OPTIMISING TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL FORESTRY SPECIALISTS

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Abstract

The reader is asked to consider this brief article as an aide-memoire *to improved candidate selection and results planning related to short-term study tour or training opportunities. From personal experience amply supported by the experience of hundreds of trainees and trainers (and even sundry donors and hosts), there evidently has been — and still is — a frequent disconnect between the upgrading needs of personnel as differently perceived by the personnel themselves, their supervisors and managers, as well as the agency which has committed to funding and/or delivering some training. This article offers a reflection on a mechanism of systematic training preparation, with suggested complimentary measures taken during the training period and their post training follow ups in order to optimise the benefits of the training for both the trainees and the institutions.*

Keywords: systematic training preparation, sending and host institution responsibilities.

Abbreviations

SI---"Sending Institution": the institution, government or non-government office or organisation interested in or preparing to send staff for upgrading training.

HI---"Host Institution": the training agency that is planning to host the trainees.

Introduction

Certain assumptions have been made: it has been taken for granted that Sending Institution (SI) supervisors, managers and the candidates themselves have an understanding of the distinctions between and integrative advantages of personal, team and organisational improvement. Therefore the thrust of this advisory *aide memoire* is not to rehash the reasons for needing

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upgrading, but rather to focus on a process for fair candidate selection, appropriate subject matter development and assiduous application of what has been learned.

My ensuing advice is based upon pre-training discussions individually with key personnel, such as Deans and other senior faculty at universities with social forestry programmes; Directors and senior field officers in government service; as well as Managers and senior specialists in commercial enterprises. These were followed up with pre-training discussions with potential training candidates in various programmes, and all selected candidates both individually and in a group within those programmes, together with pre-training reviews of completed questionnaires by selected trainees.

Next, I had engaged in post-training discussions with all returning trainees individually in a trainees' group as well as in a larger group with invited other staff. Finally, to complement the understanding gleaned from the preceding discussions, I held post-training discussions with training Supervisors, Coordinators, Trainers and in many cases, Executives.

Pre-Training – who selects what...and how?

Even in cases of adequate and thorough planning done in consultation with and approved by local SI management, adherence to an accepted selection and preparatory process can become considerably diluted. The candidate selection process may often only accidentally include anyone based on merit or need; more often, such process is undertaken to dampen internal bureaucratic or social pressures. Selection, therefore, must rest on not only seniority, personal relationships or which political party one is affiliated with, but as well on a number of objective criteria that would, in the end, improve personal effectiveness together with enhanced SI programme quality.

Sample objective criteria could include a potential candidate's current position and status in the organisation; his or her spoken and written language level abilities *vis à vis* training programme requirements; perhaps no previous exposure to the probable HI so as to give others a chance to participate; previously concluded training and its outcome; for certain courses, any number of essential technical knowledge, e.g. Mathematics, Computing, Technical English etc.; cultural sensitivity and other relational adaptability; demonstrable relevance of the training to efficiency, effectiveness and other performance gaps; the actual or potential change of position and/or responsibilities on return to SI committed to pre-training.

Questionnaires <u>must</u> to be developed for seeking personal insights as to why one aspires for further training, what gaps there are in improving work requirements and what topics in particular might be of benefit; these ought to be completed by supervisors or managers as well as candidate trainees. By

both supervisors and potential trainees providing their respective insights, the exercise would serve, together with relevant follow-up discussions, to round out perceptions about one's responsibilities within the SI and to thereby also highlight actual areas of training needed to meet individual and institutional objectives. The outcome of such confirmation must then be corroborated by the HI, so as to ensure the ability and willingness of the HI to deliver a programme that suits SI needs. This could be addressed by an off-the-shelf programme; a programme altered from the original concept; or an altogether newly developed curriculum.

This last point is an integral step. What needs were expressed by some trainees have frequently been perceived not to have been later met through the foreign experiences because of the somewhat different topic suggestions from the HIs. In other words, donor or sponsoring agencies often propose subjects for which they already have an in-stock programme; alternatively they might seek to influence the expressed needs of SI staff so as to dovetail them into already prepared courses which require as little alteration as possible; and only rarely would a programme be fully customised.

Sometimes such efforts may be quite legitimate, and certainly many HIs are willing and able to help clarify actual over expressed or perceived needs. Were the clarification honest and correct, it may be immaterial whether the training programme and curriculum had been pre-conceived. However, my caution remains: SIs must ensure that staff are to receive training that would be directly appurtenant and beneficial, not something that has been developed for another continent in a completely different context by experts unfamiliar with the SI culture wherein new learning is expected to be introduced and applied. This responsibility rests most emphatically with the SI.

Pre-Training – how to prepare

My concern is not so much with individuals who have the wherewithal, initiative, connections, donor familiarity and authority to pursue their own, individual training opportunities. Rather, my interest is in systematising both group training opportunities as well as similar individual training prospects so as to optimise the beneficial results for both trainees and their respective SIs.

One of the functions within any SI ought to be the responsibility for certain administrative facilitation of arrangements, especially when dealing with first-time travellers. Despite particular errands being possibly regarded as an individual responsibility, there need be comprehensive advice prepared and shared with candidates. I have encountered situations wherein trainees had to run around up to 2 days before departing (one of them 1 day prior to departure) for visas, foreign exchange information and such work, only

because they had no previous travel experience and instructions from their SI office were irresponsibly delayed.

In view of the preceding, a major pre-departure responsibility of the SI is the setting up of an SI "sending review committee" with a serious interest, ability and willingness to:

1. Prepare and administer a 1-day, thorough "needs' assessment workshop" to confirm the coinciding requirements of personnel and the organisation.
2. Prepare and facilitate a minimum ½ day (depending on the HI location, number of candidates, complexity of logistics and HI venue arrangements) pre-departure orientation focusing on the HI, its programme for the incoming personnel; anticipated androgogical differences; local socio-cultural and political conditions with any related protocol, safety or other behavioural cautions; language issues and so on.

Again, from my experience, there have been –and undoubtedly still are-- thousands of trainees sent abroad without any reassurance or even hint as to how, on return, their insightful new knowledge would be appreciated and opportunities provided to apply and practice the same; nor having a clue as to the place where they would be spending days, weeks, or months in training. This amounts to institutional negligence: not only would such laxness make travellers possibly uncomfortable and apprehensive, but having to spend more time in adjusting to a different culture and instructional modalities inevitably interferes with their subject-specific retention; hence, less optimisation of the experience.

In one classic case of institutional lassitude at a university, a pre-arranged 1 day needs' assessment *cum* pre-departure orientation workshop (already too short for the number of people being sent and the very different overseas host country culture) was chopped down to 1 hour with less than a day's notice! Such short briefing for professionals undertaking serious training in a country they had never before visited was grossly inadequate, and the consequences showed in their resulting frustrations on return in attempting to apply their new knowledge and skills.

Training Period

Although with the utmost preparatory attention the training provided may not always match the demonstrable needs, most trainees would still be excited by the exposure to foreign institutions and optimistic about being able to instigate some change. Discussions with previous trainees confirm that while they may pick up several useful ideas and have even thought through which may or may not be applicable in their home countries, there need be complementary, realistic and practical ways to introduce and follow through on changes. In this vein, the HI should incorporate regular synthesising sessions throughout and integrated with the training, so as to allow iterative

discussions on how to best apply what has been learned, and to then consolidate all the ideas at the end of the training.

Exit profiles of participants should clearly demonstrate the level of improvement in knowledge, skills, cognitive abilities, general skills and aptitudes as well as specific outcomes.

Post-Training

As essential as the pre-departure orientation is, the obverse is a thorough post-training debriefing at the HI, followed by one at the SI. The recorded summaries at both sites should be shared, consolidated and acted upon! In fact, a facilitated strategy session with the returning trainees should be compulsory as a follow up to the debriefing to discuss how to act upon the debriefing points within a realistic timeline. Assuring a match between HI and SI evaluations complemented by a match between pre-training plans for applying new learning and post-training related decisions speak for the integrity of resources spent on staff.

Let me be clear: not all returnees will have usable ideas; not all ideas are capable of being introduced; some proposed new ideas may be irrelevant or untimely to certain organizations; not all acceptable changes require or deserve personnel promotions or salary increases. But, if gaps in individual, team and organisational perspectives had been honestly and correctly analysed; if resulting objectives for staff upgrading were dovetailed with the gaps and the actual training imparted practical resolutions or improved processes, then the SI is ethically obligated to capitalise on the returnees who could improve the triad of individual-team-institutional quality.

As often the introduction of even minor suggested changes in the home system may meet resistance, I strongly suggest that an HI "Alumni" group meet at least thrice yearly to keep relevant HI acquired momentum going. As well, staff meetings focusing on the planned introduction of mutually agreed, necessary and beneficial changes (from whatever domestic or foreign source) must be established as a ritual. Alumni groups need not be restricted to the same HI, as sometimes there may be only one or two people who had attended the same training abroad; thus an Alumni inclusive of all foreign trained staff within one's department or other unit makes more sense. The intent is to create and sustain a critical mass of like-minded personnel who have returned refreshed and enthused with novel –but as yet, perhaps, locally untried--ideas, and who for a limited time remain interested in contributing their suggestions to a management that listens.

I say "limited time": from my experience, returnees with substantial new learning engage in a typical cycle of trying to communicate how their learning could be beneficial to the system (*i.e.* organisation or curriculum); if it becomes clear that no superior is interested (this could be from the first week

back and up to even another year or two, depending on one's stamina!), the staff member progressively slides back into the previously engrained work modalities; finally, depending on confidence and other criteria, personnel might actively seek employment elsewhere. It should be instructive to note that it was, indeed, often the "previous work modalities" in the first place that had admitted to performance gaps which ostensibly led to supporting further education. If a commitment via a locally and mutually acceptable process could not be produced prior to the training, or cannot be subsequently adhered to, then a planned and executed training or tour exposure is an unwarranted sham (or, at times, a politically necessary stratagem!).

Undoubtedly a variety of training reports might be requested by the various stakeholders, specifically the SIs and His as well as donor agency (if any). In order to not overburden the participants, especially as they will in most cases need to quickly return to work, it would be advisable for the stakeholders to coordinate reporting requirements. A coordinated reporting format could be developed and distributed to participants at the start of training so that their notes could conform to that format, thus requiring as little rewriting as possible for their final reports.

Home institutions and organisations should plan annual follow-up trainings complementary to training already received outside the SI or the country. In most cases, follow-ups should be local (at the farthest, regional), as high quality training is often available locally and certainly regionally, and would be considerably more cost-effective than sending people overseas. The use of tax money to serve motives which are ulterior to the desired outcome is unethical.

Conclusion

Sending staff for any type of upgrading or refreshing training should not be a perfunctory exercise. In-service training must be properly assessed as to needs, participants selected must be integral to closing the noted gaps and an SI must commit to a serious effort to incorporate relevant new learning. All training itself must, for the sake of ethics, cost-effectiveness and impact, be based on needs which can be identified and met through a process previously outlined. Once actual individual and organizational needs have been identified and training matched, there must be overt and sustained encouragement for allowing returnees more input into planned change strategies and corresponding support for keeping their acquired momentum going.

Exposure to another country's systems needs to include at least a limited understanding of the context in which those systems thrive, in order to support better analysis, reflection and comprehension as to whether any new learning be adaptable in one's home country and, specifically, SI; a month or

less is usually insufficient for this because the time required for any serious study it simply would and could not allow for the extra time required to research, analyse, investigate, enquire, triangulate, practice, confirm and reflect on the ethnobureaucracy.

By the same token, HIs must plan training while considering the SI's socio-cultural-political context in order to plan as tailored a programme as possible to the reality of the SI.

A comprehensive sequential chart is appended as an illustrative, "adaptable-to-one's-own-context" template to organising study tours or formal upgrading training abroad. Although developed in 1994, with iterative contextual and procedural adjustments it has proven appropriate and useful on many occasions since then.

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Appendix. Illustrative Process Template for Organizing Formal Training
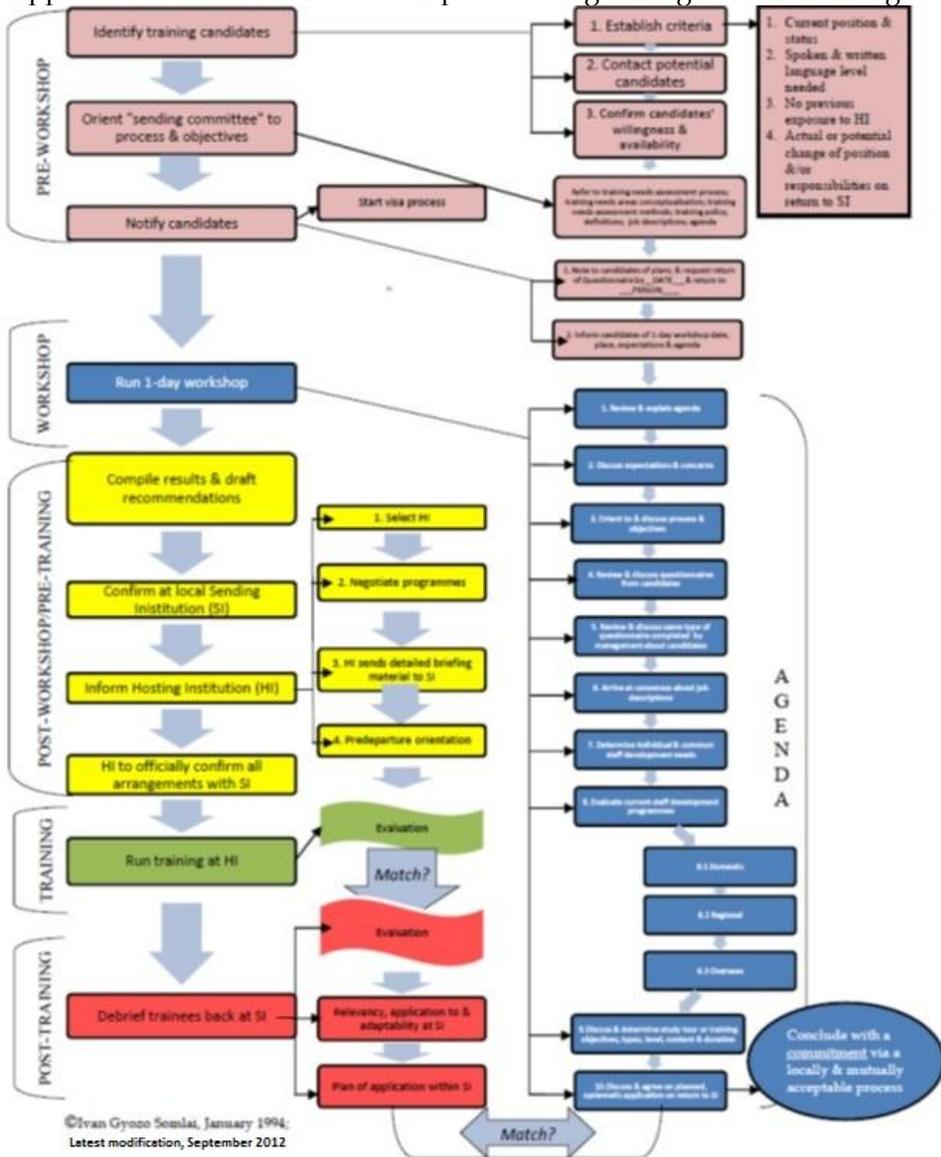
Notes: Based on discussions and personal preparatory consultation for training as well as reviews of related and selected Final Reports (see References, above) with international projects in discrete sectors, including: Bangladesh (forestry), Canada (health, administration, management), China (management), Indonesia (social forestry), Jamaica (technical and administrative), Malaysia (forestry), Mongolia (education, technical), Nepal (health, faculty administration, forest and wildfire management), Pakistan (governance, social services), Russia (management, organisational development), Slovakia (social development), Vietnam (technical). Ideas and critiques within this paper were gleaned from a composite of comments from the selected reports above as well as personal experience.