Driving Change

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Once the dust has settled and the broad terms of an agreement have been put in place, a number of necessary but sometimes awkward questions arise. Who will administer, manage and generally run the programme? Where will its administrative centre be located? What reporting and monitoring conditions should be established? And what recourse will be available to the signatories should conditions not be met or objectives not realised? The implicit sub-text here concerns how a development cooperation programme such as SANTED can be protected from becoming the vehicle for realising a donor agenda imposed from outside, and conversely, how a donor can be protected from misuse of funds and fraudulent practices by the recipient. This chapter addresses these rather vexed issues through a discussion of the critical importance of finding the right form, structure and location for the management and administrative centre of such a programme. Should it be housed in the local offices of the benefactor, in this case, the Norwegian Embassy in Pretoria, and run by its own staff? Or should it be located in the offices of the recipient, the Higher Education Branch of the then South African Department of Education (DoE), and run by government officials? These are both models of tight control which run the danger of favouring the interests of one party above the other, and limiting mutual accountability.

For Norway, the initial preference was for the programme to be managed from within the DoE as this would be in accord with its avowed principle of recipient responsibility and ownership (see
Chapter 2). This was the model adopted for a Carnegie-funded project for the advancement of women in higher education and it had worked well. But in the case of SANTED, it posed something of a conundrum. On the one hand, the bureaucratic sluggishness of the civil service made the DoE reluctant to run a programme of this nature from within, while on the other hand, it had experiences of development aid projects set up outside the DoE and staffed by the donor country that had been less than completely successful (see Chapter 1).

The issues in this instance were complicated by the fact that the DoE was not the direct beneficiary of the agreement.\(^1\) Indirectly it would benefit by having the means available to realise some key policy objectives that it would otherwise be hard-pressed to meet, but the direct beneficiaries were to be a select group of public universities which fell under the regulatory control of the DoE, and were largely financed by the state. Should the vice-chancellors be given a prominent role in determining how the programme was to be implemented? In the example described in Chapter 1 of the Tertiary Education Linkages Project (TELP), funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the powerful influence of vice-chancellors had not been conducive to strong alignment of project outcomes with national policy directions, and had led the DoE to question the effectiveness of key aspects of the project. The DoE wanted greater influence and control over the SANTED Programme but at the same time resisted the idea of managing SANTED itself.

**Location, management and administration**

Universities are rightly protective of their autonomy, even in the context of acknowledged public accountability. In relation to this particular bilateral agreement, it would not have been unreasonable to expect a certain initial defensiveness in response to the programme. After all, the universities might have assumed, with some justification, that various agendas were at play, confirmed by the fact that the SANTED Programme did not involve an open competitive bid for a no-strings-attached funding opportunity. The beneficiaries in this case were pre-
selected and then invited to submit proposals for projects within quite tightly described thematic parameters. Put differently, the programme was already set up, with only limited prior consultation with the universities that were its target.

At the same time, the broad thematic areas identified as critical for intervention fell squarely within both national and institutional mandates and addressed issues about which the universities themselves were deeply concerned. The question was how the programme was to be implemented rather than the focus areas themselves. What was required was the means for the selected institutions to take possession of the programme in their own way, to interpret the conditions and parameters of what was being offered to suit the particular challenges of their own institutional needs without diverging from the intentions and goals expressed at a national level. To allay fears of interference it was therefore important for both the DoE and the Embassy to keep their distance while still conveying a keen sense of interest in the progress of institutionally-based projects.

To this end, they chose to set up a Secretariat, accountable to the DoE, which would be neither in the Department nor the Embassy but relatively free-standing, with staff sourced from outside. For pragmatic reasons, it was housed within the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD), an independent policy and research centre with impeccable political credentials, which had been set up in the year before the first democratic elections in South Africa, and had substantially contributed to the first White Paper on Education and Training of the new government. Since its inception it had managed a variety of externally funded projects and had considerable experience in handling donor funds.

SANTED rented office space from the CEPD in Johannesburg, and the CEPD provided the financial administrative services to SANTED within its own systems. It did not, however, manage the programme. The management was entirely in the hands of an appointed director supported by two project coordinators and an administrative assistant. This was in many respects an ideal situation in that it gave relative independence to the Secretariat and distance from the two chief role-players. The reporting line was to the DoE and an annual meeting provided progress and financial reports to both the DoE and the Embassy.
The metaphor of the bicycle is a useful one in this context in that the SANTED Secretariat was set up to deliver the programme to chosen institutional beneficiaries and to be an almost constant intermediary between the institutions on the one hand, and the DoE and the Norwegian Embassy on the other. It enabled a relationship of very close contact and involvement on the part of the Secretariat (hands on), while maintaining hands-off distance on the part of the Department and Embassy. In other words, the Secretariat was given the delicate role of managing policy implementation on behalf of the DoE within a context of institutional autonomy. At the heart of this role was the translation of the broad intent of the bilateral agreement into the individual contexts of each institution, the alignment of national policy objectives with the interests and strategic objectives of each institution, building in the process, a culture of trust. Any initial reticence on the part of institutions was soon dispelled, and there were many occasions when invitations were specifically extended by the universities to both the DoE and the Embassy. In fact, the willingness of the DoE and Embassy to send very senior officials and counsellors on field trip visits to the beneficiary institutions lent stature to the projects and played an important part in preventing the marginalisation of the work undertaken.

Project proposals and business plans

The mechanisms for the translation of the government-to-government agreement into institutional contexts were project proposals developed by the selected universities in consultation with the DoE, followed by detailed business plans. At the start of both phases of the SANTED Programme, the directors worked intensively with institutions to hone project proposals. It was in the project proposals that universities expressed most clearly their interpretation of the broad thematic areas of the programme. The key to later success lay in the ability of institutions to see, at the highest strategic level, the potential offered by these projects for realising some of their own ambitions, or addressing some of their own perceived limitations. Where this happened, projects became fully institutionalised over time, and the positive outcomes of
projects as they unfolded effectively changed institutional behaviour, as the succeeding chapters demonstrate. The University of the Western Cape was exemplary in this regard, with its vice-chancellor taking a keen personal interest in the two projects embarked upon and using them as levers to raise the profile of teaching and learning on the one hand, and regional collaboration on the other.

Even more exacting than the development of project proposals was the reformulation of each proposal into a business plan with key objectives, planned activities, timelines and budgets. It is hard to describe how much work went into the compilation of these business plans, especially as some universities had little experience of ever constructing a document of this kind. But it was not just inexperience that made the task difficult; in many instances it was not immediately apparent what activities should be undertaken to achieve the desired outcomes. For example, in the Access and Success projects, enabling greater access to students from disadvantaged communities was one thing, but enabling those students to succeed at their studies was far more complex, as is demonstrated in Chapter 4. There was no blueprint for what might work, no silver bullet to undo the tangled knot of issues that presented themselves in this respect. Here the wisdom and generosity of Norway must be mentioned. Senior counsellors made it clear that institutions could experiment, using pilot studies, and that failure would itself provide a valuable learning experience. This ‘philosophy’ was one of the enormous strengths of the SANTED Programme, because had it been institutional money at stake, there would have been immense pressure to produce positive results and anything less would have been considered a ‘waste’. Instead the notion of the university as a learning organisation that could initiate change and not simply be reactive was reinforced. What was learnt in the process was that strategies had to be shaped to particular institutional conditions, and even within institutions, approaches had to be adapted to suit the needs of students in different disciplinary fields. Some experiments worked better than others and while there were generic lessons, the outcomes underscored the need for highly flexible approaches in a sector that is extremely diverse at a variety of levels.
A number of business plans took shape fairly quickly, but in other instances, it took up to a year for business plans to be fully developed and approved. This was too long in the context of an umbrella programme that had only a five-year lifespan (in each of its phases), but the value of a carefully devised business plan must be emphasised. For all the projects undertaken under the SANTED Programme, the business plans provided the framework for the unfolding of project activities and the criteria against which reporting and monitoring could take place. It provided the means for assessing whether good progress was being made or whether things were getting bogged down and required intervention. Nonetheless, it was important that adherence to the stipulations of the business plans was not rigidly required. A feature of the role of the director was to maintain the kind of regular contact with project leaders and their teams that allowed for an understanding of the circumstances and events that sometimes moved projects in directions that had not been anticipated. Such circumstances might range from changes in personnel, or new institutional imperatives, to realisations that an adopted approach had not produced the desired outcome. In the collaborative University of Johannesburg–Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University project, for example, the management structure for the project set out in the business plan proved to be unwieldy and cumbersome, taking on a bureaucratic life of its own. At one stage, the activities of this overly elaborate structure almost became a substitute for making any substantive progress in the project itself. Its dismantling released a lot of energy and a greatly pared down structure allowed for much greater movement. In this case, as in others, discussion, dialogue and advice-giving lay at the centre of the interactions between the director and the universities.

The business plan also gave an indication of how and where each project would be located within the universities. In almost every instance, senior executives were given an oversight role, but the degree of involvement from this level was varied. Location was important: the closer to the centre, the greater the alignment with other institutional initiatives and the greater the sense of significance for the project teams which became a strong motivating factor. This did not happen in all instances and there were sub-projects (such as the Multilingualism Project at the
Durban University of Technology) where the effects were so minimal and marginalised that they cannot be said to have had any institutional impact. In hindsight, this was probably the effect not just of inappropriate location, but more importantly of a plan where the component elements were too diffuse and fragmented. In other projects where there was a higher degree of concentration of efforts and energy, at least in the initial stages, a more marked and measurable effect was produced, as for example in the parallel project at Rhodes University. At Rhodes, small successes in the initial roll-out of the project engendered confidence and interest, and allowed the project to expand into a variety of different disciplinary areas. In the end, this was one of the more successful projects in the SANTED Programme and it had a lasting institutional influence.

**Site visits and field trips**

Once project proposals and business plans were approved, initial tranches of funds were released and the role of the Secretariat shifted to that of advising project teams and monitoring progress. Responsibility for the day-to-day administration of the projects from the SANTED offices was divided between the two project coordinators each of whom took charge of a group of related projects. They developed a system of close communication with project leaders in the institutions and maintained regular communication of an informal nature in between the formal periods for reporting. The consequence was not only the growth of good relationships but a sense of continuous movement. Projects were not simply left to their own devices for months on end with consequent stagnation followed by a rush to complete activities in time for annual reports, but encouraged to maintain a steady pace of action. Many project leaders were senior academics or managers who had huge institutional demands on their time, and there is always the danger that project activities will become lesser priorities in the context of more immediate pressures. Maintaining a constant flow of communication did much to mitigate this danger.

In all the beneficiary universities, a project management or steering committee was set up for internal monitoring of project progress and, in most cases, the director was an ex-officio member of the committee.
This enabled the director and project coordinators to make regular site visits and hold discussions not only with project teams, but also with senior executives. Exchanges at this level were invaluable in pre-empting problems and clarifying expectations. On other occasions, field trips were organised to multiple sites and included representatives from Norway (the Embassy, Norad or both) and the DoE. While some of these visits marked the official launch of a project, they were all treated as special events which allowed project achievements to be showcased and donor and government officials to be entertained by the vice-chancellors and their executives. Again, the interest shown by the donors, by the DoE and by the senior leadership of universities lent significant stature to the projects and to all those who participated in them.

**Disbursing funds**

One of the great ironies of donor-funded projects is the difficulty encountered in spending allocated funds. Anyone with experience in this area will recognise the phenomenon. It has multiple causes including some of the circumstances mentioned above. When projects are led by people with large institutional portfolios, activities may not be initiated timeously or sustained as they should be, so funds are not spent. In some instances in the SANTED Programme, the problem lay in internal financial structures: resources to support SANTED activities that were closely aligned to other institutional activities were at times mistakenly drawn from institutional funds instead of from the dedicated SANTED account. At other times there was simply an over-estimation of costs.

All SANTED business plans were required to provide budgets for the duration of the projects, which were then broken down into annual costs. The primary reason for under-spending was that plans were overly ambitious as to what could be completed or achieved within the projected timelines. This points to another issue: projects often come on top of the normal workload of those responsible for implementing them, and this is a blind spot for institutional leaders who are keen to reap the benefits of a project but fail to make allowances for the extra burdens placed on members of staff. To relieve these pressures, SANTED
allowed for extra personnel to be employed on fixed-term contracts who could be dedicated to project work. A number of the projects made good use of this provision. Nonetheless, it comes with its own dangers which will be explored later.

Because under-spending was a widespread problem, SANTED applied strict rules with regard to the disbursement of funds. Any request for further disbursement of funds had to be accompanied by a financial statement signed by the chief financial officer of the university indicating the current balance, and a statement of proposed activities and costs for the next financial period. In other words, the universities had to demonstrate that the previous funding tranche had been successfully used or committed before any more money was released. This worked well for the national projects, but was more complicated in the regional projects. When it came to releasing funds to universities in other SADC countries, the regulations of the National Treasury slowed things down considerably and fluctuating exchange rates meant that recipients did not always receive the full value of the allocation. It became necessary to release monies between six weeks and two months in advance of actual needs, but if institutions were slow to make requests, then they sat without funding for the equivalent period of time.

Moving from SANTED I to SANTED II

The move from the first to the second phase of SANTED required re-contextualisation. The 2005 review of the programme had confirmed the relevance of the broad thematic areas, but the passage of time and lessons learnt from the first phase meant that shifts in emphasis were desirable. The concern to increase the access of black students to universities, especially those from disadvantaged communities, had diminished considerably; the problem was to keep students in the system and to help them to succeed academically. Here a new element was introduced, namely exploring multilingualism as a vehicle for improving student success. And with the massive restructuring of the higher education sector undertaken through mergers and incorporations since 2003, a new need arose, which was to help build a new institutional
form: the comprehensive university. Nominally this fell under capacity building but it probably stretched the meaning of that term and was quite distinct from the building of financial, human resource and student administrative capacity that had been the focus of the first phase.

The projects included under the SADC collaboration theme were reduced in number and the focus sharpened to ensure that they were not used for what might be seen as normal university operations such as the offering of distance programmes by a South African university to students in SADC countries. The focus was primarily on building academic capacity through improving staff qualifications, developing the curricula and teaching materials for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and providing the resources to support these programmes. Only one project fell outside this ambit and that was a project carried over from the first phase and expanded in the second. Its primary objective was to promote student peer education in HIV and AIDS and a secondary objective was the development of student leadership capacity. Norway had originally opposed this project on the grounds that it lay in the field of health rather than higher education, but evidence that student populations were being decimated by the disease led them to change their minds. As it turned out, the most sustained formal agreements between institutions arose out of this project, marked by annual meetings of the vice-chancellors.

**Trouble-shooting through hands-on management**

Direct and frequent engagement of the Secretariat, but also of the Department and donors, meant that many problems were addressed before they became real impediments to progress. Nonetheless, there were other cases where difficulties were not that easily resolved.

One of these arose in the collaborative project between the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), both newly created comprehensive universities, when a profound difference of approach emerged in the two project teams. It became necessary to engage the services of an external facilitator to run a workshop in which issues could be debated frankly, and the outcome
was a loosening of the initial form of collaboration. Although the disagreement emanated from the UJ side, in the end, the approach taken by UJ proved to have less successful outcomes than that of NMMU.

Another problem related to the employment of externally contracted staff for project work. This worked to best effect where the task was one of management or administration of the project, but was not as effective when it related to central project activities. Again, the UJ-NMMU project is a case in point. In one of the institutions, a senior researcher was appointed who had no curriculum expertise, although much of the work was in this area. The director was not in a position to intervene without being accused of micro-management, but this was one of the factors that contributed to limited outcomes.

The most intractable of problems arose in the SADC collaborative projects. These ranged from unrealistic expectations about what sorts of things were eligible for funding to constantly changing personnel and poor administrative and governance structures. Even at the level of communication, protocols had to be established to ensure that email messages would be acknowledged and responses provided within set time periods. But these projects provided important insights into what was necessary for successful implementation of a cross-border project.

Assumptions that institutional cultures would be similar were turned on their heads, and acute differences in the conditions of academic employment were starkly exposed. An annual team-teaching field trip in the NEW Project illustrates this well. Students in life sciences programmes would travel to a particular type of natural environment (marine, desert, rocky shore) where they would be given lectures, gather samples and write reports for a period of up to two weeks in their winter vacation. The staff from all three participating institutions were expected to contribute to the lecture programme and assist with translation (from English to Portuguese and vice versa). The assumption was that academics would do this on a voluntary basis as part of a project that was benefiting their students and institution, but when academics failed to arrive, further questions had to be asked. It was revealed that in some universities, academic salaries were so low that most members of staff held at least two jobs and their work commitments ran into the
official academic recess period. Unless a stipend was paid to compensate for loss of earnings, they were unwilling to contribute to the team-teaching exercise. This was a humbling insight and a salutary reminder of the complexity of this kind of collaboration.

Levels of commitment are required for project success, but the ground is not even and this must be understood at the most painfully detailed level. And sometimes it is not the project staff who can be faulted, but broader governance and administrative systems over which they have little control. The implementation of two masters programmes at the University Agostinho Neto in Luanda was delayed for almost a year because of repeated postponements of the senate meeting at which they had to be ratified.

In this particular project, gender power relations also had to be confronted in unexpected ways. In the course of one of the project workshops, the academics responsible for the implementation of the project in Angola (largely women) were effectively silenced by the all-male senior leadership of the university. The dynamics of the workshop were extremely interesting (and tense) in that it was facilitated by a woman (who determined who could speak and when) and took place with the female SANTED director present (a proxy for control of the purse strings). While patriarchy could be challenged in that setting, it was clear that it would reassert itself in the institutional environment.

A positive outcome of the identification of common problems was the instigation of joint workshops for project teams working in similar areas. These proved to be invaluable for sharing experiences and pooling ideas, practices and possible solutions. It would have been good if more could have been arranged, but they involved large numbers of people from different parts of the country and the logistics were complicated. Participants in the few that were convened returned to their own universities invigorated with renewed interest.

**Annual reports and monitoring**

In preparation for the annual meeting of the Embassy, the DoE and the Secretariat, each project was required to produce a financial statement for
the year and an accompanying narrative report with a focus on outcomes and results, rather than a listing of activities. The Secretariat provided templates for both reports so that there was a level of consistency and to ensure that they spoke to the original objectives set up in business plans. Plans for the following year would have to indicate any roll-over of activities that had not been completed and projected costs. Project leaders were urged to use the annual report to identify problems and risks, and refrain from a simple showcasing of positive outcomes that papered over the cracks. On the basis of the project reports, the director wrote a consolidated report addressing each of the thematic areas and the presentation of this report provided the basis for the substantive part of the discussion at the annual meeting. It was also here that any shifts in direction would be debated and approved.

Report writing of this nature can be time-consuming and arduous. There is always the danger that more time and energy will go into reporting than actual delivery of outcomes and it should be kept within reasonable limits. It is, nonetheless, an absolutely critical element in the life of any project, as valuable to the participants as a recorded measure of their own progress and moments of faltering, as it is for the donors in monitoring the effectiveness of a programme such as SANTED.

Conclusion

There is no formula for successful project implementation: each situation will come with its own specificities, opportunities and challenges. But there is something to be learnt from this very statement. If the means to achieve particular outcomes are known, then a project is probably not required: what is needed is the implementation of the systems, practices and processes that are known to produce the desired end result. The SANTED projects, however, shared some features with scientific experiments which require an open and investigative approach, from which new knowledge is produced and outcomes are not always known, though they may be hoped for. And again, as in scientific research, it is the ability to reproduce the results of a pilot study in other contexts or when taken to scale, that confirm their validity. More than anything
such projects require an openness to learning from their participants and their institutions.

From the perspective of the Secretariat, certain practices evolved that definitely contributed to the overall success of the programme. Among others, they included (1) flexibility and alertness to alternative approaches; (2) consistent effort to understand the particularities of context and how these shape a project; (3) open communication that establishes trust and encourages honesty; (4) clarity around intentions and expectations; (5) strict adherence to financial accountability and reporting requirements; (6) frequent contact in the form of visits; and (7) consistent elevation of the stature and significance of projects by all parties.

In summary, the bicycle is again invoked as a metaphor because a successful ride requires clear direction, energetic propulsion and careful balance. SANTED balanced closeness with distance, flexibility with firmness, and attention to detail with awareness of broad national objectives. The combined efforts of the Secretariat, the DoE and Norway provided consistent direction, and the SANTED participants brought astonishing energy and enthusiasm to project delivery.

Endnotes

1. The idea of using some of the funds to strengthen capacity within the Higher Education Branch of the DoE was mooted at one stage, but rejected in favour of directing all resources to selected universities.
2. This is not at all far-fetched. One vice-chancellor was extremely cautious about the SANTED Programme, suspecting that it was a Trojan horse that would be used to impose the DoE’s ideas on the university.
3. The approval of proposals initially involved both the DoE and the Embassy, but in the second phase, approval was left to the DoE. However, business plans were sent to technical teams in the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) for assessment and refined on the basis of advice and suggestions received.
4. Within the programme, two broad types of project were envisaged: the first set were national projects that would address issues of access, retention and success of students, and the building of institutional administrative capacity; the second set were regional projects that were aimed at building cross-border collaboration between South African universities and those in Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries.
5. A collaborative project involving the University of Namibia, University Eduardo Mondlane and the University of the Witwatersrand.