Developing the Capacity of Post-Conflict Countries through South-South Partnerships

BY DR. SALOSHINI MUTHAYAN

FOLLOWING YEARS of war and devastation, the citizens of post-conflict countries look to the government with high expectations for a better quality of life. These countries, however, face severe institutional and human capacity constraints and normally have no other option than turning to donors for help in reconstructing their societies.

And yet the very significant aid investments in Africa over the past decades have yielded little; a pressing need exists to improve aid effectiveness and the sustainability of development programs. The Regional Capacity Building (RCB) Project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) is an example of how South-South partnerships can help address this challenge. The project aims to improve governance and service delivery in three post-conflict countries, Burundi, Rwanda, and Southern Sudan. It builds the capacity of public sector training institutions and government officials responsible for service delivery in the priority areas of water, agriculture, health, and peace and security.

This five-year project is an example of how the Paris Declaration can be translated into action and of how Southern voices have not only been heard but have in fact initiated and driven innovative projects funded by Northern partners.

PALAMA (Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy), the South African public sector training academy, has established effective partnerships with three management development institutes (MDIs): Ecole

At PALAMA, participants from Rwanda, Burundi, Southern Sudan, and South Africa learn how to research, write and teach case studies as part of a curriculum.
Nationale d’Administration in Burundi, the Rwanda Institute for Administration and Management in Rwanda, and the Capacity Building Unit of the Ministry of Human Resource Development in Southern Sudan. Multilateral partnerships have been forged among PALAMA, the implementing agency, CIDA, the donor, and the three MDIs, representing both South-South and North-South partnerships.

Advantages of South-South Partnerships

The comparative strength of South-South over North-South partnerships is that they give expression to existing networks, and to regional policies, agreements, and programs. Of central importance to South Africa’s foreign policy is its commitment to the African Union/NEPAD program and bilateral relations with African countries, particularly post-conflict countries. South Africa recognizes that the capability of African leadership to critically assess needs and formulate and implement indigenous solutions to African challenges is key to sustainable development in the region.

The strength of the RCB project is that the partnerships are based on mutual trust, respect, accountability, sharing of information, and equal relations. This has been possible because all four countries share similar histories, contexts, and visions for the future. They all have a colonial past and a history of racial and ethnic turmoil, and have all emerged from conflict situations, including South Africa with its history of apartheid. The four countries also share similar public sector challenges such as limited resources, poor service delivery, and public servants who are inadequately prepared to carry out their roles and responsibilities. Each country is aware that its success in achieving peace, stability, development, and growth depends on other countries in the region pursuing similar goals that are also aligned to the aspirations of the African Union (AU) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

A stable and well-resourced implementing agency from the South, such as PALAMA, can act as a catalyst for change, a role model, and a broker between donor and beneficiaries by helping donors understand the African context and its development challenges. It can identify workable solutions and help build trust in donors’ motives among other Southern partners, and ensure sound systems of accountability.

The divergent levels of development among the partners are seen as strengths since the more developed countries are emulated, and provide peer learning and support. RIAM, for instance, was able to field questions related to project charters, legal agreements, and budgeting processes. This prompted the more cautious partners, who may have suspected the implementing agency’s motives, or possible collusion with donors, to buy into the ethos of trust, equal relations, and mutual respect cultivated within the project.

CIDA has been highly supportive of the project’s organic development through strong South-South relations; and its presence at planning sessions as an unobtrusive participant has bolstered trust among the donor, PALAMA, and the country MDIs.

In the traditional model where donors or foreign agencies implement the project, there is less of an understanding of local contexts and of sustainable and indigenous solutions; and the foreign agency is less likely to be accorded the same trust level as an African implementing agency such as PALAMA. When donors are directly involved, partner countries become disempowered. This is evident in Southern Sudan, where beneficiaries are disengaged and rely on the donor to do the technical work. Donors may view this as a lack of know-how or commitment to the project. In the RCB project, the empowerment of the four CBU staff has been enormous. When the project began, the staff did not engage in planning on a regular basis, were uncertain about their work program, and appeared to be confused by the diverse demands of the many donors. Now, a year later, the CBU staff meet weekly, have clear work plans, and are more vocal at meetings— particularly with donors.

Thus, independent of donor involvement, the partners jointly defined problems related to governance and service delivery, conducted needs analyses, and developed an effective program of interventions.

Challenges

The challenges to South-South learning include sustaining the commitment of key stakeholders and maintaining the continued involvement of project champions and project managers over the life of the project. Each MDI has a project coordinating team of five staff, led by a project coordinator who reports to the directors general (DGs). These teams, and in particular the project coordinators, have served as the project champions in the partner countries. The overall champion is the project leader, also responsible for the conceptualization of the project, who together with a project management team, heads the project on behalf of the implementing agency and is accountable to the DG of PALAMA. An ethos of trust and mutual respect has been cultivated throughout the project.
particularly between the project leader and the country project coordinating teams. This has been crucial to accountability and sustainability of the project across the partner MDIs. In addition, the project champions, led by the in-country DGs have evoked strong support from the Ministers of Public Service and Human Resource Development in the three countries who have jurisdiction over the MDIs.

Changes in political, MDI, or project leadership present a challenge because continuity at all levels is important if high-quality project outcomes are to be achieved within the specified deadlines. Continuity between the design and implementation phases is crucial in an innovative project such as this where the project model, including the governance and management structure, multilateral cooperation, capacity development, and curriculum and training, is being designed as the project is being implemented—a praxis model. The Rwandese Minister of Public Services and Labour, for example, has been an avid champion from the outset. However, the simultaneous exit of the DG and project coordinator at RIAM held up the implementation for several months. By contrast, in Burundi the consistent presence of the project coordinator from the inception of the project has ensured outstanding implementation, despite numerous political changes in the ministry and in the leadership of the MDI.

Thus, the day to day managers rather than the political or institutional leadership seem to be critical to ensuring high-quality deliverables. However, political and institutional support remains an important factor in ensuring overall project success.

The new draft overseas development assistance (ODA) policy of the South African National Treasury makes the point that where project managers are changed midway through the project lifecycle, deadlines are often missed and the quality of the deliverables suffers.

To mitigate the negative effects of changes in political or institutional leadership, the project leader meets with the new leaders soon after their appointment, and they are regularly updated on project progress. Forums in which ministries, departments, policy and research institutions and donors, exchange knowledge, help promote efficiency and donor harmonisation, and avoid duplication. Suggestions for improving the project that come out of the forums are readily implemented.

Conclusion

FROM A SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVE, there is concern about a growing dependence on donors, which has happened in post-conflict countries where key personnel defer decision making to foreign agents because they may not be aware of how to do things differently. While it is still too early to judge the success of this project, the evidence so far indicates that South-South partnerships help ensure better use of aid through improved program design based on local knowledge, are genuinely participatory, and are responsive to the local context.

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In Bogota, some of these recommendations seemed to be taking shape and gaining support. The 110 cases of South-South and triangular cooperation presented at the High Level Event told stories as a source of learning and possible replication. I hope this book is the first of many more learning products.

CIVICUS and its member organizations and allies are taking action in the form of cooperation among peers and promotion of civil society knowledge exchange between developing countries. The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) is an excellent illustration. The CSI is a participatory needs assessment and action planning tool for civil society around the world. It aims to create a knowledge base on, and momentum for, civil society strengthening initiatives. The CSI is initiated and implemented by, and for, civil society organizations at the country level. It actively involves, and disseminates its findings to a broad range of stakeholders including: government, donors, academics, and the public at large.

Civil society stakeholders make use of participatory and other research methods to create knowledge about civil society and to assess its state or condition. This assessment is then used to collectively set goals and create an agenda for strengthening civil society. Besides the activities at the country level, partner organizations implementing the CSI conduct a variety of other exchange initiatives: sharing their results, trying to find common patterns, and seeking solutions to shared problems. Regional exchanges, for example, in Latin America, are currently very active, and are an emerging form of South-South cooperation and knowledge exchange.

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Endnote

1 The Reality of Aid Network (RoA) is the only major North-South international nongovernmental initiative focusing exclusively on analysis and lobbying for poverty eradication policies and practices in the international aid regime. Measures presented here can be further explored in their most recent report on South-South Cooperation.