

SUSTAINABILITY OF SPECIALIST ASSIGNMENTS OF COMUNDO IN THE CONTEXT OF PERSONNEL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION IN LATIN AMERICA

Experience capitalisation project



SUMMARY

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Josef Estermann
Basics & Research
COMUNDO



The author **Josef Estermann** runs the "Basics & Research" support unit at COMUNDO and has 17 years' experience of specialist assignments in Peru and Bolivia.

COMUNDO is a Swiss organisation working in the field of personnel development cooperation and is currently sustained by the Bethlehem Mission Immensee (BMI) and InterAgire (IA).

<http://www.comundo.org>



Unité is the Swiss association for the exchange of personnel in development cooperation and represents its member organisations vis-à-vis the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the broader public and international organisations.

<http://www.unite-ch.org>

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SUMMARY

This final report on the experience capitalisation project carried out in 2017 summarises the objectives, approach and results of a survey among 20 partner organisations of COMUNDO in the four countries of assignment in Latin America (Nicaragua, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia). For practical reasons (the same language), the study focused only on this geographic region, but as it is highly representative and the research focus is relatively free of any specific context, the findings are important for all COMUNDO's partner organisations as well as for the question of the sustainability of personnel assignments in the context of personnel development cooperation as a whole. The study should also provide a general guide for assessing the impact of personnel assignments to Unité for the Swiss context and to other umbrella organisations involved in personnel development cooperation for the international context.

It should generally be noted that almost all partner organisations believe that personnel development cooperation is a good and serviceable tool of global cooperation and global learning. To ensure the sustainability of specialist assignments, certain factors are essential or at least helpful, and their lack is an impediment to success. The helpful factors include good preparation by the specialist, their conduct as a role model for the team and the beneficiary population, coherence between the programmes of the sending agency (COMUNDO) and the partner organisations, coherence between the description of the project and the actual assignment, a good work climate at the partner organisation, and the financial stability of the project for which the specialist is working. The impeding factors include the possibility of competition between the specialist and local employees, a lack of "inculturation" of the specialist, the long selection period until the specialist leaves the country, complex reporting procedures, lack of continuity in cooperation, lack of clarity regarding the actual target group(s), and negative changes in political and financial framework conditions for the partner organisation.

According to the survey, it is not the duration of the partnership between COMUNDO and the partner organisations that ensures a sustainable impact, but rather the degree of "consolidation" of the partner organisation(s) (their duration of existence and stability) at the time of the specialist assignment. Consecutive assignments by specialists (i.e. with direct succession) were generally seen as conducive for achieving a sustainable impact, in particular where the project focuses on trying to change attitudes and mindset. The general view regarding the (ideal) duration of a specialist assignment is that the more the assignment focuses on the strengthening and consolidation of the partner organisation(s) and on efforts to change attitudes and mindset, the longer the assignment should be (four or more years). The ideal duration is shorter (two to three years) for specific contributions such as IT optimisation, organisational development and knowledge transfer.

Although the "sustainability" of assignments was primarily studied in the context of "sphere of influence 1", the partner organisations also partly ascribed the (indirect) impact on the beneficiary population ("sphere of influence 2") to the specialist assignment. The following "success factors" for **sphere of influence 1** took centre stage:

- Strong and solid organisations
- Established and documented procedures
- Motivated and unified team
- Structured working methods
- Empowerment of local employees
- Expanded and strengthened network
- Methodical innovation
- Intercultural learning curve
- Better and more clear-cut implementation of project cycle (planning, implementation and evaluation)
- Expansion of horizons
- International solidarity

The following "success factors" for **sphere of influence 2** took centre stage:

- Creation of awareness (*toma de conciencia*) of the personal situation
- Persons with broader competencies (*mejor capacitados/as*)
- Organisations that function better
- Improved ability to respond positively to criticism
- Increased sense of initiative
- Empowerment as citizens

It has become clear that quantitative methods alone are not sufficient in the long term to measure the impact of personnel assignments, but must be bolstered by qualitative and participatory methods supported by narrative and audiovisual tools. Generally speaking, many partner organisations associate "cultural conditioning" with the usual methods of measuring success in development cooperation and emphasise the importance of so-called "soft" factors such as role model function, engagement, inculturation and social skills.

Lessons learnt for the partner organisations:

- Importance of intercultural dialogue and learning
- Increased understanding of cultural differences
- Stricter and clearer planning, implementation and evaluation of projects
- Importance of engagement (*compromiso social*) and option for the poor and disadvantaged
- Priority of methodical approaches to work
- Necessity of constant further education

Recommendations for future assignments:

- Shorten the process of selection and preparation for future specialists
- Simplify reporting procedures and focus on contents
- Pay even more heed to the intercultural skills of specialists
- Pay attention to coherence between the objectives of partner organisations and sending agencies
- It is imperative to maintain the option for the poor and disadvantaged