

Strengthening Institutions in the Developing World: Trends and Issues

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Over the past decade CIDA and other international donors have placed increasing emphasis on the importance of strengthening institutions in developing countries in order to achieve sustainable development goals. This trend, combined with a focus on human resource development, has created opportunities for Canadian community colleges and institutes to participate in a wide variety of institutional strengthening efforts overseas.

Although there have been numerous success stories and positive experiences emerging from the growing set of relationships between Canadian educational institutions and their partners in developing countries, there still exist many unresolved issues and concerns on how best to support a viable and sustainable process of institutional development. This article attempts to summarize some of the trends and issues which need to be addressed.

Historical Trends

The concept of institutional strengthening has evolved through several historical phases which parallel changing strategies and approaches to development assistance.

In the 1950's and 1960's, the aid community focused on institution building as a part of a strategy to develop physical infrastructure. This concept gave way in the 1970's to institutional development, a more systematic approach, which offered a range of inputs including training and technical assistance.

The term institutional strengthening has acquired wide currency in the development parlance of the 1980's. This concept reflects a concern for the ability of institutions to develop effective ways of relating to their external environment, sustaining institutional gains and fulfilling their social mandate. The following definition of institutional strengthening is suggested:

To help create institutions and organizations in the developing world that are able to constantly adjust to their environment in order to attract the resources (human and financial) required to carry out their mandate.

The management and delivery of institutional strengthening programs have also evolved over time. During the 1990's we moved from institutional twinning to institutional cooperation to partnerships and finally to linkages.

The institutional linkage concept has emerged in the past five years and has increasingly supplanted its antecedents in development parlance. The term is now used for any type of mutually-beneficial inter-institutional relationship. The introduction of the linkage concept reflects a trend within the aid community away from a one-way flow of technical assistance from a developed to a less developed institution towards a concept of institutional partnership involving exchange for mutual benefit. The term linkage is also used to describe relationships at sub-institutional levels – between departments, individuals, businesses and networks of institutions. There is some sense of a

continuum in the evolution of the term linkage, however, in practice, projects which are generally called linkages now may reflect characteristics of any of the previous models.

Linkage projects are intended to develop long-term, mutually beneficial relationships between institutions as well as achieve sustainable institutional change for Third World partners. The remainder of this article raises some of the questions and issues which require further analysis and dialogue, if institutional linkages are to become a more effective means of strengthening institutional capacities.

Current Issues and Questions

Concept and Definition

Neither institutional strengthening nor institutional linkages have been defined clearly and consistently at the theoretic or conceptual level. Institutional strengthening vocabulary appears at the purpose level of many project plans, however we rarely see clear indicators of how project outputs will contribute to sustainable institutional strengthening. It seems as if linkage projects are *assumed* to strengthen institutions both overseas and in Canada and therefore it is not necessary to specify exactly how or to what degree this will take place. The linkage concept is so overused that it now has almost no operational utility. It is very important for us to develop a more workable definition of institutional strengthening and linkage.

Scope and Focus

There is considerable debate over the appropriate distribution of resources for linkage programs and appropriate levels of intervention. Growing interest in international involvement among Canadian educational institutions has put political pressure on CIDA to distribute limited resources to more and more institutions. Consequently, many

individual linkage projects have become smaller and thus, are less able to have a significant impact on institutional development.

Levels of intervention vary considerably under very different projects which are all referred to as institutional linkages. Activities may be focused on a few key individuals, a unit or department, the entire institution or a network or system of institutions.

Often the scope of programming and the level of intervention are driven by political and funding considerations and not by the logic of program design. In general terms, studies suggest that linkage programs are often spread too thinly to make significant contributions to institutional strengthening.

Mutual Benefits

In the decade of "partnerships", mutuality and parity are seen as crucial ingredients for success. It is now widely recognized that our colleges and institutes receive various benefits from their involvement in linkage projects. However, these are usually not included in formal project plans and therefore are not monitored or assessed. At the same time, the control and management of linkage projects are often perceived to be biased in favour of the agenda and interest of the Canadian partner. This imbalance stems from the primary contractual relationship of the Canadian institution to the funder and the consequent level of control over resources and programming decisions. Recently, some institutional strengthening projects have channeled funds directly to the beneficiary institution which can then contract whichever technical services from Canada it chooses.

The partners in linkage projects need to continue to develop project planning and management systems which support real parity.

Institutional Needs

There are a range of institutional strengthening needs which can be addressed through linkage projects. Typically these may include the following categories: teaching, curricula, management capacity, accessibility, equity, and capacities for dealing with the external environment.

The trend leans towards increasing emphasis on equity, accessibility and external environment needs. Yet, the best results seen to date have been in the areas of teaching, curricula, and management capacities.

Who decides which are the priority needs? Which needs are our colleges and institutes best qualified to address? What are the resource and time implications of different types of institutional strengthening?

Management of Institutional Linkage Projects

The linkage model assumes that Canadian institutions which are effective in realizing their own mandate are capable of transferring that capacity to partners in developing countries. This assumption has been challenged and various studies suggest that while Canadian colleges and institutes have improved their overseas project management capacity impressively over the past 10 years there will be increasing pressure to improve further. That pressure will centre on the need to manage increasingly complex change processes at the institutional and systems levels; operate effectively within other cultural, political and economic environments; and improve capacities to administer projects to donor specifications.

Also, alternative models for the management of institutional strengthening programs compete with the linkage model for resources and that competition will increase. Some of the alternatives include management by private firms which contract specific services

from the college and institution system or, as mentioned earlier, the assignment of resources and management responsibility directly to the beneficiary institution which contracts services in the open market.

Resources and Time

There is considerable debate over the levels and sources of funding and the timeframe of linkage projects which would optimize institutional strengthening. What proportion of resources should be contributed by Canadian colleges and institutes? Beneficiary institutions? Donors? What levels of funding and resource allocation are required for different levels of intervention? What is the optimal duration of a linkage project before results can be sustained?

How long should donors fund linkage projects? Donors often assume that after an initial 2-5 year period of support the relationship should become self-sustaining. Canadian educational institutions often argue that much longer timeframes are required for institutions to learn about each other and work through various cycles of institutional development. It has been suggested that a long term view is an important characteristic of successful institutional development. This is likely even more true for the linkage model.

There is very little consensus on these issues among the stakeholders and the debate is not characterized by much objectivity. We need to expand our knowledge base concerning the inter-relationships between time, resources and the institutional strengthening process.

Conclusion

Improving the institutional capacities of colleges and technical institutions is certainly a critical part of overseas donor aid programs. In Canada, we have used our colleges and institutes as a central delivery mechanism to support these efforts. Preliminary data from recent CIDA corporate evaluations of ICDS and

bilateral programs support the underlying model for this kind of institutional development but point out that there is still a need to advance the expertise of all involved further. This paper supports the position that the international development community including colleges and institutes (north and south) and their funders need to strengthen their knowledge regarding institutional development so that Canada can improve its abilities to carry out such activities.

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