Naji Brigui

DESIGNING SOVEREIGN COOPERATION IN TVET

Principles, Methods and Tools for Africa



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Foreword

Throughout his professional career, the author has held a variety of roles in international development cooperation, including consultant, expert and project manager. His responsibilities have included preparing and responding to calls for tenders, drafting terms of reference, bringing consortia together, and recruiting and mobilising experts. This has enabled him to examine interventions from the perspectives of beneficiary institutions, implementation teams and organisations developing technical proposals. The diversity of these responsibilities gives his analysis particular relevance: it informs his understanding of how priorities are negotiated, responsibilities allocated and dependencies created. Professional experience is not treated as proof in itself, however, and remains subject to critical examination and documentary verification throughout this book.

Rethinking Cooperation from the Perspective of Those Who Must Shape Its Future

International development cooperation generates projects, mobilises funding, organises technical expertise and develops instruments intended to strengthen institutions. It helps establish training centres, prepare professionals, develop curricula, modernise equipment and support reforms.

These achievements are visible, measurable and often necessary. They reflect the commitment of numerous national and international actors who devote their knowledge and resources to improving education systems and productive capacities.

Yet behind planned activities and reported achievements lies a more fundamental question, one that frequently remains unanswered: what becomes of an intervention when those who financed, designed or supported it are no longer involved?

This question concerns more than the physical maintenance of equipment, the operation of institutions or the availability of financial resources. It concerns the ability of national institutions to make decisions, understand and adapt technical systems, assess outcomes and, when circumstances require it, transform the arrangements for which they have become responsible.

A training centre may have been built without securing the resources needed for its long-term operation. An occupational standard may have been approved without being fully understood by those expected to revise it. A public administration may have participated in every programme meeting without acquiring meaningful influence over strategic decisions. A project may have achieved all its contractual objectives while leaving intact the institutional and technical dependencies it was supposed to reduce.

Conversely, relatively modest interventions can generate lasting benefits when they enable national teams to develop their own methods, strengthen professional capabilities and acquire the means to continue their work independently of the original support arrangement.

The difference between these situations calls for more than a general judgement of success or failure.

It requires us to reconsider what development cooperation effectiveness actually means.

The Overlooked Question: Who Really Controls Development?

For several decades, international organisations, development agencies, development banks and partner governments have affirmed their commitment to country ownership, capacity development, alignment with national policies and the sustainability of interventions.

These principles represent important advances in international thinking about development cooperation. They have influenced the language and, in some contexts, the practices of the organisations concerned.

Their operational application, however, continues to raise difficult questions.

A ministry's participation in project formulation does not necessarily mean that it determined the priorities being pursued. Consultation with social partners does not auto-

matically give them meaningful influence. Recruiting national experts does not guarantee their involvement in strategic decisions. Training institutional staff does not ensure that their organisations possess the financial, regulatory and managerial capacity to use the skills acquired.

There is a fundamental difference between being involved in an intervention and exercising genuine control over its direction.

This distinction can be difficult to recognise because cooperation procedures increasingly incorporate formal signs of participation: steering committees, validation workshops, consultations, partnership agreements, capacity-development plans and coordination mechanisms.

Such arrangements can support genuine ownership. They can also become procedures through which decisions already taken elsewhere acquire an appearance of shared legitimacy.

The essential question, therefore, is not simply whether national institutions are present in the process. It is what they can actually decide, change, reject or sustain.

This distinction lies at the heart of the present book.

Why Technical and Vocational Education and Training?

Technical and vocational education and training occupies a distinctive position within development policies.

TVET brings together education, work, enterprise development, technological change, social policy and the economic organisation of territories.

Training a technician, craftsperson, farmer, healthcare professional, maintenance specialist or entrepreneur involves more than transferring technical knowledge and practical skills.

It requires an understanding of the productive activities that training is expected to support, the conditions under which those activities take place, the economic prospects of local territories, people's aspirations and the actual opportunities available for using acquired skills.

A training policy is unlikely to remain relevant if it is disconnected from productive structures and the social conditions in which people live and work.

This requirement is especially significant across African countries, whose economies, institutions, professional traditions and historical trajectories are highly diverse.

Africa is neither a homogeneous economic system nor a single institutional environment. The realities of North Africa differ from those of the Sahel, coastal West Africa, Central Africa, the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa. Within individual countries, differences between major cities, secondary urban centres and rural areas can be considerable.

The relationships between formal education, traditional apprenticeship, wage employment, self-employment and the informal economy also vary across sectors and territories.

It would therefore be methodologically unsound to assume that an institutional or pedagogical model that has proved effective in one environment can be reproduced elsewhere without examining the conditions that made it work.

An apprenticeship system is not merely an arrangement for alternating learning between a training institution and a workplace. It also depends on social relationships, financing arrangements, supervisory capacities, certification mechanisms and the recognition of occupational skills.

Similarly, competency-based education and training is not simply a matter of producing competency standards. It requires an analysis of real occupational activities, the design of relevant learning situations, the ability to assess learning outcomes and institutions capable of updating qualifications as work evolves.

These conditions are not secondary technical details.

They determine whether lasting ownership is possible.

Sovereignty as Capacity, Not Proclamation

The concept of sovereignty carries considerable political and symbolic weight and is open to different interpretations.

In this book, it is used neither as a synonym for economic self-sufficiency nor as a justification for national isolation or the systematic rejection of external expertise.

Sovereign cooperation does not imply that a country must generate all its knowledge internally, finance every innovation independently or disregard experience developed elsewhere.

International knowledge exchange, scientific collaboration, foreign investment and solidarity between societies can make important contributions to development.

Sovereignty is understood here as an effective capacity: the capacity to determine priorities, select partners, choose between alternative solutions, mobilise relevant knowledge, exercise control over resources and adapt institutional arrangements as circumstances change.

It includes the ability to negotiate meaningfully, even when the proposals of a financial or technical partner appear attractive.

It also requires a clear distinction between the legal ownership of a system and the actual capacity to control it.

A public administration may formally own an information system without possessing the expertise required to modify it. A national certification authority may be responsible for occupational qualifications while remaining dependent on external consultants to update its standards. A training institution may possess modern equipment without being able to maintain, replace or adapt it.

Sovereignty must therefore be examined across strategic, institutional, technical, economic and evaluative dimensions.

It cannot, however, be reduced to the authority of the state alone.

National administrations have essential responsibilities for defining and regulating public policies. Yet their decisions do not necessarily reflect the full range of social and territorial needs.

Informal workers, women, rural youth, craftspeople, small enterprises, local governments and community organisations may remain distant from the decision-making processes through which programmes supposedly designed for their benefit are developed.

Sovereign cooperation must consequently be accompanied by requirements of legitimacy, inclusion and public accountability.

A country's ability to make its own decisions does not, by itself, guarantee that those decisions are appropriate or equitable.

Strengthening sovereignty must therefore go hand in hand with strengthening participation, transparency and accountability.