

FAILING WHILE SUCCEEDING? ON THE DELICATE EFFECTS OF A YET SINCERE COOPERATION

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Abstract

(EN) Within wider critical thoughts on and inside international cooperation, in this contribution some reflections are made about possible approaches to evaluate the effects of cooperation actions onto recipient populations. Starting from an experience of academically-led independent cooperation in a rural internal area of El Salvador, Central America, a debate is stimulated on how international cooperation can avoid forcing the beneficiary populations, and instead really and solely serve the interests of the recipients: their strategic empowerment and – above all – their self-determination.

(ES) Dentro de reflexiones más amplias sobre and adentro la cooperación internacional, en esta contribución se comentan una posibles estrategias de evaluación de las acciones cooperativas sobre las poblaciones receptoras. A partir de una experiencia de cooperación independiente guiada por sujetos académicos en una región rural interna de El Salvador, América Central, se estimula a un debate sobre cómo la cooperación internacional pueda evitar forzar las poblaciones beneficiarias y, al contrario, servir realmente y únicamente los intereses de las poblaciones receptoras: su fortalecimiento estratégico y – sobre todo – su autodeterminación.

Introduction

A globalised world makes us face more and more global problems, questioning the actual boundaries between Global North and Global South, and at the same time highlighting all their interconnections. Therefore, a needed question to think about would reasonably be: who needs cooperation? and why? We propose that such dilemma is too often dodged, and too often affects the way we approach international cooperation. In this contribution, we wonder how to choose a suitable approach as well as how to evaluate the effects of our action onto the “cooperated” local communities. Starting from an ongoing experience of academically-led cooperation in an internal area of El Salvador, Central America, we aim at stimulating a debate on how international cooperation can avoid forcing, and instead really and solely serve the interests of the recipients: their strategic empowerment and – above all – their self-determination. The questions we now pose come from an experience of participatory planning in the rural community of Santa Marta, in the Salvadoran deprived district of Cabañas. This project (2014) was brought about by a small group of young researchers and professionals from the postgraduate course in Habitat, Technology, and

Development at the *Politecnico di Torino*, in partnership with the volunteering association *Psicologi nel Mondo - Torino* as well as with the local organisation *ADES – Asociacion para el Desarrollo Economico y Social - Santa Marta*, the latter acting as a local administration. This group of engineers, architects, and urban planners animated the local population toward the creation of some socio-economic guidelines. The rural community of Santa Marta, founded in the late 1980s in the chaos of the Salvadoran civil war, currently lives in conditions of environmental emergency, furthermore without running water. Anyway, they have thirst for debate and new ideas: this favourable context let us start an active process of cooperation and, at the same time, of action research, aimed at encouraging levels of empowerment so as to let self-planning and self-design happen in a near future. In the three years after the participatory planning experience we led, the first pilot projects have been implemented – some still in collaboration with external professionals, some already independently. The community of Santa Marta, administratively part of the Department of Cabañas (middle-Northern part of El Salvador) and of the municipality of Ciudad Victoria, is a rural community composed of 4,000 to 5,000 inhabitants whose traditional economy is agricultural. As shortly mentioned above, the community was founded in a re-built environment after the depopulation and destruction due to the Salvadoran civil war (1980-1992) and to the associated exile in near Honduras. Such dramatic events still produces tangible and intangible consequences in the community (cf. Mela & Chicco, 2008; Cristiano, 2014; Ciaffi & Mela, 2015; Mela & Chicco, 2016). At the same time, a sudden shift from a substance economy to the imaginary and to the different customs and traditions imported from the Global North¹ has progressively caused a social, economic, and environmental crisis, which local NGO *ADES – Asociación para el Desarrollo Económico y Social* – taking care of the international relations of the community, including cooperation projects – has recently tried to overcome through some strategic planning led with the help of participatory processes.

Our case study

In favourable circumstances where the community of Santa Marta became aware of the potentials of its own society, willing to treasure its historical memory, its social cohesion, its organisational practices, and its agricultural skills, *Politecnico di Torino*'s postgraduate course in “Habitat, Technology, and Development” decides to entrust a participatory planning project to some of its graduating professionals. Such participatory planning project was to involve local population and actors operating in Santa Marta in order to design the guidelines for a socio-economic

¹Here mainly North America, Europe, and Japan.

organisational plan aiming at reaching systemic sustainability: environmental, economic, and social. In 2014, criticalities, needs, and potentials of the community were investigated through a participatory process (cf. Cristiano, 2014; Ciaffi & Mela, 2015; Cristiano *et al.*, 2015). The participatory approach involved meetings with the several organised groups (more or less equivalent to associations, collectives, and cooperatives), with the groups with political-administrative roles² as well as with the rest of the local population, even though not organised in groups. Among the employed participatory tools, focus groups, thematic meetings, outdoor workshops, and ludic-planning expedients. All these actions were meant to answer to five categories of questions, focused on the knowledge of the territory – specifically, of its problems and potentials – by *Politecnico di Torino*'s academic/volunteering professionals. Such questions – *¿Quienes son Ustedes?* (Who?), *¿Donde esta que?* (Where?), *¿Qué quieren?*, *¿porqué?* (Why?), *¿Como lo logramos?* (How?), *¿Que haran?* (Who will do what?) – were not made public until the end of the process, and let the cooperation operators to reconstruct a detailed picture of the local context, of its regulating dynamics, and of its important history. At the same time, the entire process let the local interlocutors familiarise with the method of representing the territory on two dimensions, required to pass from a qualitative description to the planning step. All of this led to the definition of the strategy to be adopted to favour an organisation of the territory inside and around the community that would be shared by the community members and the responsibilities towards its realisation would be distributed among the local stakeholders (i.e. the aforementioned associations, cooperatives, and collectives). The plan for Santa Marta was assigned a time horizon of 15 years, with three “intermediate deadlines” – 2020, 2025, and 2030 – to progressively face the detected problems while valorising the potentials of the community. The actions imagined through the participatory planning process are characterised by the valorisation of the community agricultural vocation, with a recovery (and the improvement) of agro-ecologic techniques as well as with the adoption of some best practices and the launch of pilot projects, at different levels: agricultural, economic, and space organisation, as described in the update presented in the next lines. Today, almost four years later, the economy of the community keeps being based upon agriculture. Some farmers have been experiencing the directions included in the guidelines towards 2030, thus reducing the use of petro-chemical fertilisers – depleting local soil and poisoning local water – and parallelly decreasing the production of solid waste and the release of wastewater – especially sewage water, where a sewage system is not present – in the local streams. An innovative

² Even though administratively part of the municipality of Ciudad Victoria, historical rivalries connected with the Salvadoran civil war have caused the community not to receive funding from the municipality, and to administrate autonomously on many sectors.

cooperative has been experimenting a diversified agriculture, allowing for the delivery of fruits and vegetables that were only imported until recently. A stock for the collection and delivery of corn is currently being built. Conversely, Local handicraft for the satisfaction of internal demand (and some local external) has not been encouraged yet. Some actions have been undertaken to maintain the historical tracks, often erroneously referred to as “touristic” (i.e. meant to bequeath the community history and the values to the next generations as well as to the rare visitors, mainly cooperation agents and scholars). The access to the community has been improved thanks to the paving of the main road to Santa Marta. After the collaboration with Italian academic and volunteering professionals for the sustainable guidelines through participatory processes, one of the pilot project designed in 2014 has already been completed: a learn-by-making workshop for the recovery, hybridation, and improvement of traditional building and composting technologies, flanked by an awareness-raising and training campaign on ecology and environmental hygiene. Such pilot project has been called *Compost(h)emos*, and is illustrated in detail in the next section.

Proyecto Compost(h)emos: approach, methods, and contents

The building and learn-by-making project *Compost(h)emos* started in September 2016, mainly funded within the Italian public *per mille* allocations of the Italian Waldensian Evangelical Church – obtained by Turin-based association *Psicologi nel mondo- Torino* – and co-funded through some fundraising in the city of Turin in 2014 and 2015. The project represents the first implementation of the pilot projects planned in the 2014 guidelines, and was led in partnership with Salvadoran NGO *ADES* (see above), active in Santa Marta, as well as with the directorship of the educational compound of the community. Besides providing the community with a set of dry composting toilets – previously frequently used in the community, but recently abandoned – , the goal of the project is to provide environmental education. The project is articulated in three levels:

- awareness raising on the use of dry compost toilets, in order to incentivise the reuse of organic waste as fertiliser in agriculture;
- training on the techniques of organic farmic and on the existing and traditional types of dry composting toilets – especially in rural areas of El Salvador – to raise awareness on their uses and to ensure a good maintenance of the manufact under construction;
- training on possible methods to build in *adobe*, i.e. the raw earth bricks employed to realise the manufact, with a focus on the improvement of traditional techniques recently abandoned in the community due to some solvable flaws;
- learn-by-making building-site for the self-construction of three dry composting toilets, with on-site available materials as well as the improvement of local building techniques; such

toilets are meant to satisfy a related need at the school compound “10 de Octubre”, the only one inside the community of Santa Marta, where – in line with the purposes of the 2014 participatory planning project – a career in agro-ecology has been recently activated.

The inhabitants of Santa Marta were the protagonists of this project. The experience of Association *Psicologi nel Mondo - Torino* –present in this community since 2007, with interventions on psychological well-being (cf. Mela & Chicco, 2016) – the previous knowledge of the context as well as our relations, created during the participatory planning workshop, all facilitated the individuation of local persons with the required competences to perform some parts of the project. The training course was structure in synergy with former students with expertise in organic farming, who also actively took part in the teaching process through lectures and practical workshops. Some of them also helped with the building site, sharing their skills to make the project more efficient and sustainable in terms of both financial costs and timing.

The awareness raising campaign was favoured on the one hand by the circulation on local communication channels such as the interphone system used for internal communications to the community members, local radio station *Radio Victoria*³(based in the near town of Victoria but mainly managed by and talking to people from Santa Marta),and local monthly magazine *Abriendo Brecha* (edited by a collective of 30-year-old community members; cf. original article in Falchetti & Cristiano, 2017), and on the other hand by the method choosen for the entire project. In fact, despite the fact that the participation in the learn-by-making building site had been planned for a limited number of students and collaborators, respectively receiving study and working grants, an on-site preliminary assessment done with the presidency of the school highlighted how the knowledge and the skills acquired through the training course and the building activities would be valuable for their participants, so actions were designed to favour the participation of a higher number of students as well as of their parents. So groups of 11 students per shift, attending the 7th, 8th, and 9th grade, alternate themselves every working day at the building site, only those attending the 9th grade (i.e. a lower number on the total students of the school, yet a much higher number compared to the initial plan) were selected for the training part, articulated in lectures and practical workshops however open to the whole community. Each group of students was accompanied by one or two instructors from the school, so as to ease the performing of the activities inside the learn-by-making building site.

The idea of also involving the parents of the students as well as to let other inhabitants (Fig.1) become an active part of the project favoured the changeover of people inside the building site (thus

³ radiovictoriaes.org

making the building activities faster) and, above all, followed the principle according to which the participation into the realisation of a project of general interest is the best solution to ensure that the value of the project is actually perceived as such, and, as a consequence, grant its future actual use, maintenance, care, and duration in time.

If the the new organisation of the learn-by-making building site facilitated the involvement of a higher number of people, it also made its progress dependent on the availability of students, parents, and other community members, all participating on a voluntary basis. As a consequence, the project ran the risk of not being completed in time; in fact, frequent absences were registered compared to the voluntary shifts initially agreed upon; however, this eventuality had been taken into consideration since the start of the project, since a similar project, based on the involvement of community members in a peculiar context such as El Salvador, was very likely to be to a certain extent unforeseeable.



Fig.1 – A Saturday at work with groups of non-student volunteers from local associations.

The training course was structured in six days, specifically addressed to students from the 9th grade but opened to everyone in the community. All the meetings were characterised by a theoretical and a practical part – the latter mainly performed at the premises of the local group for agro-ecology and permaculture (the *Grupo del Invernadero*, i.e. the greenhouse group) and focused on the themes of

organic farming, the use of dry composting toilets, and the improvement of local building technique in raw earth.

A further meeting on the types of dry toilets and dry composting toilets was dedicated to the instructors and directors of the school compound, so as to ease the management and maintenance of the built structures over time, including the collection of the material required for the use of the toilets (e.g. ash) and the distribution of the produced compost. These activities would involve the parents of the students as well as local groups and associations.

Discussion

Proyecto Compost(h)emos was carried out with the support of:

- 5 local skilled persons: a mason, a producer of *adobe* (raw-earth bricks), a person able to overlook self-construction projects using sustainable materials, two enthusiasts of organic farming;
- 23 instructors from the local school compound;
- 70 students;
- 98 parents.

Three dry composting toilets were built in Santa Marta, Cabañas, El Salvador, right outside the local school compound “10 de Octubre” (Fig.4), in order to allow at the same time for a usability by the students and instructors of the school and an opening to (and visibility for) the rest of the community. The structure was built with a hybrid frame (Fig.2) using improved non-alien technologies – *adobe*, local bamboo, and sheet metal – as well as with a ventilated roof. Parallely, a training course for students, instructors, and community members in general was held on ecology, environmental hygiene, and subjects functional to the very learn-by-making building site.

The project lasted 14 weeks:

- the first two weeks used to organise a calendar together with the recipients as well as to lead mechanical tests on local earth samples in order to later make high-quality *adobe*;
- 10 central weeks of building activities and training course, as described above;
- 2 final weeks used for the mason to install wooden doors, to finish off the paving of the structure, and to lay the plaster.



Fig.2 – Progress of the building site at the end of the 12th week of the project (courtesy of Justin Bench).

After the completion of the project, the natural mismatch between the remote design phase and the implementation phase has led us to ask ourselves some questions. In spite of the multiple requests of the local NGO for the project to start, why do we – external operators – seem more motivated than them to realise it? What is the perception of the usefulness of this project three years after the drawing of the guidelines for a socially and environmentally sustainable self-planning in the community? Have the priorities of the inhabitants and local associations changed? Should we revalue the entire listening and co-planning work performed with the community, whose ruined attribute of passive subject in international cooperation processes we now realise, affecting the implementation of a yet shared project?

If this project was started and carried out is because the stimulus, matched with genuine interest, motivation, and passion, towards a project able to improve the conditions of a community had solid foundations. During the first experience of research and action in 2014, it was possible to verify that the very community was aware of the compromises it was accepting while importing low-price polluting chemicals to obtain a rich agricultural yield for the time being, but insane and unhelpful for its current and future ecological and even economic impacts: the local environment, the health

of the population, and – with the impoverishment of soils – for the agricultural activity itself. At that time, some farmers were already experimenting organic farming techniques, using natural fertilisers and, very few of them, were even studying fermentation systems for organic waste to be used in agriculture. We therefore started to get the impression – later become awareness – that the problem was not a lack of interests in the project nor its no longer matching the needs of the community, but rather on the fact that processes like this require human relations characterised by more proximity as well as reduced intervals between the listening and co-design phase and the implementation phase. Once the first phases of the participatory process are completed, fuelling expectations on the involved individuals, it now seems natural that the longer it takes for the actualisation of such expectations, the more the engagement of such individuals decreases. In our example, the worsening of clashes among criminal bands inside the community (the so-called *maras*), putting the community members in danger for more than one year, caused the implementation phase of project *Compost(h)emos* to be postponed. A concause for such postponement is also represented by the financial availability of the involved organisations, due to the fundraising system. Furthermore, the experiences of activation inside the community have happened on other themes so far. As previously mentioned, some environmental awareness is present in some individuals and groups, but are walking their way up the ladder very slowly. However, it was interesting to note how each participant in the project at issue took *Compost(h)emos* as an occasion to also address other issues about which he/she cared. For instance, the school director (Fig.3) took advantage of the project also to seek those “cultural change” he has always been trying to pass on his students, i.e. raising interest in becoming an active part of the community by reducing the appeal of the “easy life” promoted by the aforementioned criminal bands.



Fig.3 –The moment when the school director communicates the beginning of the project and explains its activities to some of his students.

The effect of the implemented process was the involvement of a high number of individuals, coming from different social extractions and showing different starting competences. A learning and horizontal exchange model was experimented, where we, as technical professionals, measured ourselves with local peers, being humble and seeking to get some more knowledge of their ways of doing things. This stimulated their curiosity in experimenting a building technology inspired by a deep exchange of the knowledge of each of the two parts. This way of action, starting with the listening of what the other has to offer, let discover local skilled persons not sufficiently recognised and valorised inside the community and by its leading groups nor invited to previous international projects; these people have been therefore put into relation one another and with the managing authorities, the latter used to select personnel for projects without a sufficient turnover, i.e. not basing upon competences – we cannot say whether for inertia or favouritism. This way, new relations were started, and others got strenghtened, facilitating a social integration besides working collaboration. The importance of the project, especially in terms of knowledge exchange, was recognised by the community. This can be deduced from the direct appraisal of the participation in the building activities, from the outcomes of interviews carried out at the end of the project as well as from the acknowledgement that the school directorship and faculty dedicated to us – Italian professionals – during the closing ceremony of the project, when a diploma was also awarded.



Fig.4 – Laying of the first *adobe* bricks after the completion of the basement.

Conclusion

During a field project (2014) linked to the activities of *Politecnico di Torino*'s postgraduate course in "Habitat, Technology, and Development" in the rural community of Santa Marta, El Salvador, some guidelines for a socio-economic organisational plan were co-designed through a highly inclusive participatory process; these guidelines included some pilot projects to be implemented in the following years, all characterised by elements of environmental, economic, and social sustainability. *Proyecto Compost(h)emos* is one of such pilot projects, which we also supported. Some of our actions have helped overcome a phase of dependency cooperation culture. Prior to, many projects had faced temporary issues or created predetermined needs and/or expectations, that might not necessarily be desirable in such context. Ignoring cultural diversity risks to create a damage while being sure to provide help instead. Acting in Santa Marta, El Salvador, we realised how crucial is to create a network of interlocutors, differentiated in terms of both competencies and social extraction. The 2014 experience allowed us to relate with all the organized groups of the community (associations, collectives, and so on) and with three Salvadoran universities, in addition to our local partner. Among the positive results, an increased awareness in each involved subject as well as the setting up of a network of competencies. This led to the subsequent pilot projects planned in the guidelines, highlighting how the adopted process brought to some real listening of the needs of the whole community, and to a solid understanding of the importance of working in a system.

One year after the conclusion of *Proyecto Compost(h)emos*, we understand that something that could have facilitated the implementation phase of the project might be represented by a higher continuity in the performing of the planned actions –for the awareness raising, the training course, and the learn-by-making building site – organising and better marking each activity over a larger period than the actual 14 weeks. This might have not also allowed, but also encouraged the participation of the community members at a larger scale, thus reducing the moments when the recipients could feel like “passive” subject, and instead involving them also as authors of the project design process. In participatory processes, the figure of the operator – in this case, a cooperation operator/facilitator besides a technician – should be serving the positive outcome of the project by making his/her competences available to it and paying attention not to overpass the boundaries of its facilitating role. In fact, overpassing that threshold might of course bring alternative implementation routes compared to those used by local administrations, associations, informal groups, and single individuals, but this would be done without assuring a paradigm shift able to favour the satisfaction of the real wants as well as the self-determination of the recipients.

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