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***International Cooperation for Social Development:
Practitioners' Reports & Critical Reflections***

LARGE SYSTEM CHANGE & DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION: CREATING THE RIGHT MIX BETWEEN CONTROL & ADAPTABILITY

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CSEND APPROACH TOWARDS LARGE SYSTEM CHANGE PROJECTS

Our Centre provides assistance to governments to help them strengthen the capacity of their public administrations and public sector enterprises through the use of action learning and action research approach. Our Centre has organised large system change projects in the field of public administrative reform in Europe and Asia.

Taking for instance an example from our project work in Asia, we have concluded an institution building project in China, which lasted from 1994-1996. The bilateral project in China focused on supporting the Chinese government's decision to modernise its public administration. CSEND helped create a bilateral project jointly financed by Switzerland and China which focused on improving the training capacity (curriculum, training methods, training management competence) of 27 central and provincial training institutions. (For more details see Yiu & Saner, 1998). The project also involved a long preparation phase lasting four years including a preliminary train-of-trainers project financed by UNDP. The Sino-Swiss project has been evaluated by a joint Swiss-Chinese team of reviewers who confirmed the positive results of the bilateral project.

Another project of administrative reform at central government level was undertaken in Slovenia (details follow below). The projects in China and Slovenia involved each time the participation of 42 experts (academics and government officials) from Western Europe, North American, Australia who delivered teaching and consulting inputs in CEER countries and China. Both bilateral projects were jointly financed by Switzerland and the respective partner country. The Swiss total budget for each project amounted to ca 3 Million CHF all costs included.

CSEND's approach towards large system change can best be exemplified by a concrete example focusing on Central and Eastern European Countries in general and on Slovenia in specific.

1) Background and key features of Slovenia Project

We have followed developments in Central and Eastern Europe 1968 through visits, participation at related academic conferences, advising ministries in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) and through training of CEEC diplomats and government officials at United Nations in New York (UNITAR) and WTO/GATT in Geneva.

For example, the first author attended the IIAS round table in Madrid in 1989 on European Integration. At the conference, he met Professor Gorazd Trpin of the University of Ljubljana. Slovenia at that time was still part of the former Yugoslavia. Since Dr Saner just completed a radio feature focusing on historical, social and economic reason, which led to the implosion of the former Austro-Hungarian

Empire², he was interested to hear whether reforms of the national government and state administration were possible to prevent disintegration of Yugoslavia. The exchanges between Prof. Trpin and Dr Saner continued past the declaration of independence of Slovenia and led to a cooperation project in support of the modernisation of Slovenia's new central government administration.

The Slovene-Swiss bilateral project helped create two new governmental units at the level of Slovenia's central government, namely an Academy of Administration in charge of training of Slovenia's senior civil servants; and a Organisation and Method unit in charge of effectiveness and efficiency studies of administrative units and agencies of the central government. The development of these two institutions required approval by the coalition government (approval of concept, providing budget and integrating the two new units into existing organisational structure) and the development of related competencies of 37 civil servants in order to ensure the successful functioning of these new governmental units. (For more information (see Saner & Yiu, 1997).

2) Reflections regarding Needs Analysis for administrative reform projects.

Needs Analysis for administrative reform projects demands time in OECD and CEEC countries alike. The willingness by the Western European Country (WEC)³ expert to forego simple replication of ready made solutions developed elsewhere³ is of paramount importance. No situation is fully comparable to another CEEC country even though they previously shared a similar political system. It is equally important to understand that solutions have to be invented together, that is between WEC and CEEC partner institutions and experts. The process of fact finding at the politically sensitive level of central government requires tactfulness on the part of WEC expert and willingness to inform and explain by the CEEC partner. It is of paramount importance that WEC experts remember that our CEEC partners remain in their respective countries after the conclusion of co-operation projects. Risk taking is higher on the CEEC partner side since they have to live with the results of the projects, be they successful or a failure. The WEC experts return to their countries and do not necessarily have to justify the project in front of their own government or parliament for the remaining part of their career span.

Underlying this highly participatory approach is the process of creating common vision of the outcome, and the concurrent process of establishing mutual confidence between the "client" and the consultants. Without this rapport, it would not be possible to work through the ambiguity and unexpected implementation difficulties inherent in a complex change project.

Taking as an example of the Swiss-Slovenian project, the analysis and preparation phase lasted three years and consisted of several steps of progressively deeper understanding of the situation by both partner institutions. This lengthy lead-time

²“Logik des Zerfalls” (Logic of decomposition), Radio DRS, Basle, 20 February 1989

³For an example of ineffective transfer of training technology, please refer to Saner, Yiu 1994.

was necessary in order to harmonise both sides' philosophy and theory of public administration and administrative reform. In addition, it was also important to broaden the knowledge base on both sides in regard to understanding each countries administrative complexities and to get sufficient support from ministers, high ranking government officials, academics and representatives of the media (Saner & Yiu 1996). This process of "Getting to know each other" was built around several conferences on matters pertaining to comparative administrative practices, study visits in Slovenia and Switzerland (Saner & Yiu, 1997), exchanges of views by Swiss, Slovenian and other Western European experts and academics, and informal consultation with the key political figures in Slovenia. The goal of these exchanges was to create a common language and mutual understanding in regard to the needs of the partner country and in regard to the support that the donor country could offer in terms of know-how and financial and logistical support.

3) Reflection regarding the Operational Design of administrative reform projects

Often times, the designers international cooperation projects under-estimate the cultural gaps (both nationally and institutionally) which might exist between the donor country and the recipient country. Therefore, a topdown standard rational of a typical OECD country approach tends to run into covert institutional resistance in transition and developing countries and often results in sub-optimal project performance.

A West-East topdown approach can easily create a perception of "colonisation" and reduce local "ownership" of the planned administrative reform project. Therefore, a circular approach is most of the time more effective which allows individuals and organizations of the participating transition or developing country to participate in the identification of the problems, the development of solutions, the implementation of the solutions and the subsequent evaluations of the project.

CSEND plans for such participation by the partner organisations through the use of Action Research and Action Learning methodologies. Both methods require high local inputs regarding problem definition and solution generation. In the case of Slovenia, trainees developed their own competence in managing the reform process and in using training to support administrative reform by undertaking actual reform projects while being trained.

3) Criticism of current practice in the field of technical cooperation and large system change

a) The knowledge base for administrative reform projects in Central and Eastern European Countries needs to be elevated to professional levels. The best way to do this is by sharing experiences and by participating in theory building. There exists no neutral forum yet⁴ which can bring together government officials of WEC and CEEC country representatives in charge of public administrative reforms, programme officers of intergovernmental and national donor agencies in charge of

⁴ Neutral meaning without financial dependency relationship e.g. in regard to donor versus recipient organisation or personnel.

technical co-operation in public administration and academics and experts with proven expertise in the fields of public administration and international relations.

b) Evaluation reports of similar projects undertaken by Phare, Tacis, Sigma-OECD, World Bank and national governments should be made public in order to help CEEC and WEC governments and experts learn from each other's difficulties and successes. Good governance applies to Western donor organisations as well, they are transparency, accountability, access to information and services and non-discrimination of contractors.

c) Donor institutions should better co-ordinate their efforts with each other in order to avoid duplication of effort and in order to avoid costly and confusing competition for scarce resources in Central and Eastern European countries, for instance poaching of local staff should be ruled out in the interest of all parties concerned.

d) Intergovernmental agencies and development agencies of WEC governments should limit the damages caused by institutional and personal rivalries. Nobody gains by the practice of deliberate omission of contributions made by perceived rival institutions and nobody benefits from attempts of supremacy be it for ideological, institutional, financial or personal power. Good professional practice includes the acknowledgement of contributions made by other institutions and the ruling out of plagiarism be this of concepts or work methods.

e) Government reform is a complicated and complex undertaking in every country. Donor and recipient countries would fair well if they could agree on a clear responsibility structure for such technical co-operation project for both sides, donor and recipient alike. The EU (Phare/Tacis) preferred consortium approach is too costly, too complex, too slow and too confusing. It is already problematic enough not to have an agreement among EU member countries as to final form of the EU governance structure and administration why add more complication by having unequal EU country institutions try to co-ordinate a reform project in a third country when neither of them can offer EU-wide validity in terms of administrative norms and standards, coherent administrative theory nor consistent reform practice? It would be better to have one EU country institution be clearly responsible and the other EU consortium members take supportive secondary roles and the EU commission, that is Phare or Tacis, be clearly accountable.

f) Technical co-operation involves a lot of money which in turn can attract rent seeking behaviour by all parties concerned. In light of the premise of good governance, it would be useful if the main donor countries and institutions would apply the WTO rules regarding public procurement contracts. These rules have been signed by the EU and forty other countries, but the implementation is still hampered by bureaucratic obstruction and hidden political agendas. Our Centre being domiciled in Switzerland for instance is not eligible for EU projects while EU based institutions can apply for Swiss financed projects.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STEPS

In order to advance the field of large system change and central government reform, CSEND has organised conferences, published articles and books and

conducted comparative research in order to deepen its understanding of large system change theory and practice. For example, a comparative research project was published which is adding to the knowledge base of public administrative reform. The publication's title is "The use of in-service training as a vehicle of change within public administration" (Saner, Strehl, Yiu, 1997). Thirteen different governments were compared in regard to their effectiveness and efficiency in the use of training for administrative change. The data contained in this comparative research publication will be of benchmark utility for future administrative reform projects.

While CSEND's efforts of conferencing, researching and publishing are adding to the knowledge base of large system change and administrative reform in transition and developing countries, it is however clear that CSEND cannot request the international community to do similar steps in regard to the performance of governmental and NGO donor organisations and development banks. This step requires political will by the international community to stop preaching to transition and developing countries and instead to apply the same rules and standards of good governance to the development banks and donors countries as well.

To be clear, this would mean transparent policies of technical cooperation, access to information regarding procurement practices to service providers without discrimination, predictable policy régimes, continuity and intellectual cohesion in regard to governance concepts and project philosophy, regular evaluation and publication of evaluation results, clear accountability of donor officials and regular dialogue (no proforma conferencing) with competent service providers, beneficiaries and researchers.

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