



From Self-Help to Empowerment: Fragments of Interpretation

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In the frame of a process of learning, systematization of experiences and conceptual clarification undertaken by SDC's West Africa Section (SAO) and Social Development Division, the author was given a mandate with the objective of explaining the evolution of the SAO's choices and the ways in which they were implemented with regards to the evolution of the contexts, both within the partner countries and within development thinking.¹

This text, complementary to Jean-Luc Alber's which is focused more on empowerment itself, briefly outlines the history of a concept : self-help. According to a majority of people whom the author met, self-help and empowerment are closely linked. As Jean-Luc Virchaux explained: "In 1990 we used the term self-help, in 2000 we used the term empowerment." This allows the author to postulate that self-help was an "ancestor" of empowerment in the West Africa Section. The present contribution is constructed on the basis of this hypothesis, which justifies the choice to develop it around the concept of self-help. The research begins in the 1970s, when the first disillusionments about "development aid" became too loud and present in the media to be ignored and ends with an independent evaluation of SDC mandated in 2005 ("*Independent Evaluation of SDC'S performance towards empowerment of stakeholders from the recipients' perspective*").

The author has worked on "fragments of interpretation" to avoid any pretension of exhaustiveness: this text is not the definitive point of reference that still remains to be written about self-help. It takes a fragmentary and fragmented approach, the author having freely decided to spend more time on some subjects than on others. He hopes that this approach will open some paths for reflection which will allow a better understanding of the evolution of the West Africa Section's choices. These fragments are also the result of his interpretations, if only through his choice of citations and the manner in which they are used. The author also extensively quotes certain writers, hoping thereby to transmit the wealth of their reflections and to inspire, perhaps, some readers to seek out more from these writers.

This text is composed of six fragments of interpretation

- The first fragment reviews the criticisms leveled at traditional projects since the 1970s, projects that were claimed to "make beneficiaries passive." Beyond these "classical" critiques, the way of conducting these projects – the "practice of aid" – is examined and the concept of the specificity of projects is introduced.
- The second fragment debates two proposals dating from the same period: abandoning aid in favor of support and promoting an endogenous – rather than exogenous- development, both with the aim of focusing development interventions on those who are its ultimate beneficiaries.
- Following these proposals and critiques of the practice of aid, Lecomte, a consultant who worked with SDC at the time, developed four strategies for self-help in 1978 : support social innovators, finance them through flexible funds, support capacities for initiative on the ground and prepare cooperation activities for this change. This is the subject of the third fragment.

¹ This is a summary in English of the paper « De l'autopromotion à l'empowerment: fragments d'interprétation », which is available to download at: http://www.poverty-wellbeing.net/en/Home/Empowerment/Experience_and_Practice/West_Africa



- The next two fragments return to self-help in light of the analyses made, on the one hand by the West Africa Division in 1989 (at the Bossey workshop) and, on the other hand, the Sahel Club in 1997. The Bossey workshop marks the apotheosis of self-help, at the limits of self-congratulations for a development practice! Ten years later, the Sahel Club analyzed and validated the principles of self-help.
- In the form of a conclusion, the last fragment explores the link between self-help and empowerment. In comparing them, we note that on the one hand empowerment, in any case as it is understood in the Independent Evaluation, has freed itself from the collective dimension of self-help to go towards a more individualistic approach, an approach which could force those working in development cooperation to transform themselves into cooperation technicians, rather than into development actors. On the other hand, the absence of a quantitative or external evaluation of self-help projects is as striking as the lack of theoretical elements explaining or justifying them. In the last thirty years, requirements concerning evaluations have radically increased and it is no longer possible to carry out projects as it was done in the past. Nevertheless, this evolution is not without risk, a “fetish” for results and their measurement can bring us back to where we started this reflection: again leaving local actors passive.

