

Theoretical reflections on Capacity Building as vehicle for knowledge transfer in development cooperation, drawing on the observation of water development projects

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Present-day development cooperation professionals colloquially use the terms “hardware”, “software”, and sometimes even “orgware”, to refer to the material, the human and the organisational aspects involved in the transfer of technologies from North to South. Indeed, since the late sixties development organisations have increasingly been concerned about adequate methods to transfer scientific-technological knowledge, acknowledging the importance of skills and training over the mere material aspects of technology. However, whether it be the hardware or the software, the transfer of technology and knowledge from North to South is never straightforward since they are confronted with indigenous knowledge and they are moulded by the local cultural context (Harding 2003, Berkes 2010). Therefore, throughout the past decades, various paradigms have been proposed for the transfer of knowledge in development practice (King and McGrath 2004, UNDP 2009). Since the turn of the millennium the buzz word is “capacity building”. UNDP writes that “*there is now emerging agreement in the development community that capacity development is the engine of human development*” (UNDP 2009). With its popularity, the number of definitions of “capacity” has also increased (Baser and Morgan 2008). Some authors even argue that capacity building is nothing more than the latest discourse twist with the mere objective to continue legitimising development aid (Kühl 2009).

Drawing on ethnomethodological observations of “*capacity building*” practices in freshwater development projects and in Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) projects in Africa and South-America, the present article makes theoretical reflections about the importance and innovative character of capacity building in the transfer of knowledge in development projects. The present paper argues that capacity building is crucial to human development and a prerequisite for knowledge transfer.

The presented paper has two main sections. First, the article tries to situate “capacity building” in the spectrum of paradigms of knowledge in/for development that have been proposed in the past decades. Typically each paradigm stands for a particular vision of what “development” should be like (Cozzens 2008). Hence, *capacity building*, although a very polysemic concept in itself, corresponds with only one specific sector in this spectrum.

Second, the article proposes, based on the field observations, a model in which “capacity”, “knowledge transfer” and “enabling environment” are articulated as 3 distinct – but interdependent – levels of the same single coherent model. Capacity is presented as the binding layer. The “enabling environment” in this model is similar to the concept of “entitlements” in the work of Amartya Sen (e.g. 1981). Capacity building should aim to contribute to the construction of this “enabling environment”, while the “enabling environment” on its turn allows the further development of capacities and ultimately the transfer of knowledge. In the presented model, capacity is the prerequisite for knowledge transfer.

The current literature on capacity building often conflates the different levels of the proposed model into the single concept “capacity building”, and this is what produces the current polysemy of the concept.

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