

REDEFINING TECHNICAL COOPERATION: CHALLENGE FOR THE UN OR LET'S DUMP THE 'TECHNICAL COOPERATION' MANDATE

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For 50 years, technical cooperation has defined the *raison d'être* of the United Nations role for promoting social and economic development. A major challenge for the United Nations is to rethink and retool itself in this role for the twenty first century.

1 THE NEED FOR REDEFINITION

The need for such retooling is dictated in part by the overall need for new directions in development cooperation as a whole. The 1993 DAC Chairman's report, aptly entitled 'Aid in Transition' starts with the introductory remark that 'Donors must join with beneficiary countries and their people to rethink development goals and priorities. What is at stake is an unprecedented opportunity to build human security throughout the world. Using development assistance to facilitate and reinforce this process is critical'.

The United Nations system needs to respond similarly to the challenge of redirecting its development cooperation in a new and changing world.

The second, and just as compelling a reason for change, is the lesson of past and current experience with technical cooperation. We have seen a series of debate and analyses on the effectiveness of technical cooperation over the last ten years, starting with the DAC discussion in the mid 1980s leading to the 'Principles for New Orientations in Technical Cooperation' adopted in 1991, the 1992 Summit at the European Centre for Development Policy and Management in Maastricht, the publication of 'Rethinking Technical Cooperation' by UNDP, and the most recent DAC/UNDP/World Bank High Level Seminar held in 1994. Many aid agencies, including the World Bank and French bilateral cooperation, carried out internal reviews during this time. Less well known but more important is the series of studies undertaken by the recipient countries, mostly in Africa (over 30), but also others such as

Pakistan and Bangladesh, leading to the adoption in many cases of policy statements on technical cooperation. Almost all of these were sponsored by UNDP under the programme for National Technical Cooperation Assessments and Programmes. All these analyses and conferences document well the strengths and weaknesses of the process. They do point to a need for major rethinking, particularly because of the failure of technical cooperation as an effective tool for capacity building. (See Box 1 on page 69.)

The United Nations, with its global mandate for technical cooperation, should take a leading role in developing new concepts and tools that work better.

2 THE AMBIGUOUS CONCEPT OF TECHNICAL COOPERATION²

Technical cooperation, or technical assistance, is one of the most ambiguous concepts in development. Much of this ambiguity is about whether it should be defined by the nature of the inputs or by its purpose. If we take a poll among development practitioners, most would identify it with the inputs – expatriate specialists, education and training. These inputs are clearly distinct from other forms of development aid, specifically equipment and financial resources. But many currently used definitions of technical cooperation identify it by its purpose, as a form of development assistance aimed at capacity building. This is true of the definitions used in the OECD/DAC, as well as the United Nations and the World Bank. Some donor agencies, however, particularly bilateral programmes still identify technical cooperation more closely with the type of input. For example, the French term 'assistance technique' refers strictly to personnel.

The concept of technical cooperation used in the United Nations has evolved, with the focus shifting

¹ The author is a staff member of the United Nations Development Programme. The views expressed are those of the author along and do not reflect the position of the UNDP.

² This section draws heavily from Marc Destanne de Bernis, 'La Coopération technique – de quoi parle-t-on?', 1989, UNDP (mimeo).

away from the input towards the objective. When the Expanded Programme for Technical Assistance was founded in 1949, it was clearly identified with inputs – experts and training and excluding other inputs such as equipment unless it was for technology transfer.³ The establishment of the Special Fund in 1958 focused on preinvestment studies and enlarged the inputs to equipment.⁴ The Capacity Study of the United Nations, led by Sir Robert Jackson in 1969, was a landmark for defining the institutional structures for operational activities of the UN. But it failed to grapple with the concept of technical cooperation. It adopts a very broad definition of purpose as ‘social and economic development’, while also admitting a broad range of inputs, including equipment.⁵

The real landmark for conceptual thinking on technical cooperation and its importance for development was the policy statement adopted by the UNDP in 1979 called ‘New Dimensions of Technical Cooperation’.⁶ This definitively shifts the conceptual focus away from the input to the purpose of this form of aid. New Dimensions grappled with the dilemma of why inputs other than personnel and training could not be justified as ‘technical cooperation’. Thus technical cooperation was squarely defined by its purpose of providing developing countries with the means to utilize its own resources more efficiently, and for the overall purpose of self reliance. Self reliance refers particularly to management, technical, administrative and research inputs necessary for formulation and implementation of development plans and policies.

This redefinition of technical cooperation, focused on measures to enhance the utilization and resources, clearly separates it from other forms of aid which augment the level of resources, i.e. budgetary aid, capital investments, or food aid. The same distinction is clearly made in the OECD definition.⁷ This distinction provides an approach to the division of functions between the agencies within the United Nations system and with the Bretton Woods institutions. It clearly signifies the United Nations role in building capacity to manage

development – as distinct from the resource transfer role of the World Bank and IMF.

3 FROM INPUTS TO OBJECTIVES, FROM TECHNICAL COOPERATION TO CAPACITY BUILDING AND UTILIZATION

The conceptual innovation of ‘New Dimensions’ was far reaching and revolutionary. But it was not pursued to its logical conclusions. It did not re-shape the operational activities of the UN system from the supply of certain kinds of resources to all manner of activities for the aim of capacity building. Nor did it influence the rest of the development community to pursue capacity building with full vigour. As a result, the conceptual innovation did not achieve its potential impact to the full.

Within the UN system, as in the bilateral programmes, ‘technical cooperation’ adopted the objectives of capacity building. But the tools did not change – or changed too little. Programmes remained fixated on the provision of experts and training. The personnel component has remained quite constant over the years and takes up the lion’s share of budgets.⁸

From a conceptual point of view, capacity building as a dimension of development was left undeveloped. It was essentially equated to the training and education of individuals and the transfer of technology. So, no new instruments were developed. This is not to say that there was no evolution. Innovations have been introduced, notably the move to increase the use of national expertise, local training, national management of projects (‘national execution’). But these innovations were simply modifications of old tools.

4 THE TRAP OF TECHNICAL COOPERATION TOOLS AND NEW NEEDS FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

The real irony is that the old tools of technical cooperation are antithetical to the new objective of capacity building and capacity utilization. Much of

³ Social and Economic Council, Resolution 222 (IX), 14-15 August, 1949.

⁴ Resolution 1240 (XIII) of the UN General Assembly, 14 October, 1958.

⁵ UN, Study on the capacity of UN, Geneva, 1969, see Chapter IV, Section 3.

⁶ New Dimensions for Technical Cooperation, UNDP Governing Council, 27th session, 11-27 June, 1975.

⁷ OECD, *Geographic Distribution of Financial Flows to Developing Countries*, Paris.

⁸ UNDP and DAI, *Rethinking Technical Cooperation, Reforms for Capacity Building in Africa*, UN Publications, New York, 1992.

the criticism levelled at 'technical cooperation' effectiveness is directed at the expatriate expert component and its costliness, its substitution rather than capacity transfer role, its demoralizing effect on natural counterparts.

The tools of 'technical cooperation' were invested in the decolonization context of severe shortage of training nationals to take over from colonial administrators, technicians and professionals. The human resource situation of the 1990s is radically altered.

What are then the current and future needs for capacity building for self reliance? The old model assumes training to be the critical constraint. But capacity for self reliance is a far more complex process than training individuals. We find weak capacity to be a critical bottleneck to development management, especially in Africa. But unemployment among graduates and poor motivation are also problems. The impact of training is also poor. There is a breakdown in the link between training and self reliant capacity for development management. The breakdown has to do with poor capacity utilization due to both the policy environment and management practices in institutions.

Much of the recent analysis on technical cooperation effectiveness shows that the reasons for poor impact can be traced to the environment in which it intervenes. When national institutions do not function well, donors are tempted to pump expatriate 'advisers' and training as well as salary incentives for nations into the situation. This further undermines national institutions which are weakened by reduced salaries and operating budgets due to severe budgetary constraints. Training has no impact if the enhanced capacity is underutilized by the demotivating policy environment.

New approaches are needed to enhance resource use in the developing world and to promote staff reliant development. Much more focus is needed on relieving the constraints in the institutional environment, and the analysis needs to look not just at human resource but at institutions.⁹

5 THE UNITED NATIONS OPERATIONAL MANDATE IN A NEW ERA

What should be the future direction of the development cooperation role of the United Nations?

Old style technical cooperation – the provision of human resources and training – is outmoded and ill adapted to present and future needs for capacity building. Fresh approaches to facilitating capacity building for self reliance are needed.

First, the term 'technical cooperation' riddled with its ambiguous identification with tools rather than ends, is part of the problem. It reinforces the trap back into the old tools. The United Nations would be best served by abandoning this term.

Second, the United Nations should take the lead in development cooperation for capacity building and utilization. The work not yet done, to develop the concepts and tools for capacity building needs to be pursued vigorously. Some work has started in recent years in UNDP but still remains embryonic. Papers, publications, specialists in this area remain hardly identifiable through the United Nations organizations and institutions. The new tools for capacity building should be developed in the form of operational packages and the operational work of the United Nations should be retooled.

Third, the United Nations should take the lead in the policy debate on resolving policy constraints to capacity utilization. The effectiveness of the public sector institutions is a key issue, particularly in Africa. The recent work by UNICEF and UNDP on salary supplements is a good example of such work.¹⁰ Such initiatives on exploring policy issues which affect capacity utilization should take a more central place.

But redirecting the United Nations' role in development cooperation should not stop at doing better for capacity building. It must find meaning in a changing world where economies are market driven, where global communications are rapid and comprehensive, where democratization of political systems is spreading. The public sector role in capacity building is also increasingly limited. Technology development and transfers are being made

⁹ See Chapelier and Fukuda-Parr, 'A fresh look at national capacity building', UNDP, 1993 (mimeo).

¹⁰ Adedeji, Green and Janha for UNICEF and UNDP, *Pay, Productivity and Public Service: Priorities for Recovery in Sub-Saharan Africa*, New York, 1995.

in the free market world. The United Nations and the public sector may not be the key players for such activities. Capacity building need not be propelled by government action only.

To define a unique role for the United Nations development cooperation in this new era, we must refer back to the unique role of the United Nations, as a forum of global governance. We must refer to the role of setting global agenda and bringing national consensus. The UN development cooperation must surely be the national link to facilitating

this process of global dialogue to make for a more secure world.

The future role of UN development cooperation would not be defined in the transfer of resources for capacity building but rather for self reliance related to the objectives of global goals of peace, security, social and economic development. It must assist nations to participate in reaching consensus with the world community on global issues, and advocate the implementation of global commitments.

Box 1: The consensus critique of technical cooperation

The recent analyses and debates on technical cooperation effectiveness come to many common conclusions; the record of technical cooperation and its key issues are well documented. They merge on some central issues.

- technical cooperation programmes have been often effective in providing direct support and a reliable tool for 'getting the job done';
- but the record is poor when it comes to transfer of know how and building sustainable capacity. Most of these criticisms are levelled at the resident expatriate personnel component of technical cooperation, a concept which is fundamentally flawed because it is based on 'learning by watching' rather than 'learning by doing';
- the resources used in technical cooperation are large. That \$17.6 billion are tied up in it is well known. Less well known is that in the national context, its value might be similar to the entire public sector wage bill, or that the cost of one expatriate expert could be more than the entire annual recurrent budget of a ministry or a department;
- many aspects of the technical cooperation process are disturbing from a political and social point of view. It is often donor driven and motivated by distrust of recipients. The widening salary gap between expatriate and national personnel cause resentment and frustration, adding to the demoralization of the civil service. The impact is seen to be frequently negative on motivating national personnel. On the recipient side, the need for operating funds and materials which comes with personnel, drives the demand. Thus at best, technical cooperation is a disguised – but an expensive – form of budget support, and at worst, a capacity destructive force.

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