A brief reflection on 'Innovation' in Development Cooperation

The effectiveness of Development Cooperation is under increased scrutiny. Many donor agencies and NGOs address this challenge by focusing on innovative approaches. The rationale is that Development Assistance should not be invested into routine operations, but should mainly be used to find the solutions to a broad range of challenges that the partners (countries) face.

Accordingly, 'innovation' has become a major criterion for the assessment of projects and programs. This article examines how realistic and relevant this demand for innovation is.

What is innovation?
The first question is whether we are clear about the nature of innovation or whether it is just a catchword. According to OECD / DAC:

Innovation is the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization or external relations.

We can easily agree to this definition, as we would say that this is exactly what (good) development cooperation is about. This leads to the next question that is more difficult to answer.

How does innovation happen?
If innovation should be a deliberate approach of Development Cooperation, we should be clear on how we can make it happen. The points of departure for innovation are:

- The product or service to solve a problem does not yet exist – needs to be invented.
- The currently available solution is not sufficient to solve a problem – needs to be improved or replaced by an innovation.

The history of some exceptional products shows that innovation is not necessarily a thing that can be planned. There are typical examples where a new product, service or approach is invented, but:

- its use is not recognized (the glue that later was used for the post-it notes).
- there is no use for it (probably true for most of the innovations shown at innovators' messes)
- its too expensive and/or nobody will invest in it.

Thus, innovation is obviously about bringing problems and solutions together. Accordingly, we can distinguish broadly 4 types of innovations.
This categorization points at different ways of innovation happening:

- **‘Enlightment’**: the solution is suddenly obvious
- Re-arranging, combining existing elements to possible solutions
- Research and development: A systematic management of ‘innovation’, either by:
  - systematic analysis that ultimately leads to a solution or
  - systematic ‘trial and error’, i.e. producing ‘solutions’ to the point where the one matching the problem is found.

**What does this imply for Development Cooperation?**

- **It is easier said than done.**

The observation implies that the word ‘innovative’ is trifled with in Development Cooperation. While there are plenty of concept papers on all kinds of issues nothing of this sort exists for ‘innovation’. The word appears in strategies and documents without explanations on how it will be implemented practically.

Realizing the rather intangible nature of innovation, one would expect a stronger dialogue on how to make it happen.

- **Are we really selling innovation?**

Looking at innovative projects and programs it appears that often ‘state of the art’ implementation is considered as innovation because it sets off the project from average, below standard implementation.
To claim new and innovative approaches is a well-known phenomenon in Development Cooperation. A closer look at these approaches suggests that often it is rather the ‘wrapping’ that is new.

**Is innovation the remedy for all development challenges?**

Considering the frequency by which our partners are confronted with innovative approaches, which mean that they will have to go out of their way, even reform their systems, some caution may be justified with regard to the effectiveness. Change and reform take time to happen even in our countries under better framework conditions. Our partners are faced with donor organizations suggesting ever new approaches, before they had a chance to evaluate the effectiveness of the previous ‘new’ approach and consolidate or discard it.

✈️ **Innovation as an approach not as a catchword**

For innovation to happen and to leave results two aspects deserve due consideration:

- We need to be clear about the nature of innovation and from that explicitly develop realistic and practical possibilities for stimulating innovation.
- Innovation alone will not lead to the expected, sustainable results, unless we allow for innovative solutions to be tested, adjusted and consolidated. Thus Development Cooperation cannot be only innovative it also needs to support ‘practicing the innovation’ which may appear less attractive, but is indispensable for sustainability.