Some comments on the book:

Mutsaers H.J.W. and P.W.M. Kleene (Editors) (2012). *What is the matter with African agriculture? Veterans' visions between past and future.* KIT Publishers, Amsterdam.

By Toon van Eijk, 1 december 2012.

One of the criteria used in the selection of contributors to the book was: "age not less than 60 and not hampered by institutional restraints". Since I only became 60 this month, it is obvious that at the time of selection I was not 'veteran' enough to participate. The last 17 years I have been free lance consultant, initially engaged in paid work and now doing more and more volunteer jobs, and I am thus quite free of institutional restraints. Before my period as free lance consultant I worked on long-term assignments in Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia (for FAO, Dutch government, FINNIDA and KIT respectively). In total I worked some 20 years in Eastern & Southern Africa in agricultural research and extension.

I read the veterans' book with great pleasure, especially because most of it is "freed from the usual cautious wrappings". As the Editors say in the Introduction to the book: "One … often encounters a wide gap between 'official' statements about the success record of African agricultural development, and what field workers say 'officiously' about what has really been happening. The official narrative is often biased or even disingenuous in order to serve institutional or personal interests and keep the development vessel afloat". The Editors suggested to the contributing authors "to forget about convention and circumspection, and reveal their true mind". Well, in most cases the contributing authors have done exactly that! And it is this unusual frankness which makes the book so interesting and useful.

In the period 1979-2007 I have heard quite some expatriates in Africa complain bitterly about the work ethic of the local population, always in unofficial circumstances. However, in the published and 'grey' literature on development cooperation the topic 'work ethic' is never mentioned. That is one of the reasons I decided to write a book on the role of work ethic in the long-term process of development (Van Eijk 2010a). To my mind such topic can be discussed in a (social) scientific manner and thus be made more explicit and less based on subjective emotional feelings/prejudices and cultural narrow-mindedness.

> Let's drink to the hard-working people
> Let's drink to the lowly of birth
> Raise your glass to the good and the evil
> Let's drink to the salt of the earth
>
> Say a prayer for the common foot soldier
> Spare a thought for his back-breaking work
> Say a prayer for his wife and his children
> Who burn the fires and who still till the earth
> […]
> Raise your glass to the hard working people
> Let's drink to the uncounted heads
> Let's think of the wavering millions
> Who need leaders but get gamblers instead

Spare a thought for the stay-at-home voter
His empty eyes gaze at strange beauty shows
And a parade of gray suited grafters
A choice of cancer or polio
<div align="right">The Rolling Stones, Beggars Banquet, The Salt of the Earth (Jagger & Richards 1968)</div>

The work ethic is influenced by many factors, but culture and personality certainly play an important role. The fact that in every small village in Africa one can find a few persons who work harder than the rest indicates that personality is a determining factor in this context. Personality is partly inherited (the genetic aspect), partly learned (the cultural aspect). Below I have listed a number of quotes from the contributing authors in order to show that also they consider culture and personality important items in the development process.

In his chapter on Community Development in Nigeria Allen says: "Everything depended upon the **personality** of the individual District Officer and unless he was capable of encouraging and maintaining the surge of enthusiasm the fervour died" (p.39)[1].

"The lesson is the need to have an understanding of the constraints facing the farmer, probably best obtained by in-depth exchanges with farmers themselves" (Van Arkadie: 67). Here the **arrogance** of politicians and aid administrators plays its part (68).

"All the successive changes in approach did not address the single most important factor: the need for strong local **leadership** at all levels, characterized by identification with and dedication to goals surpassing the individual and his family" (Mutsaers: 93).

"Significant (agricultural) development is indeed contingent upon a massive **cultural** change … [that] can only be brought about by local people and their leaders … It has to emerge from Africa's own core and no international aid can bring this about" (ibid.: 94).

"Every kind of entrepreneurial spirit, including that in agriculture, is rooted in economic motivation, with the people's **ideology** and **commitment** also playing an important role" (Verdurmen: 103).

"Successful entrepreneurship requires a literate, numerate, **hardworking**, **honest** workforce. These virtues earn an increasing cash value, and may thus become inculcated in the general population" (Griffiths Lowe: 130).

"Poor governance [although I believe it to be the overriding factor] is another answer, which is correct but does not resolve the issue of why Africa is undeveloped, why, otherwise, do the masses simply look on **as if helpless** while the political class plunders the economy" (Nweke: 154).

"I'd stake my life on it that **leadership** is feasible and that it is a most important condition for development. There is no other way" (Traoré: 163).

"A real change in **mentality** takes a couple of generations" (Franssen: 179).

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[1] The 'bolds' in these quotes are added by me.

"We have been slow to realize that development is far more complex and insensitive to our methods of technical and socio-economic engineering … Economic take-off is linked to a combination of macroeconomic, **socio-cultural**, educational factors enabling high economic growth" (Kleene: 204).

"The farmer has a tendency, very legitimate in fact, to optimize the productivity of his labour … I do not wish to put too much emphasis on these '**human**' factors, because far too often there is a trend to qualify as '**cultural** constraints' those difficulties which the agents of development have not managed to overcome" (Lhoste: 284).

"In short we have been projecting our image of modern agriculture on societies that were totally different in **cultural** as well as environmental aspects and we did this in 'top-down' ways that often reflected a combination of ignorance and **arrogance**" (Stoop: 327).

"Knowledge, support services and co-operation can only really help agriculture forward when … certain **moral** and **civil values** are strengthened, such as dedication, entrepreneurial drive, perseverance, work ethics, political will and assertiveness of local farmers and their leaders. Only a new breed of African **leaders** at all levels can bring this about" (The authors' views: common ground as described by the Editors: 342).

"Agriculture is not developed through a succession of fads, fashions and miraculous innovations promoted by people **more concerned** with their **own careers** than with the needs of their clientele" (The Editors: Editorial summary: 354).

Although culture and personality (e.g. leadership) are thus frequently mentioned by the authors as important factors in the development process, these are not the only factors referred to. Various authors also refer to technological, geographical and ecological, economic, political, and socio-structural factors that affect the process of development. It seems evident that all these factors have an impact on the development process, but is it possible to indicate whether all the factors carry equal weight? The book with the veterans' visions is meant to support young professionals in their work on African development. But if young (African and expatriate) professionals want to do some priority setting in their work, on what kind of factors should they focus then? The long list of **technological**, **geographical** and **ecological**, **economic**, **political**, **socio-structural**, and **cultural** and **personality** factors that appears in the book makes it difficult for young professionals, politicians and policy makers to set priorities. Each author, quite understandably, focuses on a different set of factors, depending on his/her training, working experience, vision, personality, etc. Although I would certainly recommend young professionals to read the book carefully, I guess that many of them will be flabbergasted by the long list of relevant factors mentioned by the authors. What to do now?

If I would be asked to list my own priorities at the level of the different categories of factors mentioned here above, my choice based on my specific cultural background, social class, personality, professional training, working experience and individual life experiences would be:

- At the level of the **technological-ecological** factor: a focus on mixed farming (crop-livestock integration, including animal traction); improved labour saving and drudgery reducing hand-operated machines; complementary, cost-efficient external input use.
- At the level of the **economic** factor: a protectionist policy to shield the emerging agricultural and industrial sector from worldwide competition; a focus on intra-regional trade; construction of all-

weather farm-to-market roads; emphasis on training in farm management (record keeping, simple cost/benefit analysis).

- At the level of the **political** factor: full-blown democracy might be too early in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with weak nation states, therefore focus on 'enlightened' competent, honest and strong leadership; politicians and policy makers to promote farming as a profession or vocation - as a worthy cause.
- At the level of the **socio-structural** factor: build up political and financial power through farmers organizations (cooperatives, unions); mainstream gender issues.
- At the level of the **cultural** and **personality** factor: promotion of internalization of modern work ethic and time discipline through various societal structures (including civil society) and individual development.

Having selected my priorities in the different categories of factors, the question still remains which category of factors is the most crucial one for sustainable and equitable economic development. Just two authors in the book address the issue of priority setting, albeit only at the level of agricultural development. Peter Bolt (p. 210-11) writes:

"It is perfectly possible to achieve … positive change … by ensuring that *the most limiting* factors in agricultural production are identified and removed, keeping in mind that another one will *immediately* take its place … The most limiting factor must be eliminated first, before other limiting factors are tackled ['the law of the most limiting production factor']. In principle one factor at a time, as it is difficult to predict the effect of its removal on the other factors and also because farmers all over the world have a limited absorption capacity for new practices and are adverse to risk-taking".

And Adri van den Dries (p. 227-8) finally raises the all important question of **how** to determine the most limiting production factor or bottleneck:
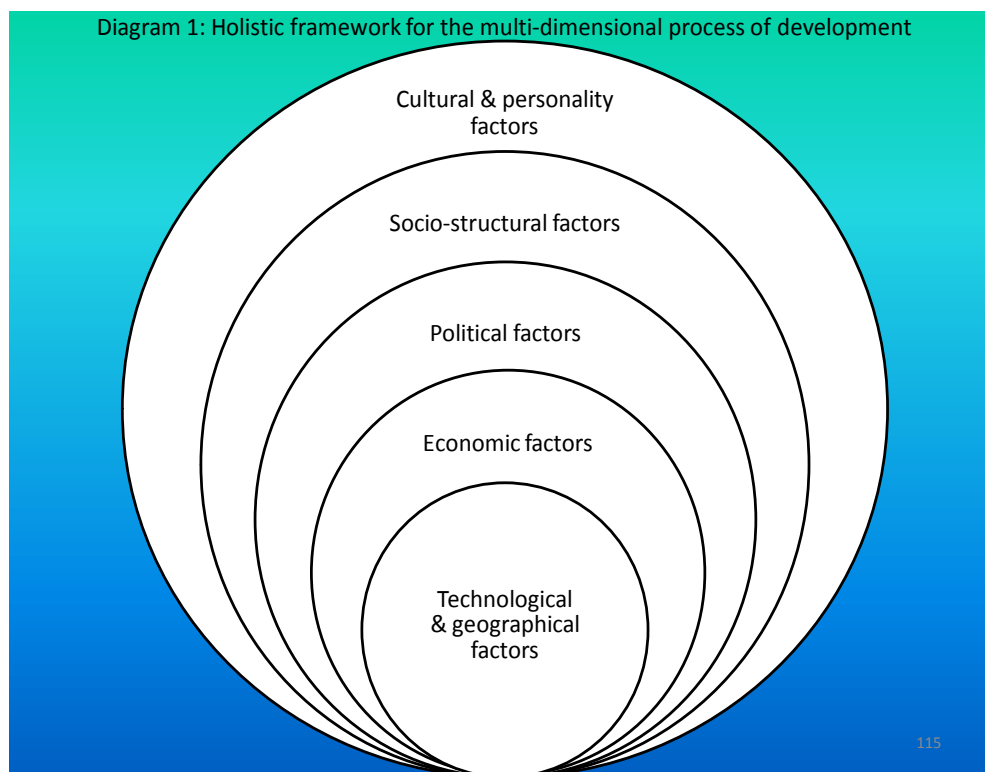
"The most limiting bottlenecks [in production and productive infrastructure] need to be gradually removed. The crucial questions are precisely how to do that, in which direction (intensification vs. increase in scale), in which sequence and in what rhythm [a step-by-step approach is needed] However, who is able to point out the most suitable technological path to follow?"

At a level above agricultural production one can raise the question **how** to determine the most crucial category of factors. One can argue of course that all the categories of factors are important and interdependent, which is true, but where do we start then? Since money, time and manpower are always limited, which category of factors deserves highest priority? At the level of agricultural production Van den Dries asks: 'who is able to point out the most suitable *technological* path?' At a higher system level the question would be: who is able to point out the most suitable *developmental* path? Since all the categories of factors influence the development process and interdependencies and feedback mechanisms do occur, it is difficult to determine what the most limiting factor at a specific point in time and space is. In my view it is an illusion to believe that the human intellect, extended by ICT or not, can cope with all the categories of factors simultaneously and determine the most limiting factor **in specific cases**. I have labeled this 'the illusion of intellectual holism' (Van Eijk 2010b, chapter 3). Nevertheless, it could be worthwhile to attempt to explore whether **in more general terms** the different categories of factors carry equal weight.

In Diagram 1 I have attempted to depict a holistic framework for the multi-dimensional process of development (Van Eijk 2010a, 2010b). Development as a multi-dimensional process involves not only

economic growth, but also changes in societal structures and popular attitudes: comprehensive socio-cultural changes are needed, as also exemplified in the writings of various veteran authors. Moreover, full control of the development process is not possible: we can only facilitate it by creating the right conditions. Development is a process characterized by as many unanticipated as anticipated outcomes. Focussing on only one societal subsystem will not be sufficient. Comprehensive development demands effective interplay among many actors, but how does this interplay come about? The behaviours of many actors in the development process need to be attuned before synergies can emerge.

The different categories of factors in Diagram 1 are interrelated: they can be distinguished but they cannot be separated in their effects. Although the categories are interrelated, they are not equally fundamental. In the interdependent totality of Diagram 1 the factors in the outer categories (the cultural & personality factors) are the more independent variables, while the factors in the inner categories are the more dependent variables. Today technological and ecological factors can be relatively easy changed, but cultural and personality factors remain more resistant to change. It is easier to introduce a new technology than to change cultural traits.

Diagram 1: Holistic framework for the multi-dimensional process of development

Cultural & personality factors

Socio-structural factors

Political factors

Economic factors

Technological & geographical factors

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Moving from the outside to the inside in Diagram 1, from the cultural & personality factors to the technological & geographical factors, the categories become less encompassing, less inclusive. For example, the decision to actually start using a newly developed technology is largely determined by economic factors. Economic factors, in turn, are strongly influenced by political factors. The main issue in today's politics is economics. Economic markets are largely political constructs. Politics encompasses economics, but economics does not encompass politics. Political factors in turn are determined by socio-structural factors, such as the economically and politically increasingly important middle class in developing countries and the emerging non-governmental civil society. The socio-structural factors in turn are influenced by cultural and personality factors, since all societal substructures ultimately are

made up of individual citizens. The 'building blocks' of all societal substructures, be it farmer cooperatives, NGOs or churches, are individuals. And these individuals are shaped by their group cultures and individual personalities. Whereas feedback mechanisms between the different categories do occur, the more outer categories encompass the inner ones and seem therefore more important and essential. The various categories are interrelated in a kind of hierarchical order and the outer categories seem to carry more weight.

Although the need for concerted action among the many actors in the development process is obvious, it is not so obvious how to create coherence and cohesion. And the higher the level of integration is, the more difficult it becomes to formulate and implement effective approaches to development. In Farming Systems Research and Development, for example, it proved difficult to implement effective strategies at the level of large numbers of single farms. What about much higher levels of integration then? How to implement effective and efficient strategies at district, regional, watershed or national level? Also in rich countries the higher levels of integration often surpass the abilities of policy makers and scientists. Even with the help of modern ICT, these levels cannot be easily handled. For instance the persistent problems in the Dutch agricultural sector indicate that a truly integrated approach has not materialized yet. The undesired side-effects of modern industrial farming (environmental pollution and large-scale killings of animals when health problems occur) bear testimony to our inability to integrate ecological, technological, economic, political and ethical issues.

While all categories play a role in the multi-dimensional development process, unfortunately mainly the inner categories receive attention in the development debate, i.e. the technological & geographical and economic factors. Recently political factors and to a lesser degree socio-structural factors receive more attention. Issues such as good governance and the development of an effective civil society are nowadays also considered. Thus a gradual tendency to take the more outer and encompassing categories into consideration can be discerned. The most outer category, however, so far hardly plays a role in the debate: the cultural and personality factors are rarely discussed (at least not publicly and officially).
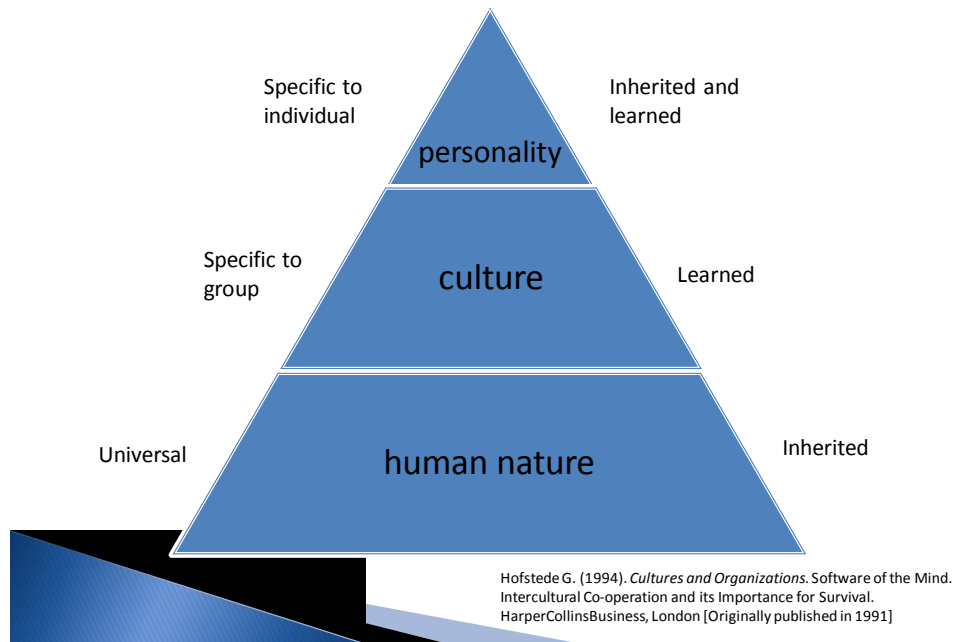
The hierarchy of categories in Diagram 1 is a social construction for mainly analytical purposes. This hierarchical order is not absolute; rather it is a matter of categories being more or less encompassing. One can also use the metaphor of Russian puppets in which each puppet is enclosed by the next larger puppet but also contains smaller puppets. The various categories can be distinguished but not radically separated in their effects, because they are interconnected.

In Diagram 1 cultural and personality factors constitute one category. It is a matter of discussion among social scientists where the border between culture and personality exactly lies (Hofstede 1994:5; see Diagram 2). Culture is a pattern of thinking, feeling and acting. It is mental software. Hofstede (ib) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another". Culture is learned, not inherited. "It derives from one's

social environment, not from one's genes" (ib). One has to distinguish between culture and personality. While a culture is specific to a certain group of people and is learned, a personality is specific to an individual and partly learned, partly inherited. The inherited part of personality is due to an individual's unique set of genes, while 'learned' means here "modified by the influence of collective programming (culture) *as well as* unique personal experiences" (ib:6).

Diagram 2: Three levels in human mental programming (Hofstede 1994:6)

Specific to individual   Inherited and learned

personality

Specific to group   Learned

culture

Universal   Inherited

human nature

Hofstede G. (1994). *Cultures and Organizations.* Software of the Mind. Intercultural Co-operation and its Importance for Survival. HarperCollinsBusiness, London [Originally published in 1991]

Personality factors are not (officially) considered in the development debate. Yet personality factors are often pivotal, for example, in *inter*disciplinary collaboration in *multi*disciplinary teams of development experts. And all forms of 'aided' change, including development cooperation, require facilitators with 'participatory' attitudes. But most importantly, sustainable and equitable development demands citizens who behave civically. Civic behaviour, societally and ecologically sound behaviour, is the cornerstone of development. The centrality of the human factor in development is beyond doubt, but behavioural change receives little attention in development literature. Most likely this is due to the elusive character of behavioural change, which makes concrete action by change agents difficult.

Human behaviour is influenced by all the categories of factors in Diagram 1, but the cultural and personality factors are the most encompassing and therefore probably the most crucial one. As exemplified by the quotes of various contributing authors, also they emphasize the importance of these factors. Whether one prefers individualistic-psychological or socio-structural approaches to behavioural change, the essential point is that societal changes ultimately are grounded in the (collective) behaviour of individuals. Whether one prefers 'betterment' of individuals or 'upgrading' of societal structures, the underlying idea is that societal structures cannot be improved without 'upgrading' the civic behaviour of their constituting elements. Unfortunately the hitherto intangible character of individualistic (and collective) behavioural change results into inadequate attention for this topic in the development debate.

In my view the old proverb "if you want to change the world, start with yourself" remains unremittingly valid. Also the current financial/economic crisis ultimately seems to be a moral/ethical crisis, caused by lack of civic behaviour on the part of high-ranked bank officials and financial whizz kids, but also overspending consumers. The 'betterment', however presumptuously this may sound, of individual behaviour demands effective and efficient techniques/methods/practices for self transformation. The individual choice of such a technique is always a personal one, but preferably based on scientifically validated effectiveness and efficiency.

As a (relatively young) veteran I would recommend the next generation of young professionals to focus on a combination of professional and personal development. Personal development in the sense of self transformation is important because the personality factor carries heavy weight (Diagram 1), is partly learned (Diagram 2), and after all you have to do what you preach. In the professional field I would recommend young professionals to acquire an inter-disciplinary training to the extent that one understands at least the basic principles of the five categories of factors in Diagram 1, in addition to one's own field of specialization. At the end of the day also smallholders have to deal with all these factors in the management of their farms. Moreover, it would be a good idea to study the history of the development process in one's own country before going abroad.

Finally, the biggest unresolved question for me is: how will the excess rural labour be absorbed without a competitive industrial or services sector being in place in Africa? Brian van Arkadie remarks in the veterans' book:

"It must have been hundreds of times I have heard commentators bemoaning that African agriculture is still dependent on the hand hoe. The implication is that mechanization is necessary to transform agriculture … While one must of course sympathize with the hard grind of African agriculture, the call for mechanization misses the point that it is more typically the result than the cause of agricultural growth" (p.65).

The 'modernization syndrome' is indeed rampant in Africa, with politicians as well as agricultural professionals. When mechanization is the *result* of growth in agricultural output, leading to labour scarcity in the agricultural sector along with the growth in industrial employment, as Van Arkadie argues, then the assumption is that industrial employment is available. What kind of competitive industries and/or services can Africa develop for millions of farmers who will be pushed out of agriculture? Even when rural policy would be focussed on labour-intensive, animal traction based, semi-commercial family farming, many rural people will become un(der)employed.

Literature

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