and evaluated. This offers the first chance of cross-checking culturally different modes of reasoning: what constitutes "success" and how can this success be demonstrated?

In order to avoid the often observed tendency of potential recipients to simply take development goals they know will appeal to the reasoning of the providing agency, this project will begin with an novel approach to the establishment of a local need: the initial development of the objective for the later project goal is to come from the discussion of a drama performed by children/youth. This drama, in turn, is simply the result of a drama workshop conducted by local experts in "theatre for development" work at a local school. While these will know about the ultimate goal, this will not be revealed to either the students or the audience. They will therefore be focussed on simply presenting and discussion an issue of local development without the prospect of immediate financing of any kind of solution.

The experts will be instructed, however, to use every possible emerging argument in the discussion to guide the discussion in the direction of reflecting on possible solutions – on

possible real development initiatives. This reflection would of course also turn towards obstacles, including the lack of resources – whether finances, knowledge, inputs.

Only if the discussion actually leads to such concrete ideas which are feasible within the budget available to the research project, will the local experts reveal that there is actually a possibility to realize this project. And only then will the researchers be introduced as anything else but curious visitors to the spectacle of the drama.

This method not only avoids the repetition of stereotypes, it also avoids that the initiative or initial idea for the project to be actively studied later on, will come from a locally powerful group or person: the initial discussion seems to be completely unrelated to any prospect of obtaining resources, it starts out as a "playful" discussion of the children's theatre play. That a discussion of a theatre play can lead to community action is the experience of the limited number of activists in this field all over the world, including Namibia (Joseph Kamoegetsi Molapong, personal communication, see also Philander (undated)).

Once the initial project idea is developed, the researchers become part of a network of communication and action in the same manner as other development actors from governmental or non-governmental organizations. This provides a first-hand experience of the kinds of decisions faced by such actors, thus feeding the first loop of self-reflective learning. In addition, it provides a much better basis for interaction with such other actors who will now recognize in the researcher someone who has to face similar problems of interactions – and will therefore be much more willing to engage in a one-to-one exchange of views and opinions. This, in turn, will provide data of a depth and detail not to be obtained by other methods.

As it is at the same time the explicit aim of the project to provide a model of reflexive action, the one basic difference between this project and other development projects is a built-in reflexive loop in the form of regular reviews of past communications and their outcomes: this will take the form of watching recorded video material of earlier communications with the explicit aim to find out causes for dissatisfactions as well as causes for satisfactions – "causes" as constructed between local actors and the researchers (and other personnel) involved.

In this manner the topic of "constructed reality" which forms an important part of conversation analysis and a number of other "post-modern" approaches – stemming from earlier approaches within ethnomethodology - becomes available for direct observation; i.e. for observation by the researchers as well as by the other actors of the field, who will be invited to share this perspective.

Following earlier experiences, this is very well possible with so-called "laypersons" – because they are involved in observation, interpretation and re-interpretation of reality most of the time anyway.

Being in the position of the providers of resources and originating from what is commonly seen as the rich and powerful part of the world, the researchers will nolens volens be identified to some extent with this powerful position – and this will shape the communication towards them. In contrast to anthropologist who can – and have in fact – left this position with varying degrees of succes, the researchers in this project will remain identified with the powerful position, simply because they – as other actors in the field of development – control the flow of resources to the recipients. That this leads to sometimes difficult constellations is

easily observable from the position of an outsider (Döbel 1994). Similarly, the effects of real and imagined power structures on attempted participatory appraoches are observable from the outside (Döbel 1993, 1995, 1996, 1999). Not observable from the outside, however, are mechanisms to overcome the distortions inherent in the attribution of intentions to other actors in power relationships without checking their validity. That such checking contributes to the effectiveness of managerial decisions is reflected in a more recent approach to management (Bushe 2001). This approaches deals with the contribution of a shared understanding of the ways to achieve mutually agreed-on goals and offers methods of developing such a shared understanding: methods for mutual sharing of the "construction of reality".

It has become fashionable to talk of results-based management – both in the industrialised world and in the development literature. That such results may need more than an agreement on the goals and standards of evaluation, however, is largely ignored: often the achievement of results also depends on a shared understanding of the ways to achieve them – on the "mental models". In this respect, the tools offered by the above approach, though intended for modern organizations, can also be tested in the multicultural context of a development project.

From a scientific point of view, this approach offers an otherwise unattainable opportunity to gather *live* data of communications in a development context with a particular focus on the effects of power structures first, and secondly on the interaction of the unavoidable power effects with the explicit attempt to clarify issues to achieve a shared understanding not only of goals, but also of intentions behind goals, and of ways of achieving and evaluating the achievement of these goals – across cultures and language barriers.

In the experimental situation constructed by the project, the achievement of such understanding is only possible because of the insistence on expressing the shared understanding in the mother tongue – on both sides. Whatever complex negotiations and translations this may involve: based on the experience with LAGUS I it is imperative that all the negotiations relevant for decisions about the development project as well as the reflexive communication around the documented material are conducted in the local language. At the same time, the researchers themselves will have to insist on more than one translation "back and forth" (involving rephrasings in both languages) in order to ensure as much as possible that "shared understanding" is more than a figment of the translator's imagination.

At the most abstract level, "Reflexivity and Action" can develop a better understanding of the mechanisms of reflexivity – a subject which has been very much neglected in social science research due to the influence of a pseudo-objectivist approach modelled after the natural sciences. Yet in recent times even financial managers begin to realize that the one thing which distinguishes natural sciences and social sciences is reflexivity, a "two-way feedback mechanism between thinking and reality" (Soros 1998: x): actors act not only with intentions but also with expectations of others' intentions and this influences the outcome. In the context of this project, these feedback mechanisms will include reflexions on the relationship between language, identity, and reasoning about cause-effect relationships. These are all topics which have traditionally been addressed separately, and in part by different disciplines. To address them together in the context of an interdisciplinary action project to achieve development goals first formulated by the target group without knowledge of the availability of funds – that is the novelty of this project.

In practical terms, the funding of the development project could be achieved through negotiation with one or the other national or international companies which have officially declared their support for the goals of sustainable development either in their companies

4

philosophies or by joining the *World Business Council for Sustainable Development*. To the extent that this approach proves successful, it will – in addition to the communication model – also provide a model for project funding. This model has the added advantage that companies may – given the right incentives – engage themselves on a longer term basis than is possible for "regular" funders of development projects (with the exception of some private initiatives such as school partnerships, or church initiatives which depend on long establishing long-term relationships with a given population). The intention is from the outset to initiate a "project" which will survive the life cycle of the research project: the funding commitment should be long-term, based on an agreement between the donating company and a local initiative or NGO concerning the goals as well as monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, based on the communication model first worked out by the project.

Thus, the outcome of this project should be
    a) A model for intercultural negotiation for the achievement of agreed-on goals.
    b) A model for achieving a shared interpretation communication situations which gave rise to strong positive or negative emotions at first not understood by the party on the "other side" of the cultural divide.
    c) A model for the funding of development initiatives by private business
    d) A "thick description" of conditions for the success or failure of reflexive mechanisms of action and communication across cultures. This latter is the real scientific gain from the project and should be of a quality which allows a fresh look at the old question of the relationship between theory and practice, and between actor and structure.

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