

Confronting The Challenges Of Leadership

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In book recently published by Thomas Theisohn and myself ¹ we make the case for a renewed interest on the links between ownership, leadership and the perennial dilemmas of capacity development. Today there is a rich body of literature on capacity development. A difficulty remains, however, on how to pin down what it actually implies in practical terms. Our definition is quite simple: it is the ability of people, institutions and society –the three layers of capacity development- to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve objectives.

There are several ways capacity can be developed and sustained. But in general they are all premised in a sense of ownership and the existence of transformative leadership. We believe an owner is not necessarily a leader, who must possess certain skills, personal commitment and the ability to carry out concrete action. From the highest national authorities to those at community levels, leaders are most effective when they are inclusive and proactive, and ensure allocation of adequate domestic resources. Leaders make transformation happen when they have courage to take risks, expand implementation, overcome obstacles and empower others.

It is common sense to say there are no leaders without followers. The real issue is how we define a leader. Is it someone that has personal ambitious goals detached from common public good? Certainly there are such leaders in abundance. Hence the need for the transformation to become central to the call for a leadership. This is better illustrated through examples. I would like to dwell on two countries I know well: Guinea Bissau and Zimbabwe.

The structural adjustment initiated in Guinea Bissau in the early eighties followed the usual recipe of economic liberalization and deregulation, privatization and fiscal balance. This was done under the assumption that a more stable macro-economic situation would entice foreign direct investments as well as create domestic incentives for growth. It has become obvious that countries such as Guinea Bissau had little to offer to foreign investors, unless they wanted to make a quick buck and get out. Likewise privatizing in a country without an entrepreneurial class and savings capacity was tantamount to pervert the system and expand corruption.

The adjustment failure to produce results, combined with increased external debt created the conditions for a very fragile socio-economic situation. If one adds the imperatives of a quick institutional move towards superficial democracy (reduced to more or less organizing supervised elections), it is not difficult to imagine confusing political developments. Under the circumstances the little institutional capacity created in the

¹ Lopes, C. and Theisohn, T., *Ownership, Leadership and Transformation. Can we do better for Capacity development?*, UNDP/Earthscan, NY/London, 2003.

country after independence is quite vulnerable to human security concerns. Each conflict could provoke a migration of a few hundred families. After three major crisis and a civil war the middle class just disappeared. The evaporation of capacity was to a large extent influenced by externally-induced policies that did not take into account the imperatives of leadership.

Zimbabwe was for at least the first 15 years of independence a beacon of pragmatism, reconciliation and aggressive social policies. The results surprised the world, with the country being considered an example of responsible leadership. The social performance, however, was not matched with political liberalization, making the country vulnerable to tensions and land pressures, the unresolved dilemma of Zimbabwean history. It was therefore not surprising that as soon as civil society organizations and social movements start to develop Government structures reacted defensively. Zimbabwean quasi one party system became hostage to a conflicting and polarized society. Although Zimbabwe has a large middle class and well educated population, these factors could not impede a slide in the economic and social situation provoked by poor leadership. Again the role leadership plays on capacity development is demonstrated.

These two lessons are just examples of the need for a further debate on these issues.