

Helping Latin America Help Itself

South-South cooperation as an innovative development tool

BY PAMELA COX

EVEN BEFORE THE MASSIVE EARTHQUAKE struck Haiti early this year, the country was one of the biggest beneficiaries of South-South cooperation in the Americas. In fact, since 2004, the first UN peacekeeping mission made up mostly of South American forces has been serving in the beleaguered Caribbean nation.

Not surprisingly, in the first days after the disaster, MINUSTAH, as the UN mission is known, played a crucial role in maintaining order and coordinating the massive relief

effort. They did it as they tried to cope with their own losses—the UN headquarters in Port-au-Prince had collapsed killing 101 people, the largest single loss of life in the history of United Nations peacekeeping.

Helping neighbors

ASIDE FROM the official international presence, scores of Latin American nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), many of them World Bank partners, were also quickly at work tending to victims. Brazil's prominent NGO, Viva Rio, which



Members of the Colombian Red Cross prepare boxes of supplies to send to Haiti in the aftermath of the January 2010 earthquake.

had been running social and violence prevention programs in Haiti, quickly adapted its mission in the earthquake's aftermath. It turned its community center into temporary shelter, offered *capoeira* classes to homeless children, and operated a project to turn human waste into fuel. (*Capoeira* is an Afro-Brazilian art form that combines elements of martial arts, music, and dance.)

Meanwhile, Argentina's Pro Huerta Project, which helps Haitians grow their own food in small-scale organic gardens to improve nutrition, redoubled its efforts in areas badly affected by the earthquake. Within weeks after the quake, Argentina announced the shipment of thousands of seed packets and tilling tools, aiming to increase its contributions in the island by 50 percent.

There is no question that Haiti's tragedy helped trigger a tremendous outpouring of solidarity from developing and even poor nations. And while the levels of support may have been unprecedented, this display of South-South cooperation was not altogether new in the development arena. In recent years, the exchange of expertise and resources between governments, organizations, and individuals in the developing world has proven to be an effective tool for relevant and sustainable reform.

In Latin America, Brazil has emerged as a leading force in this form of assistance. The South American giant participates in a variety of expertise-sharing ventures in Latin America and around the world, many supported by the World Bank. Bolsa Familia, Brazil's successful conditional cash transfer program that provides a subsidy to poor families in exchange for keeping children in school and receiving regular medical checkups, has been a centerpiece of Brazilian cooperation. Bolsa Familia technical experts have shared their knowledge and discussed their challenges with counterparts from neighboring countries such as Peru and Colombia as well as distant India and China. Mexico too is a pioneer in this type of targeted welfare and its Oportunidades program is being replicated throughout the hemisphere, including in New York City. With World Bank assistance, Mexico has also been involved in improving social conditions in Latin American countries, especially those with large indigenous populations such as Bolivia.

Sharing what they know

COOPERATION AMONG nonrich nations does not revolve only around common poverty challenges. In fact, the current list of projects backed by the Bank covers a broad spectrum of issues ranging from early childhood development and pension system reform to health care access and mitigation of the effects of natural disasters. In the global fight against HIV/AIDS, Brazil has also gained international recognition for its work in developing generic antiretroviral drugs. In recent months, it has assisted Mozambique, a country where AIDS is the main cause of death and hospitalization among adults, to develop its own capacity for providing these medications.

While government-to-government exchanges are common, cooperation can also be among nongovernmental organizations or civil society groups. A project designed to

improve forest management, for instance, included study tours and virtual workshops that allowed Mexican indigenous representatives to share their practical knowledge with indigenous peoples from Nicaragua.

An important element of knowledge exchange is to bring players with similar problems and missions around the same table with the hope that by joining forces and sharing experiences they can more easily arrive at solutions. One such exchange recently took place between parties from Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa who were all seeking to develop a legal and regulatory framework to provide microinsurance to low-income households and microbusinesses. Their hope was to come up with an innovative delivery mechanism that would reduce operational costs, educate consumers, and facilitate widespread coverage.

The challenges ahead

ALL THESE ADVANCES don't necessarily mean that this type of cooperation among equals is easier or less challenging than traditional assistance from rich to poor nations. In fact, there are several stumbling blocks that stand in the way of turning this form of exchange into a more established form of assistance. Exchanges need to be better organized and have an established forum. Many current exchanges are largely incidental, motivated by disaster or similar events, which allows little time for proper sharing and development of ideas.

More significantly, there is insufficient funding for South-South cooperation and what little is available goes mostly to the world's poorest nations, particularly in Africa. For Latin America and the Caribbean the challenge then is to identify interested donors and sources of finance that have begun to recognize the potential of this form of cooperation.

So far, most of the projects in the region have secured funding from the participating countries themselves, often with the World Bank playing a facilitator role as the convening entity that provides the platform for the exchange to take place. Yet since these projects are not a mainstream form of assistance, governments often fail to plan for these activities as they make budget decisions.

There is no question that South-South cooperation is gaining recognition as a promising form of assistance. The best proof is that today a tremendous amount of demand for it—and interest in supplying it—remains unmet. That too is an indication of the work that remains to be done to tap its full potential. 

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