

COORDINATION OF TECHNICAL COOPERATION IN ECCB MEMBER COUNTRIES

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by

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COORDINATION OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Introduction

Too little in the literature of Caribbean thought on technical assistance does the researcher see a reflection of the two-way nature of technical assistance. Assistance used to conjure up thoughts of one active subject and a passive object, the latter being the recipient country. That stance, or rather *supine* position, reminds one of a contest between well-qualified workers whose work was performed near to the edge of the sea¹. That posture has changed a long time ago. September 1978 witnessed the historic meeting in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where Technical Cooperation issues were discussed. More than one modality of cooperation was identified. The idea of North-South cooperation was discussed as well as South-South cooperation or TCDC (Technical Cooperation between Developed Countries). Today, nobody will roll a country over and put money into its back pocket. There must be a proven double-coincidence of wants. On the part of the country, there must be demonstrated a willingness to accept the assistance that is in the offing. Similar to the concept of effective demand, that wish must be backed by some outlay – whether it be of cash, counterpart national resources or other in-kind outlays. On the part of the potential donor, there must be a competence to deliver the assistance and a willingness to do so. Such a willingness may not necessarily be one hundred percent altruistic, as the donor pursues a mission with clearly stated objectives, strategies and tactics.

The terms “technical cooperation” and “technical assistance” are for all practical purposes in this document interchangeable. Whereas it might in some quarters still be argued that technical assistance might refer to a relatively passive stance on the part of the recipient

¹ Some workmen who had just finished working during their rest period from rest emerged from the storage area and resumed their rest. Someone proposed a contest to see who was the laziest of the group. The prize was one hundred dollars. Seven of the eight men energetically recounted stories of their laziness. The contest was headed for a photo-finish as all stories were potential winners. Contestant number eight did not move from his supine position on a bag of flour for his performance. He simply stretched like if he had just got up from sleep, yawned and said, “Fellas, just roll me over and stick that hundred dollars in my back pocket”. Needless to say, he won the contest.

government, the argument can be made that the acceptance of technical assistance would require positive action on the part of the beneficiary to agree to the proposal. The term “technical cooperation” on the other hand, would suggest collaboration between the donor and the beneficiary in a manner that would ensure the delivery of assistance that would primarily benefit the country while serving some strategic objective of the donor.

To an increasing extent, the receipt of technical assistance or cooperation comes with a price tag. It is not as free as some people would think. The country cost ranges from some incidental costs concerning the accommodation and per diem expenses to full cost in the instance of a consultancy. Depending on the modality of assistance, the incidence of cost would therefore vary. Suffice it to say that costs must be considered when looking at technical assistance or cooperation. Especially in the case of cooperation, and to a greater extent within more recent times, the assistance may come with conditionalities. These must be examined carefully. Conditionalities are imposed to safeguard against the risks of failure of the project because of a failure of the logistical support that should be forthcoming from the beneficiary government. For instance, a big technical assistance mission in the upgrade of national accounts statistics would be jeopardized if in the middle of the programme the Statistical Office is moved to another building. The conditionality would safeguard against this eventuality by stipulating that for the life of the project the premises of the Statistical Office will remain the same.

Background

All ECCB countries benefit from technical assistance. Much of this help is directly related to data that the donor organization wishes to receive but cannot because of the non-production of those series. In many cases the assistance targets the area of deficiency (to the donor agency) and proposes a project that will result in the collection and processing of the data required and the receipt of the required statistics. The project is justified by the assertion that it will expand the statistical capacity of the recipient country or organization. Under the technical cooperation programme, statistical personnel may receive training in the concepts, definitions and methodologies that govern the statistical measures being pursued by the donor agency. Almost certainly the intervention will bring with it computer hardware for use in the project. This hardware is usually left with the recipient office at the end of the project.

The above scenario of a bi-lateral technical cooperation agreement between an external agency and a government department that produces statistics may convey to the reader a situation of dynamism on the part of the head of that government department. Indeed, the Departmental Head may give this event prominence in his or her annual administrative report. The question arises as to whether accepting that technical assistance was the right thing to do. How does that technical assistance event add to the statistical capacity of the country to produce the data that it requires for planning and monitoring?

Under some conditions the claim of capacity building may be true, but in a situation of free acceptance of technical assistance with no frame of reference, the opposite may well be true.

Objectives of the Coordination of Technical Cooperation

The coordination of technical cooperation is desirable in that it should discover the following:

1. The existence of duplication in cooperation programmes;
2. A clear statement of the expected and actual outputs from coordinated technical cooperation initiatives;
3. Instances of duplication of effort among two or more international agencies. This is especially relevant to smaller societies;
4. Possibilities of joint funding of technical assistance by two or more international agencies;
5. A prioritization of technical assistance in accordance with national needs before any other
6. A knowledge on the part of the donor community of what technical cooperation programmes are being proposed by the other donors with a view to strengthening the initiative or streamlining the assistance through a combined donor project.

The role of information in the coordination of technical cooperation

Maximum effectiveness will be achieved through the coordination of technical cooperation among all providers of such coordination. The meeting of technical cooperation providers should result in greater understanding and collaboration among donors. In order to contribute to a useful coordination effort, the recipient government should present an internally consistent list of projects (proposals for technical assistance) that speaks to the nation as a whole, rather than to a set of national organizations whose objectives are not consistent with an enunciated policy on technical assistance or cooperation. Given the needs of both donors and recipients, the technical cooperation that is agreed on should present benefits to both parties.

Poverty is usually the result of the sub-optimal use of resources. The Caribbean has been described as “data-poor” and will continue to be that way if we do not form policies that govern the production of data. These policies will identify the data sets that are critical for analysis and assessment of our economies and societies and will prioritize them in accordance with our human resource devoted to statistics. For such activity to take place we must develop national statistical systems. Very few Caribbean countries have anything that approaches a national statistical system. A recent report to the CARICOM Secretariat states precisely this point – that the ECCB countries do not have national statistical systems. Today, the Central Statistical Offices in some of the countries do not know intimately what statistics are being produced by other Government statistics-producing departments, let alone find themselves in a position to supervise the quality of the data being produced. The existence of a national statistical system will inform the decision to accept or not to accept technical assistance of a given nature. In such a setting, coordination of technical assistance will eliminate duplication in the receipt of such assistance and eliminate the waste that goes with it. This author is aware that the same request for technical assistance is made to several organizations. In the case of some favoured countries, all of the requests are met, with the result that there is duplication in what is received. One example in point was the receipt of the same piece of software from two organizations. Only one was needed. The other was of

no added value to the recipient and represented a sub-optimal expenditure on the part of the well-intentioned donor.

Coordination of requests for technical assistance

Arising from the above, a coordinating mechanism should be established to review all requests or offers for technical assistance. That organization should pass these requests or offers through the filter of national policy and priority needs. This will be the basis for the decision to go forward or not with the request or acceptance of the technical assistance. Very often, offers for technical assistance are not entirely altruistic. The coordinating unit should conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the technical cooperation proposal to determine if it puts the government in a surplus or deficit position in the medium to long term. Of great importance is a calculation of the sustainability or maintenance costs that result from the assistance. Within more recent times, technical cooperation agreements have been carrying with them conditionalities that must be observed by the beneficiary. The cost-benefit analysis should determine who is really the beneficiary in these agreements. Is it possible that in the light of the conditionalities imposed and the value of the initial assistance that the donor and the beneficiary are one and the same and that the government agency is placed in a resource deficit position in the final analysis?

Coordination among donor agencies offering technical assistance

The various international organizations have their own mandates and presumably their own areas of strength. In some cases they pursue analysis through indicators that are value-laden. This means that their view of the world is normative. This affects concepts and definitions. If one such agency offers technical assistance by way of a cooperation agreement, it trains the nationals to collect and analyze data in accordance with its philosophical stance. This may not be in harmony with the national view. The effect of the externally originating offer of assistance could be to create dissonance in the national system, if it existed. This is what most probably happens now, except for the fact that there are no national statistical systems. The result is the inability to detect easily these instances of dissonance. The country is therefore set back as a result of conflicting objectives that result in the training of the national human resource away from the direction that it should be taking.

Coordination should be embarked on in the light of known prioritized national needs and offers to deliver technical assistance. This would permit the donors to be aware of other offers and create the possibility of two or more donors combining their resources to provide a measure of assistance more comprehensive than any one of the separate proposals would have been able to deliver.

Suggestions as to how technical assistance/cooperation can be coordinated

Internally originating identification of assistance needs

Technical assistance should be guided by a national policy towards the production of relevant statistics through the employment of national human resources. These are in short supply so their absorption of technical assistance, especially externally originating, should be prioritized and become official policy. An office should be designated the focal point for all technical assistance requests and activities. The priority in identifying the need for technical cooperation or assistance should emanate from an assessment of the gap between the

statistical capabilities on board and those that should be on board now or in the near future. This approach would ensure that the enhancement of the national capacities is relevant to prioritized needs. This would suggest that before entering into initiatives that bring together statistical personnel from several countries with disparate capacities in statistics for common training, the thrust should be to seek national needs first. The determination of national needs will be made after consultation between all statistics producers and users nationally.

The list of assistance needs as identified by the process described above should be sent to prospective donor agencies and their replies and offers collated and rationalized so as to avoid duplication. These initiatives should be tied to directly productive activities so as to make their effect measurable.

Externally originating assistance needs

In the case where an external agency takes the initiative in proposing technical assistance or cooperation, the proposal should be studied carefully to ensure that the priority needs of the country will be served by the intervention. Depending on the problem as seen by the international or regional agency, several proposals may be received by a given government in respect of virtually the same development objective. In such a case, an inter-agency meeting should be convened by the national technical cooperation focal point to discuss the offers in an attempt to streamline the assistance and perhaps develop the activities beyond the possible narrow scope of the individual offers, moving the assistance to a multi-donor approach. The initiative for such an inter-agency meeting should come from the national focal point for the coordination of technical cooperation/assistance.

Statistical coordination in the ECCB member countries

The foregoing discussion of country specificity in the need for technical cooperation in statistics reduces the number of “one-to-many” training programmes where one set of trainers transfer knowledge to statisticians from many countries, each at a different level of development and by that token, need for such training at the time of the assistance. The present paper has made the case for country-specific scrutiny and identification of statistical needs. The disparity among the ECCB member countries may at times be so large that it negates the usefulness of a statistician from one less-developed (statistically) country being sent on a course with statisticians who are really *au courant* with the subject matter and who can contribute to the advancement of the training.

The International Community may, on the other hand, examine the need for broad-based training of statisticians and not be too concerned with country specificities. Implementation back home of techniques learned may or may not take place, depending on the readiness of the country to implement the training received. Even if this is the case, the recipient country will have to agree or disagree with the training proposal. The decision will be based on country needs before any other consideration.

In the case of an externally origination multi-country training proposal, the Subregional grouping should present one response through an organization charged with the responsibility of determining the training needs in statistics and putting forward a sub-regional response. Emerging from the acceptance of the proposal, the initiative should be made into a project with all knowledge transfer points being identified and put in place. The short-term follow-up action at national level (for example, training of local staff not included in the original training) will be spelled out.

Results and sustainability

Far too often, the end of the project means the end of all thoughts about the technical cooperation or assistance just received. An evaluation of the success of the training should be undertaken, at least by the national entity, and perhaps also by the donor. An acceptable gestation period for the fruits of the training to appear should be agreed on and the determination of success or failure made by the assessment exercise. This is a direct parallel to an environmental impact assessment. This can be done *X* years after the end of the project. Sustainability assessments should be made several times over a period of years (number to be determined by the focal point for technical cooperation acting on behalf of the Government).

Why all this fuss about some technical assistance?

By now we agree that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Somebody pays for it. Not because a lunch appears to be free should we eagerly accept it. It must be the correct lunch that befits our blood type. A free lunch has the potential to hurt the careless consumer.

Careful study and evaluation of the potential benefits of technical assistance may well lead to a success story, but that success must be actively pursued. Issues such as adequate staffing and servicing of vacancies in the recipient offices can go a long way to realize for the country the benefits of its investment in training. Excellent implementation at country level will also provide the donor with a success story and predispose that organization to further cooperation.

The ball is in the court of the ECCB member countries !!