



**SKILLS DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES:  
A SLOW LEARNING PROCESS**

**HOW MUCH HAVE WE LEARNED?**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>1. The slow process of strategy learning</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>2. The need to take local factors into account, and its implications for cooperation</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>3. Implications of evaluation</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>4. Regarding international financing and its implications</i>	<i>9</i>

## **Introduction**

This paper sets out to present a series of reflections on the topic of skills development, paying particular attention to the approaches, strategies and learnings produced and their relationship to cooperation agencies both in Mexico and abroad. To this end, the analysis focuses on two topics: i) the cross-sectoral dimension and its importance in the area of job training, and ii) learnings and knowledge about the strategies and approaches in this field.

Indeed, the growing importance, in recent years, of skills development in vulnerable sectors has led to a demand for greater knowledge in this field. And while, for some time now, a wide range of protagonists have been involved in developing programmes aimed at the social sector, focusing on the development of work skills, neither the sector nor the topic in question have been priorities for international organizations. How much accumulated knowledge now exists? To what extent has a learning process taken place among the various organizations? What typifies skills development strategies? How much resistance has there been to the incorporation of new approaches and strategies? Which institutional bottlenecks prevent strategies that have been “tried and tested” by other institutions from being put into practice? What role has international cooperation played in the design of new skills development policies and strategies? The central tenet of this paper is that, while strategies and approaches have evolved over time, it would seem that, in general, little has been learned, given the scant circulation of this accumulated know-how among organizations and the probability that the programmes have played little or no part in truly improving the conditions of the marginalized communities they were meant to support. One recalls La Belle in the 70’s, who pointed out (1986) that the effectiveness of non-formal education programmes in this area was more an article of faith than a proven reality.

Though the reflections presented here have to do with the Mexican context, some of them may be extendable to a lot of developing countries. For purposes of analysis, I also touch on the topic of international financing and its implications, and on the nature of the evaluation process stemming from the job-training strategies and approaches developed by the different agencies.

### **1. THE SLOW PROCESS OF STRATEGY LEARNING**

Upon analyzing the various skills development strategies that have arisen during the last three decades, one notes a series of transformations in the way in which they are conceived of and put into practice. Over time, a *continuum* has come into being that stretches from the most rudimentary training for specific jobs, in the form of short technical courses (for example, ones in metal-working, lasting for three months) at one extreme, to the development, at the other extreme, of broader focuses that try to tackle the problems of skills development in a more comprehensive, systematic, holistic manner. These comprehensive strategies spring from confrontation with a reality that consists of complex social relationships and processes that need to be taken into consideration when one seeks to design a training program.

At different points on this *continuum* we can locate different programmes that are distinguished by the way in which they conceive of skills development and put it into

practice, ranging from courses that focus on the development of a specific trade to the offering of a diverse gamut of courses (sometimes claiming to be interlinked). Other courses focus on job training, but in close linkage with an embryonic economic activity. There are strategies that centre programmes around the notion of integrality, while also envisaging consultancy processes as a *sine qua non*. Finally, there are those that base themselves on the premise of local development and seek to influence the setting up of financially productive activities that are tied to a vision of community development.

It should be noted that, within this broad range of practices, it is generally the NGOs who spearhead novel skills development training strategies<sup>1</sup>. They are the ones who adopt integral approaches and have tended to favour the creation of comprehensive curricula that include the notions of sustainability and a focus on the environment, gender perspective, education for citizenship and leadership training, along with the setting up and encouragement of micro-enterprises. It is among the NGOs that one can most easily come across approaches to, and linkage with, educational-sector institutions, the aim of which is to certify and regularize the studies of those who participate in their programmes. Likewise, within a framework of sectoral comprehensiveness, it is the NGOs that tend to develop links with institutions in other sectors in order to respond to the diverse needs of the populations that they attend to (health, housing, money-earning projects, education, culture). (Pieck, 2000)

Similarly, civil organizations have given priority to a territorial approach, thus assigning added value to local spaces. Within this framework, and with a view to overcoming all forms of improvisation, arbitrariness and misgovernment, it is necessary to move forward, based on an approach and methodology that are shared by the different territories that are being explored. Methods that focus on local and community development as part of their spectrum of actions have formed a typical part of the strategies adopted by many NGOs involved in job training. At the methodological and strategic level, they have contributed many successful lessons and experiences that seem to have been barely disseminated and scantily absorbed by the majority of organizations<sup>2</sup>.

Indeed, there is something paradoxical in the continuing existence of approaches based on training for specific jobs, in which no sectoral linkage arises and there is no initial understanding of the operational context, all this despite the research findings and the wisdom gained from a wide range of experience. It is noteworthy that a job-training proposal is more likely to have an impact if a series of contextual and process factors are taken into account, and if the requisite reflection on subjects and environments takes place, accompanied by a basic guiding principle of comprehensiveness, around which strategies are centred. All of this bears witness to the fact that the knowledge derived from various bodies of experience has failed to filter through to skills development institutions, or to have any effect on public policy. In other words, suitable channels have not been set up, the requisite multiplier effect has not been achieved, and no

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the observations made in this document are based on the body of experience to be found in the Information Network about Skills Development Experiences (Spanish initials: SIEFT) that is being developed on the Universidad Iberoamericana's Mexico-City campus.

<http://www.uia.mx/investigacion/sieft/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> The IIEP led in 2000 a Latin American collaborative research where some case studies were carried out. It gave the opportunity to share skills development strategies in vulnerable sectors among the different programmes and organizations. See Jacinto *et al* (2002).

institutional rationale has been created such as would give rise to the sort of discourse and practice that would enable these programmes to better achieve their aims.

Nonetheless, in this regard one can assert that different government institutions have, very gradually, been taking stock of the approaches and strategies developed by the NGOs. Perhaps this has been more in the breach than in the observance, since widespread inertia and red tape hinder the adoption of new approaches and methodologies, but, nevertheless, it is noteworthy how public institutions are starting to include participatory dynamics in their strategies, or to insert subjects such as citizenship, gender and sustainability into their programmes. One example of this are the high-school-level job-training centres in Mexico, which, over the last few years, have included the topic of training about micro-business enterprises in their curricula, in order to help their students to acquire the skills needed to develop some form of self-employed activity.

Likewise, as part of a strategy aimed at creating integrated curricula, the said training centres have included in their programmes elements that enrich the job training that they supply, abandoning their traditional focus on narrow training programmes for specific jobs. An example of this is the inclusion of multifunctional elements in their curricula – i.e. the inclusion of extra subjects in some job-training programmes, so that the training can be more multi-purpose. Cases in point are the auto-mechanics course which includes additional subjects such as applied IT, electronics and English, courses for beauticians that also include applied IT plus facial and body massage, and secretarial courses incorporating IT, personal development, English and some accounting. This comprehensive focus affords the students more opportunities to find employment and to perform better once they have done so.

Similarly, some outstanding approaches have been adopted in the case of the technical-training centres for tradesmen, where, as part of a skills development strategy that seeks to make an impact, community links are forged, rooting the training centre in the community and thus turning it into a sort of community centre. The strategies mentioned above are just a few of the many endeavours that have borne fruit, increasing our knowledge about job-training practice and policy, linked to the various sectors.

One of the impediments to putting sectoral comprehensiveness into practice is, precisely, the lack of a cross-sectoral management culture. In this field, it is hard to find examples of harmonious cooperation among the different institutions. Usually the implementation of agreements with other institutions in the same sector involves a variety of motives and power games, as is the case with rural programmes where an attempt is made to build links among job-training programmes, education, financing, consultancy on micro-enterprise creation, and so on. This idea is in keeping with a vision of multifaceted reality, where different groups of people have widely varying needs, different requirements arise in different contexts, and it is important to be aware of the diverse socio-economic and political realities in which one is intervening.

## **2. THE NEED TO TAKE LOCAL FACTORS INTO ACCOUNT, AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATION**

In the marginalized urban and rural sectors, local skills development programmes are receiving more and more international financing and/or experiencing an ever greater private-sector presence. In this regard, international-cooperation institutions have ceased to channel most of their resources into massive, country-wide government programmes. Since opting to interact at the local level implies taking stock of local logic, job-training programmes need to be designed in a manner that respects, or sets out to rescue, the culture of the marginalized groups involved, rather than rejecting it out of hand based on external criteria and trying to impose rationalist ways of thinking and acting. To what extent are national and international cooperation agencies aware of the nature and implications of differing social contexts, and how much consideration do they give to them when designing their strategies?

The approaches and strategies adopted by the institutions are indeed based on different conceptions of social reality and of its workings. Hence, it is quite common for contradictions to arise between programmes that stress efficiency, seeking immediate results in terms of improved production or better living conditions, and ones where time scales are not the same and different conceptions of productivity, aims and deadlines prevail. As is the case with many evaluations, there is a tendency to expect immediate results, in communities that have a different way of thinking and *weltanschauung*. Clearly there's quite a gap between the Western logic of strategic planning and the logic that operates in indigenous rural communities. For instance, a Tzeltal community in the State of Chiapas experiences a conflict between the indigenous long-term perspective that conceives of the family as a productive unit, the house or plot of ground as a foundation for growing maize, coffee or other subsistence crops, felling timber or rearing livestock, and attempts to set up a coffee cooperative, emanating from a hub of social improvement that thinks in terms of a global coffee market and of getting the best possible price. By the same token, while the Tzeltal community pursues the logic of the "good life", understood as harmony with nature, with others and with oneself, the cooperative seeks a type of sustainable development which, though also motivated by the wish to bring back the good life, is founded in a technical rationality that involves step-by-step planning, aims, results and profitability.

### **2.1. The case of young people**

To what extent do skills development strategies and policies aimed at young people take stock of the latter's lifestyle, expectations, way of seeing the world and concept of the labour market? Cognizance of these factors will enable us to envisage various types of comprehensive curricula that incorporate elements pertaining to young people's other interests (leisure, young people's rights, sport, cultural activities, support for micro-businesses). Multi-functional approaches to the design of job-training programmes for young people are also a response to a real world in which young people tend to move from job to job (alternately being pizza-delivery boys, waiters, itinerant salesmen, computer technicians, mechanics' assistants, etc.). This is why job-training policies need to take young people's lifestyles and "covert" interests into account, and why it is crucial that such policies take into consideration what leads young people to enrol in a job-training program.

Indeed, a stereotypical vision of young people has sprung up to the effect that most of them “neither work nor study”, living aimless lives. Similarly, it is asserted that young people don’t read or write, or take part in any type of social organization. Some research and/or direct experience disprove this: young people do all manner of work, moving from one job to another. They also “read” the complex day-to-day world that they live in, especially TV programmes and music, and they “read” their own lives, all the while hardly reading any written texts at all. Likewise, they “write” using non-verbal codes, covering their own bodies, and also the urban landscape, with symbols. Lastly, though they distrust political parties and governments and play no part in traditional institutions such as the church, or local organizations such as neighbourhood committees, they do participate in flexible, spontaneously generated groups, meeting with friends or workmates or people out on the street, with whom they operate multiple mechanisms for thriving and surviving. In short, they live their lives as if they had no life of their own (Machado Pais, 2007).

In Mexico, given the situation faced by young people in rural areas, local skills development programmes set out both to keep people rooted in their communities and to foment sustainable development and production, with the family functioning as an integral unit that both produces and consumes. However, these programmes fail to put a stop to the mass migration of young Mexicans to the United States, highlighting the superior power of social and economic macro-forces.

Moreover, for most people in developing countries, job security is precarious, especially among young people in low-income groups, who aimlessly move from one badly paid, unskilled job to another (from waiter to bricklayer to peddler to fast-food delivery boy). These patterns hold true both for young people who have attended technical secondary schools and for those who have graduated from technological institutions. Thus, skills development programmes need to adapt themselves to this skipping from casual job to casual job, producing young people with multiple capabilities via multifunctional curricula.

## **2.2. Regarding job competencies**

An examination of the issue of job competencies will serve to highlight the lack of fit between the policies that hold sway in national and international agencies, socio-cultural realities and institutional structures. Consideration of the stress on competencies by national and international agencies inevitably leads to reflection about the extent to which a competence-based approach inevitably implies an emphasis on production that ends up subordinating education to economic considerations, thus homogenizing the said competencies and closely tying them to global economic development. What, then, is their relevance at the local level?

This leads one to stress the importance of rescuing people’s traditional wisdom and building curricula as part of a series of social processes that have their origins at the local level. Oftentimes the competency focus promoted by national and international agencies is of no help at all in achieving this. On what principles, then, can skills development be based? On a basis of universal competencies defined by a globalized economic model, or starting at the local level, based on the needs expressed by

communities in the light of their immediate contexts and particular problems? What are the implications of the unbridled application of competency approaches in environments whose logic and needs are different? What role do such competencies set out to play in the evaluation and certification of learning? Most certainly one of the key issues is the extent to which such an approach is meaningful and useful for marginal communities that do not share the same production-focused logic and needs, as may well be the case in most marginal rural areas and urban sectors, where casual or “non-formal” economic activity is the order of the day? To what point do such approaches ultimately violate existing realities and patterns, or merely constitute simulation activities aimed at creating uniform, widely applicable criteria that are clearly based on a different rationale?

### **3. IMPLICATIONS OF EVALUATION**

In the matter of evaluation, it is interesting to note how financing institutions have changed their criteria for apportioning resources, so that international financial organizations now dictate the *modus operandi* of professional-training institutions in Latin America by imposing stricter and stricter criteria for evaluating programmes and reapportioning funds. Hence, in recent years, they have included criteria such as the “generalization” of experience, social and educational impact, network development, job creation, linkage and cooperation with other institutions, profiling of populations served (women, youths, etc), empowerment of participants, sustainability, appropriation of processes, and so on. This is all interesting, since it bears witness to an increasing awareness, on the part of the said organizations, of the fact, on the one hand, that the processes are more complex than originally thought, and, on the other hand, that their impact does indeed extend beyond the economic sphere, given that mere economic or productive impact are not, *per se*, guarantees of social impact.

In this regard, some civil organizations that depend on international funding have been seen to seek other options, operating in a relatively autonomous manner. General conclusions could be drawn from these organizations’ experiences, either by each organization separately, or in collaboration with other organizations, with a view to bringing about changes in evaluation criteria, thus assigning a central role to yardsticks such as “empowerment of the participant” and the creation of new types of community-education institutions.

### **4. REGARDING INTERNATIONAL FINANCING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

The topic of financing by national and international organizations is a relevant one, in the light of the various implications that it has for programmes, and all the more so in view of the fact that it has been decreasing in recent years, at least in the case of Latin America (while, conversely, more and more funding has been made available to Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe). For social organizations, diminished funding means less projects and a lower social profile. In Latin America, this trend has mainly affected countries such as Chile and Mexico, since they are deemed to have reached almost the same levels of modernization as the developed countries.

On the other hand, international-cooperation agencies have tended to finance not only the setting up of local development projects, but also the building of networks. Such cooperation is based on the assumption that support put into networks has greater impact.

Likewise, funding institutions are subjecting their support to more and more conditions, insisting that all processes be evaluated using quantitative yardsticks. Getting funding has become an end in itself rather than a means of enabling civil organizations to run projects. Consequently, some projects funded by cooperation organizations end up imposing unforeseen rhythms on the institutions receiving the funding. In short, making the search for financing an end in itself not only weakens the civil organizations, but also converts the funding organizations into fund providers rather than project “partners”.

Faced with this situation, the civil organizations have developed manifold-financing strategies that range from seeking government support, through competing for public funding on a merit basis or soliciting donations, to earning money by offering consultancy services. In some cases, this has turned the said civil organizations into implementers of -and thralls to- their governments’ policies, even leading them to compete with each other. They have done everything they could to garner resources, from “selling” evaluation services, consultancy, projects and services in general to governments or international funding organizations, through depending on occasional donations from companies, churches and foundations, to engaging in outright business activities – i.e. they have survived by whatever means possible. Thus the procurement of funding has become an end in itself, rather than a means of achieving institutional aims. This *modus vivendi*, which has been forced on the organizations in question, jeopardizes the body of knowledge that has been accumulated by the NGOs, in turn threatening to erase historic memory.

Finally, it should be stressed that the issue of skills development and community development has not constituted a priority for international cooperation agencies, which have focused their support on the elementary-education sector, especially in the case of the World Bank. Interestingly, in the case of skills development in vulnerable sectors, support has been primarily financial and channelled into the purchase of machinery, premises, equipment, infrastructure such as roads and drains, classroom construction, technical support, etc. It is worth asking ourselves to what extent the national and international organizations see skills development -above all via the development of frameworks and the promotion of research- as worthy of their support. In other words, to what extent does funding help promote the transfer of knowledge about different approaches, processes and strategies both general and specific (in short, those crucial issues and activities that guide the design of skills development projects in the sectors mentioned)? And this in turn leads us to ask ourselves how much know-how the said national and international organizations have acquired. As always, the fundamental question is “How much have we learned?”

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