

Supporting Development Relevant Research

by

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SUMMARY. — The Flemish Interuniversity Council-University Cooperation for Development (VLIR-UOS) promotes and supports development relevant research, as part of its broader mandate, and programmes of capacity building in higher education in the South. Its activities are centered around the motto “sharing minds, changing lives”, meaning the empowerment of individuals and institutions of higher education in developing countries to better fulfil their functions of education, research and service to society as drivers for change and development. Based on a system of calls, the programmes of VLIR-UOS are appraised against criteria pertaining to academic relevance and quality and to relevance for development. The different phases of the project cycle are explained in the context of ensuring high-quality research that is relevant for development. And finally, challenges are discussed with regard to how VLIR-UOS can and needs to continuously update with the latest developments regarding policies and best practices.

Introduction

The University Cooperation for Development, as part of the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), or VLIR-UOS (www.vliruos.be), is the responsible actor for the Belgian government for all university cooperation for development between the universities and university colleges in Flanders, Belgium, and their partner universities in the South. The “South” is a convenient geographic term designating developing countries in South America, Africa and Asia. The universities (in this paper always including university colleges, see BASTIAENS *et al.* 2011) in the South are recognized as development actors in their country and region. Universities indeed play an important role in creating and disseminating knowledge, and in offering a critical reflection on society. Both knowledge and critical reflection are important drivers of development. The link between knowledge and development is well expressed in the VLIR-UOS motto “sharing minds,

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changing lives”. By sharing minds, through science, VLIR-UOS aims at changing lives in the developing countries in the South.

University cooperation for development is not about money changing hands, but about ideas changing minds. The sharing of minds, the exchange of information, knowledge, ideas and experiences must lead to changing lives for the better for the people in the South. Therefore, local institutions of higher education are incited, encouraged and supported to take up their role as drivers of change in society, to contribute to development in general and to poverty alleviation more specifically. Development relevant research is not to be confused with “development research”. Development research can either be understood as research on the development of new products or research about the developing world as done by development research institutes listed by *e.g.* the “European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes” (EADI). Development relevant research is one of the components or outcomes of “capacity building” or “capacity development”, as defined by OECD and UNDP. Capacity building is based on learning and acquisition of skills and resources among individuals and organizations, in order to become less dependent and ultimately independent of aid in a spirit of long-term sustainable development (OECD & The World Bank 2007).

The general objective of VLIR-UOS is to empower the universities in the South to fulfil their role as actors in the development of their region and country (education, research and service to society) through cooperation with the Flemish universities and university colleges. VLIR-UOS funds cooperation, rather than institutions in the South. The specific objectives are on the one hand institutional capacity building in the South and on the other expertise development in Flanders. This means building education and research capacity of partner universities to stimulate the development of knowledge and expertise in the South, as well as maintaining and enlarging development expertise in Flanders. Maintenance and expansion of the level of support for development cooperation in Flanders is made possible by promoting mutual understanding, solidarity and world citizenship (see *e.g.* GEERTS 2011). Six basic principles underpin the actions of VLIR-UOS: (1) solidarity and quality, (2) attention for sustainability, (3) interuniversity approach, (4) multidisciplinary approach, (5) shared interest and (6) participation and ownership. Solidarity amongst academics goes with mutual trust, but also with solidarity towards the poor, the minorities, North-South solidarity. The selected projects should be of high academic quality, but also the functioning of the projects should be characterized by high-quality communication, financial management, or human relations. Sustainability is a wide concept. It refers to the effort to ensure that the undertaken development process will not collapse, once the programme is finished. This can *e.g.* be achieved if structures are installed which generate funds (excellence centres, spin-offs, internationalization, grant schemes, public-private partnerships). However, projects dealing with natural resources or agriculture should take sustainable development as guiding principle as well. This means to create development which does not

damage the environment for future generations. The core business of VLIR-UOS is to create cooperation between universities in the North and in the South in a multidisciplinary approach based on shared interests, participation and ownership. Scientists often give testimony of the added value caused by this approach. Their personal networks are expanded, and their isolation or ivory tower is abated for their own benefit and the benefit of science and development.

Relevance for Development

The final objective of university cooperation for development is the sustainable, people-oriented development of the countries of the South through mutual enrichment of knowledge and by a continuous questioning between the two partners of one another and oneself. Concretely, this means that VLIR-UOS is translating this objective into policies at different levels, processes, institutions, activities, outcome, output and results, application of results and impact. All these reflections, actions or interventions mean much more than only “research”. The activities facilitated and funded through VLIR-UOS are partnerships between universities, departments, laboratories and researchers in the form of programmes and projects. Programmes are defined as larger entities corresponding to specific administrative and financial transactions in the portfolio of VLIR-UOS. Projects are the concrete thematic interventions within such programmes.

As VLIR-UOS is managing funds of the Belgian Directorate General for Development (DGD, formerly DGDC), it needs to adhere to the policies specific for the Belgian development cooperation, itself under regular scrutiny by the peer review of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD (OECD 2010). The “niche client” of VLIR-UOS is the academic world in the North and in the South. Hence, the programmes of VLIR-UOS are always combining or linking two worlds: the scientific community or the academic world and the development cooperation world with its own paradigms and rationale. The work generated by VLIR-UOS should always be embedded in what is relevant for development. Therefore, it is essential for VLIR-UOS to check project proposals against the mission statement of VLIR-UOS, specifically questioning the developmental relevance.

The following issues are crucial when appraising a new research project: what is the role of the university, its social responsibility? Why should a particular university engage in that specific project or programme? What are the academic and the developmental objectives? Who will cooperate? Where is the demand-drivenness? Is the ownership ensured? Is the context analysis adequate enough? Which of the three university functions — teaching, research, service to society — will be served by the project or programme? What is the importance of the intended research as to the developmental relevance for the university, its direct area, its country or the region beyond? Is the partnership bound to be a win-win relationship for North and South?

Each of these questions can be discussed at length, and the terminology used may be subject to discussion or even controversy as to the perceived contents and definitions. What is development, win-win, ownership? It is however not the scope of this paper to discuss in depth the various meanings of this terminology, but it can generally be understood according to the mainstream international consensus, as referred to in *e.g.* the Paris Declaration or the Accra Agenda, to name but the main international fora about improving aid efficiency.

However, it is pertinent to define the boundaries in which VLIR-UOS wishes its projects to function within a development relevant rationale. This can be done by answering the questions mentioned. Who will be selected? Partner universities are selected both on the basis of (i) their potential with respect to university education and research and (ii) the emancipatory role they play within their society. Furthermore, they must pursue an active policy of cultural, ethnic, social and philosophical non-discrimination. These criteria can be inferred for a particular institution by scrutinizing annual reports, multi-annual plans, strategic plans and websites, next to face-to-face discussions. The who-question does not limit itself to the university alone, as one can, or even needs to work together with other social actors in the countries concerned: government institutions, NGOs, local SMEs, research institutes, government agencies, to name a few. The aim is to respond to a local, generally recognized development need, which can be remediated by academic cooperation with a Flemish university. This responds to the what-question.

A VLIR-UOS funded project can thus be considered as a development relevant project which strengthens the research and education capacity of a partner institution in the South by means of generating and exchanging knowledge. The final aim is to use this local capacity in the struggle against poverty in the concerned country or region. The potential contribution and added value to the development programme of the country concerned is of high importance for the developmental relevance of the intended VLIR-UOS funded project.

VLIR-UOS funded projects have to meet local needs and have to be aligned with the vision and strategy of the local partner institute. This requires an in-depth analysis of the economic, social, cultural and political context of the region and country, of the needs and capacities of the partner institute, of the available expertise and opportunities, and of the added value of the concerned academic cooperation, also taking into account projects or programmes of other donor organizations. More specifically, capacity building at the level of local institutions entails improvement of quality of education, research, service to society, policy and management, but also self-reliance for scientific research and access to international networks and external money. Improved capacity for development is the ultimate impact, with direct dividends for research on local development problems and an active role in civil society: *e.g.* advocacy to government, other civil society actors.

The Application and Selection System

Challenges exist at every level, from the policy to the selection initiating a project. Selection criteria do not necessarily carry the same weight, depending on whether the selection concerns scholars (BOEREN *et al.* 2008) or projects (Span Consultants 2008). The selection commission should be as objective as possible. Therefore, it is important to ensure a fair balance of disciplines amongst the reviewers, as well as enough external reviewers not linked to a Flemish university. Even though this system is more complex in terms of logistics and more expensive, inclusion of experts from the South should be more encouraged, as they might view the needs addressed in a different perspective. VLIR-UOS is striving for a peer review system similar to the system prevailing at the National Fund for Science, with some differences inherent to the specific operating details. In order to identify interesting development relevant research proposals, VLIR-UOS thus far acted around basic principles of (i) open calls for proposals, (ii) competitive selection and (iii) selection on the basis of peer review. VLIR-UOS is handling the application and selection procedures for its programmes and projects based on mainstream practices in the scientific community on the one hand, but also on development aid practices on the other. The methodological framework is embedded in the Project Cycle Management (PCM), adapted from the PCM used by the EU for its own development projects (European Commission 2004). Although a comparative study on application and selection amongst different granting organizations and between the different VLIR-UOS programmes still demonstrated disparity in procedures (Span Consultants 2008), there is a general movement of convergence amongst organizations and within organizations to simplify and harmonize such procedures, in order to meet the principles set out by the Paris Declaration (2005) and the Accra Agenda (2008).

The selection will take into account a set of criteria applied on the project proposal, but also on the national and international contexts, such as the country, the partner institution, the partnership, the adherence to internationally agreed principles as worked out by the Paris Declaration (2005), the Accra Agenda (2008), the Millennium Development Goals (see *e.g.* European Commission 2005) and the Belgian formal cooperation framework. Some political economy issues, such as possible hidden and double agendas, the power structures, the level of corruption, the justice system, the democratic institutions, the (lack of) political checks and balances, the fungibility trappings are much more difficult to assess, but might play a role in the selection if some elements are known. The national contextualization is important, as well as the existing complementarity and synergy with existing initiatives by VLIR-UOS and other donors. Criteria range from quality of the proposal, to developmental relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, feasibility and sustainability. Other criteria such as ethics and human rights, ecological sustainability and gender balance are *de facto* screened for conformity with the mission and vision of VLIR-UOS.

Identification and Formulation

A project can only be written after a proper identification process, including the first contacts of the partners around an idea of cooperation, followed by a stakeholder analysis, a problem and objectives' tree analysis. This identification process is the first step in the process of the project cycle. The next step is the formulation phase with the definition of the five pillars of a programme, as expressed in the logical framework: (i) general and specific objectives, academic and developmental, (ii) intermediate results and corresponding activities, (iii) corresponding objectively verifiable indicators, (iv) sources of verification, and (v) assumptions. This should be linked to a coherent budget according to financial guidelines per budget line and a time line in the shape of an operational plan. This project identification and formulation ensures a proper guarantee for local contextualization and demand-drivenness and an *ex ante* identification of objectives — academic and developmental — in view of future monitoring and evaluations. Obviously, the project proposal should adhere to the guidelines as formulated in the call concerning eligibility and formats.

Depending on the scope and the scale of the programme, a call can either be launched for a full-fledged project proposal, which includes the identification and formulation process, or limited to a call for intention first, which excludes the formulation or additional identification steps. This tiered method is useful for large projects, because it allows VLIR-UOS to define a formal funding framework in order to support the multi-stakeholder formulation mission in the South. The identification of a large IUC programme (Institutional University Cooperation) can be backed up by a mission by external consultants (*e.g.* DE NOOIJER & SOUTHWOOD 2008). The mission is intended to deliver an appraisal of the visited universities using information provided by VLIR-UOS, locally collected information as well as an on-site verification and qualification of the data obtained. The mission formulates a recommendation to VLIR-UOS concerning the extent to which the visited universities and proposed partnerships meet the IUC criteria and expectations of VLIR-UOS in view of the IUC programme objectives and modalities. The formulation is often backed up by a resource person from VLIR-UOS who provides support for the compliance to the guidelines, but also assists in formulating a quality logframe. These identification and formulation phases are essential for a maximalization of the success rate of a future project.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Once a project has been selected by the selection committee and confirmed by the VLIR-UOS Steering Committee, the partners and VLIR-UOS will sign a cooperation agreement defining the period, budget, planning, objectives, deliverables and the rights and duties of each party. The projects, once started, need reg-

ular monitoring. This happens through steering committee meetings in North and South, and jointly. Once a year an annual narrative and financial report, and the planning for the following year, are submitted to VLIR-UOS. This is the occasion for VLIR-UOS to check whether the decisions taken at the steering committees have been implemented. Moreover, the report for a particular year is checked against the planning for that year. Regular field monitoring visits, often combined with a joint steering committee meeting, but also organized to mediate in conflicts or bottlenecks, add to this monitoring process by VLIR-UOS.

Large Institutional University Cooperation (IUC) programmes are regularly evaluated, *i.e.* at the end of a first phase of five years, the midterm evaluation (*e.g.* VAES & DELVAUX 2011), and at the end of the second phase of five years, the end-of-programme evaluation (*e.g.* DE NOOIJER & ABAGI 2009). The midterm evaluation allows for the possibility to list the accomplished outputs by means of a number of Key Result Areas (KRAs) on teaching, research, extension and outreach, human resources, management, mobility and infrastructure and to remediate “*en cours de route*” into projects with dysfunctions at the level of procurement, implementation or human resources (mandates). The end-of-programme evaluation gives the occasion to present all output by means of the KRAs. Evaluation moments often include a symposium with the presentation of all results generated by the scientific research of Masters and PhDs.

At a higher level, VLIR-UOS also organizes “country-impact evaluations” in order to assess the impact of a whole set of programmes over an extended period in a particular country. This has been done for Vietnam and Ethiopia (PENNY & TEFERRA 2010, VISSER & LAP 2011). Internal evaluations of own programmes are also regularly commissioned, such as *e.g.* a review on Ethiopian alumni (Amdamu Management Consultancy 2006), a review of the Own Initiatives (STESSENS 2006) or a review of ICT projects (CARPENTER *et al.* 2007).

The country, midterm and end-of-programme evaluations are carried out by an evaluation team consisting of an international expert and a local consultant, and backed by a VLIR-UOS programme officer. Both consultants are recruited by VLIR-UOS, following a tender. They are contracted according to Terms of References. Their evaluation consists of a number of steps: (i) desk study of all available documents, (ii) study of self-assessments, (iii) interviews of Northern and Southern stakeholders, and (iv) visit of the local partner university and all the projects. The self-assessments are formats with a number of questions and a scoring system, to be filled in separately by the Northern team, the Southern team (programme formats) and each project (Northern and Southern teams combined, project formats).

Once the evaluation by the external consultants finished, VLIR-UOS will consolidate the evaluation report with all concerned in order to come to a final report. In the case of a midterm, this report will formulate recommendations, availed by the Board (Bureau UOS) for the formulation of the second phase of the IUC programme. The follow-up to the evaluation is the responsibility of VLIR-UOS.

Challenges

“Developmental relevance” is a fluid concept, which may differ from donor to donor, according to the country, the partner institution or the programme. The difficulty of measuring the “impact” of “development relevant projects” is well known in the development literature (*e.g.* JERVE & VILLANGER 2008). The evaluations are excellent at measuring what has been done (results, output, KRAs), and at allocating scores (*e.g.* bad, good, excellent, better than planned, etc.), giving a sense of objectivity and quantitative appreciation, but the real impact at the level of the individual, the department, the campus, the university, the local area and at regional and national levels, the society, is hard to materialize and quantify (see *e.g.* BAKER 2000, World Bank 2006). How do we measure “intellectual products”, how do we isolate the impact of the VLIR-UOS contributions from other interventions, or from the period before the programme? What is the valorization of the involvement of individuals in a scientific career? What is the average cost of an intellectual product? Is this linked to a specific location, or should it be seen as a mobile value? This touches the issues of brain drain, brain gain and brain circulation.

VLIR-UOS is a continuously learning organization. It not only needs to react to changing policies at the national and international levels, but also has to be constantly on the alert for the latest new insights in best practices in *e.g.* administration, Human Resources, financial control, participative workshop methods, public relations, monitoring and evaluation methodologies. Optimization of the systems in place is an ongoing and never ending open process. At the same time it needs to show continuity with policies and administrative processes in order to ensure a stable and predictable environment.

Globalization and the financial crisis have a direct impact on how industrialized countries view their development aid in terms of contents and budgets. Universities also go global and enter the arena of global competition for quality rankings and recruitment of the best students worldwide. It is the challenge and the core business of an organization like VLIR-UOS to constantly benchmark its systems against and in accordance to these dynamic changes in a multi-stakeholder environment.

An example of challenge at the level of VLIR-UOS is the elaboration of country strategies and programmes in order to meet the new DGD policy on more thematic focus in less countries. Another issue, closely associated with country programmes, is the transformation of programme-specific selection committees into regional commissions responsible for all programmes within a particular region.

As a token of this dynamism in the world of development cooperation, at the time the present paper is being written on the basis of a conference held in 2009, not only the whole IUC project cycle of ten years is under review, but also the programme approach is being transformed into a country approach *anno* 2011-2012.

Conclusion

Rather than being centered on its own functioning, VLIR-UOS strives to stay in contact and cooperate with national and international organizations (*e.g.* CUD-CIUF, ITM, KMMA, NUFFIC), several international and regional academic member organizations (*e.g.* EUA (European University Association)), and works in alliances with a number of organizations with similar and complementary interests, such as Close The Gap, International Foundation for Science (IFS, Sweden) and International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP, UK). As summarized in the proceedings of the VLIR-UOS IUC policy workshop of March 2008, “only a self-assessing, flexible and dynamic set of programmes from the donor side in alignment with the local structures and in coordination with other bi- and multilateral donors will be able to face the challenges ahead. The buzz word is ‘sustainability’, both in terms of staff retention as institutional finances and educational policy continuity” (JANSSENS DE BISTHOVEN 2008). As formulated by LIE (2005), or in the spirit of the EUA “white paper” (2010), “the aim of all cooperation is the achievement of greater strength through the pooling of resources. This applies to academic cooperation, ..., the building of research and educational cooperation requires long-term commitment”.

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