

Helpdesk Research Report: Changing approaches to technical assistance

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Query: Please provide an overview of how donors are moving away from or changing their approaches to technical assistance, and a summary of problems in the field, drawing on a selection of donors' strategies and plans for technical assistance.

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1. Overview and definitions

Technical assistance and technical cooperation have a long history in development aid and have often been criticised as being supply-driven, expensive, poorly planned and integrated, and failing to promote country ownership. Despite criticisms, these activities continue to play an important role: the OECD estimates that technical assistance makes up about one-quarter of global aid, while ActionAid suggests that the true figure could be much higher, perhaps as high as half of all aid¹. Expenditure on technical cooperation has not declined in absolute terms, although it has declined as a proportion of overall aid as other forms of aid have grown more quickly. Donors are taking steps to reform technical cooperation policies in response to the main criticisms, including repositioning technical cooperation so that capacity building, rather than technical support per se, will be its main purpose, but skeptics point out that problems with technical cooperation have been known for many years, with few signs of change.

Definitions of technical assistance and technical cooperation

Technical assistance (TA) has been used for many years to deliver expertise, typically by placing expatriate consultants in positions where they can advise and support counterparts in developing countries. In the 1990s, the World Bank defined technical assistance as 'the transfer or adaptation of ideas, knowledge, practices, technologies, or skills to foster economic development. The purposes of Bank technical assistance are classified as follows: (a) Policy development, (b) Institutional development, (c) Capacity building, and (d) Project or programme support.'²

The term 'technical cooperation' (TC) has become more popular in the last twenty years as a way of describing this sort of knowledge transfer activity, with 'cooperation' implying a change in attitude towards a more equal partnership.

Some agencies consider the two terms equivalent, as in this OECD definition:

Technical co-operation (also referred to as technical assistance) is the provision of know-how in the form of personnel, training, research and associated costs (OECD DAC Statistical Reporting Directives 40-44). It comprises donor-financed:

¹ ActionAid, 2006, *Real Aid: Making technical assistance work*, http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc_lib/real_aid2.pdf, p. 28.

² World Bank, 1991, *Managing Technical Assistance in the 1990s: Report of the Technical Assistance Review Task Force*, World Bank. Cited in McMahon, G., 1997, *Applying Economic Analysis to Technical Assistance Projects*, World Bank.

- Activities that augment the level of knowledge, skills, technical knowhow or productive aptitudes of people in developing countries; and
- Services such as consultancies, technical support or the provision of know-how that contribute to the execution of a capital project.³

More often, though, 'technical cooperation' is the more common term for describing overall strategy and as a broad description of 'any activity aimed at enhancing human and institutional capabilities through the transfer, adaptation and utilisation of knowledge, skills and technology'⁴ while 'technical assistance' is used more narrowly to describe specific operational aspects of technical cooperation, as in this definition from the European Commission:

Technical Cooperation is often associated with actions aimed at strengthening individual and organisational capacity by providing expertise (short and long term TA personnel, institutional twinning arrangements, mobilisation of diaspora, etc.), training and related learning opportunities (peer exchange, tertiary education, etc.), and equipment. Technical Assistance (TA) refers to the personnel involved in the implementation and the management of technical cooperation services.⁵

Criticisms of technical assistance/cooperation

Technical assistance and technical cooperation have often been criticised. The most common grounds for criticism include:

- Supply-driven: Activities tend to be driven by donors rather than provided in response to developing countries' priorities.
- Country ownership: There is often a low level of ownership and involvement on the part of partner countries. This may in some cases be due to insufficient country-level capacity, political will, leadership or initiative, but can also be due to donor controls and the use of parallel management structures (see PIUs, below). Technical assistance personnel are often more accountable to donors than to the countries they are working in.
- Parallel implementation units (PIUs): The use of management systems created outside the national civil service has been common, but they tend to undermine national capacity development, distort public-sector salaries and diffuse accountability.
- Planning and design of interventions: Weak procedures for identifying needs and for planning and designing technical cooperation support, including lack of clarity about roles and results expected.
- Contextual analysis: Insufficient analysis of national contexts and underlying capacity constraints.
- Cost: Technical cooperation is seen as relatively expensive, and this has been exacerbated by tied aid. It is often said that reliance on Western providers results in high costs, but some studies have noted that local providers are not always significantly cheaper, particularly in Africa.
- Selection of personnel: Insufficient attention is given to ensuring that TA personnel have the necessary skills and profiles (including interpersonal skills and the ability to transfer knowledge as well as technical skills) to be able to engage effectively in demanding change processes.
- Weak integration and coordination: Technical cooperation initiatives are often not well integrated with national development strategies, or are poorly coordinated with other activities taking place in countries.
- Lack of consideration of alternatives: In many cases, the provision of TA personnel and the use of parallel implementation units is taken as a given, without questioning their appropriateness, and there is limited experience in the use of alternative forms of provision

³ OECD, 2008, *2008 Survey on Monitoring the Paris Declaration*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/58/41/41202121.pdf>, p. 149

⁴ ECDPM, 1995, *New Avenues for Technical Cooperation in Africa: Improving the record in terms of capacity building*, Policy Management Report No. 2, European Centre for Development Policy Management

⁵ European Commission, 2008, *Reforming Technical Cooperation and Project Implementation Units for External Aid provided by the European Commission: A Backbone Strategy*, EuropeAid, Directorate E, European Commission.

such as the use of public sector expertise through twinning arrangements and South-South cooperation.

Current trends in technical cooperation

Donors are changing their approaches to technical cooperation in response to criticisms, but change has been slow. Trends have been observed in the following areas:

- Increasing country ownership: Donors agree that local ownership of technical cooperation is important and are implementing policies designed to encourage greater local participation in planning and design of interventions, as well as in management, evaluation, and accountability. As part of this, donors have committed to reducing the number of parallel implementation units and drawing more on national management systems. There is slow but significant progress towards these goals.
- Increasing use of national consultants: There is a strong desire among donors to use more local consultants rather than international ones, and to encourage South-South cooperation. Procurement systems are being reformed with these goals in mind.
- Expenditure constant or increasing: The volume of technical cooperation, which constitutes between a quarter and a half of all ODA, is either increasing or remaining constant in many countries, but it is declining as a proportion of ODA as other forms of aid such as general and sector budget support have been growing quickly.
- Improving coordination and integration: Technical cooperation is becoming better coordinated and aligned with national programmes, although a large proportion of activities are still not well linked to other strategies.
- Pooling technical assistance funds: There has been a trend towards arrangements where donors pool their funds for technical assistance to improve coordination and encourage country leadership.
- Shorter interventions: There is a trend away from long-term technical assistance to short-term technical advice that avoids substitution.
- Purpose shifting towards capacity building: Many agencies now see technical cooperation as being primarily and explicitly for the purpose of capacity building, and are designing initiatives accordingly, rather than solely focusing on technical support.
- Untying aid: On the whole, donors have continued the trend towards untying aid, although some lag behind.

2. Key synthesis reports

OECD/DAC, 2009, 'Inventory of Donor Approaches to Capacity Development: What We Are Learning', Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/system/files/c4d/21_INVENTORY_OF_DONORS_Final.pdf

This study provides information about current capacity development activities of DAC member countries, including technical cooperation and technical assistance. The authors note that technical cooperation is the most common form of capacity building activity and that it 'includes the provision of technical assistance to partner countries through technical and advisory services provided by expatriate experts. Donors such as France, Australia and Japan have a tradition of appointing experts to work as advisors within partner country systems, often in long-term positions. However, the overall current trend is increasingly to move from long-term technical assistance to short-term, focused technical advisory services that avoid substitution, and to increase the use of local technical expertise.' (p. 6)

According to the study, donors 'seek to integrate technical cooperation into a broader framework of capacity development vision and support, often affiliated with the political will for change. Donors acknowledge that, ideally, technical cooperation should be country-led, country-owned, country-managed, and fully integrated in the context of national sector programmes. Many strongly advocate South-South co-operation approaches and the use of local capacities. Yet, they also point out that technical cooperation at the field level often remains far from these goals. Interventions may remain focused on task specific, traditional training and skill building, sometimes qualified as "substituting" rather than enhancing local capacity.... Various initiatives, including evaluation exercises, mapping

studies and revision of guidelines, are currently taking place or have been recently launched to reform technical co-operation.’ (p. 8)

The study summarises capacity building, technical cooperation and technical assistance activities of 20 countries and five multilateral donors. A few highlights are included below:

- France: ‘France’s technical assistance presence in the field has been very significant. In the last two decades, France has made great efforts to move from massive French “substitution” technical assistance (23,000 persons in 1980) to short term, focused international technical expertise (1,200 experts in the field in 2008). France’s new approach to technical assistance aims at building up and supporting local expertise. France intends to improve the integration of its technical assistance into joint approaches to capacity building that will encourage ownership and reduce the risks of substitution, to align its activities with national systems, and to make use of local capacities to carry out the country’s programme.... France is currently in the process of reviewing and modernizing its approach to technical assistance. This process will include the promotion of South-South cooperation and the provision of technical assistance to organizations outside government structures.’ (p.25)
- Ireland: ‘Irish Aid uses technical assistance within the context of sector or programme support, and tries to fully embed it in the context of local structure and management systems. Many Country Strategy Plans include a process fund which can be drawn on to support demand-led technical assistance or short term consultancy inputs that support capacity development.... Irish Aid promotes local knowledge and experience and the use of local consultants and local institutions to the maximum extent possible.’ (p. 30-31)
- Netherlands: ‘In 2002, the former Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation decided to discontinue the provision of technical assistance, which she saw as too supply-driven. The Netherlands strongly supports the shift towards demand-driven development co-operation practices and is currently in the process of rethinking its technical cooperation approaches and modalities.’ (p. 35)
- Norway: ‘As with other donors, technical assistance remains a major capacity development expenditure item... each embassy with a development co-operation budget has a local consultancy fund for hiring local expertise and building capacity among local trained professionals, rather than bringing in consultants from Norway.... the Norwegian Development Assistance Strategy for 2008 explicitly mentions the goal to increase capacities at institutions in the South, and stimulate South-South-North cooperation in the education sector.’ (p. 37)
- Spain: ‘Spanish technical assistance remains in demand, as it fits into local processes and priorities. Demand for this is particularly strong in Latin America because of historical and cultural ties and affinities, as well as similarities in administrative and legal systems. An additional driver for the use of Spanish expertise in development co-operation programmes could be to maintain support for development co-operation within the Spanish public. Spain increasingly seeks to provide technical assistance using locally or regionally available expertise, thereby strengthening South-South co-operation. The Peer Review recognizes Spain’s good experience with technical assistance, and suggests the utility of analysing “where, why and how” that its support to capacity development has been effective and what lessons could be replicated elsewhere.’ (p. 38)
- Sweden: ‘SIDA has been using technical cooperation to support capacity development, mostly in the forms of education and training, twinning, and technical assistance delivered by international experts.... The 2005 Manual recognises that SIDA capacity development interventions have primarily focussed on the “lower” target levels, i.e. the individual and organizational levels, with little concrete experience on influencing systems of organizations and institutional frameworks. In relations to support to public sector reform and major programme based approaches, the memorandum explain that local capacity (consultants, training institutions, think tanks, universities, etc.) are often recruited to provide technical assistance as part of the capacity development or reform programmes.’ (p. 40)

JICA, 2008, ‘Effective Technical Cooperation for Capacity Development’, Japan International Cooperation Agency. <http://www.jica.go.jp/cdstudy>

This joint study involving eleven countries and seven development agencies argues that technical cooperation is an important part of aid strategy, particularly for capacity development, and that

'understanding of the importance of technical cooperation, interest in ensuring its effectiveness and knowledge of good practice is growing' (*Key Findings*, p. 3).

The study finds that technical cooperation (TC) is more likely to be effective when the following features are in place (*Synthesis Report*, p. 72):

- Country-led planning
- Flexible and responsive design
- Embedding within an organizational change process
- Country-led management
- Complementarity with other forms of support
- Embedding within an organizational learning process.

Countries are making good progress towards improving technical cooperation effectiveness at the national and sector levels. At the national level, country ownership and leadership are strengthening and interest in TC and capacity development (CD) issues moving up the policy agenda, but the study recommends that more should be done to nurture and promote country ownership. At the sector level, policies and strategies are linked to country-led sector wide or program based approaches, and joint sector working groups are operational, but CD and TC strategies and priorities need to be better articulated and country capacity to formulate capacity improvement strategies needs to be strengthened.

Detailed case studies of Cambodia, Ghana, Kenya, Laos, Malawi, Malaysia, Pakistan, Tanzania, Thailand, Vietnam, and Zambia, are available at <http://www.jica.go.jp/cdstudy>.

Land, T., 2007, 'Joint Evaluation Study of Provision of Technical Assistance Personnel: What can we learn from promising experiences? Synthesis Report', European Centre for Development Policy Management, Discussion Paper 78. <http://www.ecdpm.org/dp78>

This study focuses on the provision of technical assistance personnel, drawing on country studies conducted in Mozambique, Solomon Islands and Vietnam. The study's key conclusions are:

- Development agencies need to let go of technical assistance management in order to empower country partners.
- Country management of TA personnel is a key determinant of effectiveness. This includes decisions about recruitment and deployment, and once deployed, TA personnel should be unambiguously accountable to the host organisations they serve. Some countries may lack sufficient management capacity, in which case progressive or interim support measures may be needed.
- A more informed understanding of how TA can support capacity development and change is the other key determinant of effectiveness. Having an explicit theory of action with an understanding of how different models of change can contribute to capacity development should increase the chances of success.
- Good design is important, including proper diagnosis of need, a flexible mix of approaches including iterative approaches, and monitoring and evaluation systems that address accountability and learning and provide the right incentives.
- Country partners need to come to grips with human resources planning and management and think strategically about the use of TA personnel. TA provision can never be a substitute for reforming the public service.

Three country case studies were developed as part of this work:

- Mozambique: <http://www.ecdpm.org/dp75>
- Solomon Islands: <http://www.ecdpm.org/dp76>
- Vietnam: <http://www.ecdpm.org/dp77>

Williams, G., Jones, S., Imber, V., and Cox, A., 2003, 'A Vision for the Future of Technical Assistance in the International Development System', Oxford Policy Management.
http://www.opml.co.uk/policy_areas/aid_policy/ed768_vision_ta.html

This influential study commissioned by DFID 'presents a vision for the future of Technical Assistance that is based around moving from regarding Technical Assistance as an instrument of donor policy, towards a focus on building capacity for developing country governments to procure and manage advisory services.' (p. iii) The authors call for aid to be untied and delivered through partner country government budgets, and for procurement of skills and services to be done through national procurement systems, with strengthening of such systems where necessary. Where countries lack sufficient local capacity to procure and manage technical assistance, they argue that this capacity needs to be supported and developed. 'The main examples of reform in TA provision including the removal of tying, the use of pooled arrangements and routing through national budget or procurement systems are found among the smaller providers... there has been slow progress in changing technical assistance practices but there are positive examples of change' (p. iv).

ActionAid, 2006, *Real Aid: Making technical assistance work.*
http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc_lib/real_aid2.pdf

ActionAid calculates that at least one-quarter of donor spending, and perhaps as much as half of all ODA, is in the form of technical assistance, and argues that it is overpriced and under-evaluated. 'Like a relic from an earlier age, technical assistance has been largely insulated from donors' efforts to improve the quality of their aid and to act on the widely advertised principles of ownership and partnership. Too much of it continues to be identified, designed and managed by donors themselves, tied to donor countries' own firms, poorly co-ordinated and based on a set of often untested assumptions about expatriate expertise and recipient ignorance.' (p. 3) Specifically, ActionAid argues that (p. 29-41):

- Technical advisers are often under pressure from donors and governments to 'get the job done' rather than take extra time to build capacity
- Advisers often have incentives not to pass on knowledge to their counterparts
- Technical advisers are more focused on meeting donor demands than building capacity
- Advisers have often lacked skills or expertise in building capacity
- Some governments have not been strategic in their use of technical assistance
- Heavy use of expatriate consultants can foster a 'dependency culture'
- The common failure of donor co-ordination has fuelled the problem
- Capacity building initiatives have been undermined by a lack of policy coherence.
- Costs and prices play a limited role in determining demand and supply, leading to high costs
- Much technical assistance is officially tied, and donors prioritise their own nationals even when technical assistance is not officially tied
- Heavy use of expatriate advisers inflates costs because of associated expenses
- The technical assistance market is highly inflexible and competition is severely limited
- Donors want to maintain control and meet disbursement timetables
- Technical assistance is used to ensure that aid money is well spent
- Donors use technical assistance alongside conditionality to promote reforms they consider to be important
- Technical assistance contributes to donor geopolitical or commercial objectives
- There is a lack of clear strategic framework for capacity building
- Technical assistance is seen as a 'free good'
- Too much emphasis is placed on technical solutions to what are often social and political problems
- Too much value is placed on international expertise and experts, and not enough on local knowledge, and experts with understanding of the local political, social and cultural context
- It is often incorrectly assumed that learning is always one way; from expert to recipient

The study recognises efforts at reform including the Paris Declaration (although describing the declaration as being particularly weak on technical assistance) and is optimistic about the increasingly common practice of pooling funds and the shift towards 'greater use of country systems, which appears to be generating some benefits in terms of enhancing government ownership' (p. 42).

ActionAid makes the following recommendations for improving technical assistance (p. 49):

- Draw up capacity building plans based on national development strategies
- Ensure technical assistance contributes to capacity building
- Ensure transparency and accountability in the use of resources
- Ensure that women's rights are fully taken into account
- Allow southern countries to take the lead in the capacity building process
- Make maximum use of country systems, including for procurement, financial management and reporting
- Do not use technical assistance to either substitute for or complement conditionality
- Be fully transparent, to both citizens and poor countries, about funding for technical assistance and its impact
- Ensure greater cost effectiveness, by ensuring that all technical assistance contracts are fully competitive and that bids are made fully transparent
- Strengthen the targets agreed under the Paris Declaration
- Collect and make available more data on donor-by-donor spending

Morgan, P., 2001, 'Technical Cooperation – Success and Failure: An Overview', United Nations Development Programme.

<http://www.cdc-crdb.gov.kh/cdc/twg/Morgan%20TC%20Success%20and%20failure.pdf>

This paper examines factors contributing to the success or failure of technical assistance in different circumstances and suggests possible improvements to TA practice. It notes the following 'corrosive practices':

- Erosion of ownership, commitment and independent action of national actors
- Undermining the functional capabilities of those whom TA was trying to assist
- Encouraging countries to put in place the wrong policies, organizations and institutions
- Lack of sustainable impact
- Self-perpetuation and excessive costs
- Damaging the motivation and sense of professionalism of some donor staff

On the other hand, technical assistance has been successful when the following circumstances are present:

- Interventions are designed around capacity building and the contribution of TA to that process.
- A good fit (in terms of context, purpose, strategy, methodology and management) between TA and other organisational factors.
- A pre-existing sense of country ownership and control: 'TA could damage country ownership but could not do much to create it' (p. 14).
- A 'learning organisation' capacity to sort, synthesize, discard and customise technical knowledge, sifting through the flow of TA advice and picking out what is relevant to problems and conditions at hand.
- Appropriate organisational and personal relationships, where power and authority is delegated to the project level and managed according to the needs of the participants, where TA providers assumed an important but secondary role, and donors focused on support, facilitation, learning and buffering.
- A network of champions who are committed to the intervention including entrepreneurs, protectors, managers, and followers.
- An effective approach to change management, including careful attention to timing and sequencing.
- Quick initial benefits can be realised to establish credibility and momentum, alongside more profound reform over the long term.

The author argues that TA is changing so as to encourage country ownership of development interventions, reduce fragmentation, and encourage more trust and collective action amongst all the participants.

ECDPM, 2002, 'Pooling of Technical Assistance', Capacity.org, European Centre for Development Policy Management, Maastricht.

[http://www.capacity.org/Web_Capacity/Web/UK_Content/Download.nsf/0/3F97CBE6B009E190C1256D56002A3E7C/\\$FILE/issue-12e.pdf](http://www.capacity.org/Web_Capacity/Web/UK_Content/Download.nsf/0/3F97CBE6B009E190C1256D56002A3E7C/$FILE/issue-12e.pdf)

This paper summarises a six-country study on 'the pooling of funds to finance technical assistance (TA) in the context of sector-wide approaches (SWAs) and other new aid mechanisms.' (p. 2) Pooling funds 'has been proposed as a means to reduce the fragmentation of development activities and to encourage country leadership.' (p. 2) This study argues that 'pooling of TA is still in its infancy, although there are some modest but promising signs in several of the countries examined. The move to pooling is part of a broader change in the design and management of international development cooperation, at the core of which is the emphasis on country ownership and control.' (p. 5) In particular, the study reports that:

- Current levels of pooling are low but increasing
- The ability to pool funds has been restricted by national capacity shortages
- Pooling has not yet demonstrated an increase in country ownership
- Small, incremental, and context-sensitive initiatives stand a better chance of success than comprehensive ones
- Pooling has not affected the quantity or cost of technical assistance
- Many agencies are still reluctant to untie aid
- Local technical assistance, especially in Africa, is increasingly expensive and is often no cheaper than foreign assistance
- Efficiency gains due to pooling have been mixed: most initiatives have proven more complex than predicted, but there are emerging signs of improving efficiency
- Pooling tends to highlight the comparative advantages and costs of different providers, and thus increase transparency.

Hauck, V., and Baser, H., 2005, 'TA Pooling: Tools and Lessons Learned', DFID Health Resource Centre, London.

http://www.dfidhealthrc.org/publications/health_service_delivery/TA_Pooling_Dec05.pdf

This report describes technical assistance pooling arrangements and trends in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Technical assistance pooling can be described in terms of three levels (full, mixed, and loose) and four models (delegated cooperation, integrated TA, TA in isolated units, and regional TA support facilities). The study finds that:

- Funding for TA is primarily organised by sectors or themes
- Many arrangements aim to be 'full' pooling but are in practice 'loose' and could remain so for a considerable time given weak national management capacities
- The type of pooling selected must be appropriate to the circumstances
- Applying a mix of mechanisms to a situation can be a useful strategy
- Pooling depends on a critical mass of like-mindedness among partner countries and development agencies
- Building mutual trust based on a shared understanding is the foundation of most successful TA pooling exercises (including trust among development agencies, not just between agencies and countries).

The study argues, 'pooling for TA or other purposes is not a panacea. It has significant costs in terms of time and resources. It may divert resources from more substantive activity. There is also the risk that the difficulties inherent in coming to agreements among a large group of IDAs may result in a risk-free consensus that loses [sic] all innovativeness. Pooling can be useful but is not the only road to good development.' (p. iv)

3. Selected donor policies, strategies and evaluations

Asian Development Bank

Asian Development Bank, 2007, 'Performance of Technical Assistance', Special Evaluation Study, reference number SST: REG 2007–02, Operations Evaluation Department, Asian Development Bank.

<http://www.adb.org/Documents/SES/REG/sst%E2%80%90reg%E2%80%902007%E2%80%9002/SST%E2%80%90REG%E2%80%902007%E2%80%9002.pdf>

This review examined 110 ADB technical assistance projects in five countries and found that two-thirds of projects were successful. The evaluation developed an overall rating of TA performance which revealed:

- Where TA had been used strategically, successful results were often achieved. However, no country strategy examined contained explicit TA strategies.
- Many TAs were weakly formulated with often inadequate application of 'quality at entry' control procedures. There are serious weaknesses in TA implementation monitoring and often weak ownership by executing agencies. ADB is focused on outputs (i.e., report preparation) rather than implementation of the resulting recommendations.
- Inadequate TA resource allocation systems, poor systems for measurement of staff performance related to TA, inadequate TA management information systems, and failure to satisfactorily address problems related to TA that have been known for a decade or more.

The authors argue that ADB's approach to TAs needs to be reconsidered, and that isolated short-term inputs are not appropriate in areas such as policy reform, change management, and capacity-building. They recommend:

- Improving the TA resource allocation system to fit strategic development priorities
- Country partnership strategies should include a clear strategy and program for TA within a long-term framework
- Improve corporate level TA management
- Delegate more authority and contracting accountability to executing agencies
- Ensure that, wherever practical, staff who process advisory TAs remain involved up to completion of the TA, even if they are transferred internally to a new assignment
- Track the results of advisory TAs and reflect these in staff performance assessments
- Strengthen quality-at-entry control systems and evaluate a sample of TAs as part of ADB's biennial review
- The system for TA portfolio monitoring and evaluation should be overhauled to provide corporate and departmental level data on TA implementation, performance, and outcomes.
- A more systematic TA knowledge management process should be developed to collect and synthesize lessons and key findings from TA, and ensure that they are used to improve subsequent TAs.

Belgium

ECDPM, 2006, 'Changing minds and attitudes: Towards improved Belgian Technical Assistance', Belgian Technical Assistance.

http://www.btcctb.org/doc/UPL_200706121115324746.pdf

This study was commissioned by the Belgian government and carried out by ECDPM and ACE Europe. It presents current thinking and new concepts and approaches to technical assistance, reviews the practices and experiences of seven donor countries, and makes recommendations for Belgian Technical Cooperation.

The authors note that 'for twenty years or more, TA has been criticised for its high cost, its demand-led nature and its tendency to self perpetuation' (p. 20) and outline the steps that donors have been taking since the 1990s in an attempt to correct these problems. They argue that progress is being made: 'the agenda for reform of TA is moving, albeit slowly' (p. 29) but 'the agenda is complex and

demanding and could well take a decade or more to implement. Most donors are only at the beginning and are still largely formulating policies to address the goals and concepts.' (p. 21)

Most changes to date have focused on transactional reform: 'improving the performance of TA through organisational and procedural changes such as (i) increased pooling of resources, (ii) South-South co-operation, (iii) untying, (iv) management reforms, such as delegated cooperation and improved choice of personnel, (v) abolition of project implementation units, (vi) decreases in the number of long-term personnel and (vii) improved aid coordination.' (p. 23) More fundamental transformational reforms have been elusive.

The study also notes that 'many if not most developing countries would say that they want less TA, especially from Western countries. They see it as expensive and as displacing nationals. They complain bitterly about the salary differentials between nationals and expatriates and they feel that there is too little emphasis on building national capacity.' (p. 29) Developing countries' priorities include (p. 29-30):

- TA should be unbundled, not serving as a pre-condition for other kinds of assistance as is often the case
- As little earmarking of funds as possible, in order to improve national control
- Some countries are keen to move towards pooling of TA which they see as a means of increasing their control over funding, but this is not always the case and should not be assumed
- Developing countries are uneasy with the fact that accountability is still heavily weighted towards the government's obligations to the donors, with little attention paid to monitoring the role of donors
- Developing countries would also like to see ODA in general and TA in particular arrive on their timetables, not those of donors

Commonwealth Secretariat

Baser, H., Morgan, P., and Zinke, J., 2007, 'Evaluation of the Strategic Gap Filling Programme of the Commonwealth Secretariat', Strategic Planning and Evaluation Division, Commonwealth Secretariat.

http://www.thecommonwealth.org/document/189957/evaluation_of_the_strategic_gap_filling.htm

'Strategic gap filling' is a term used by the Commonwealth Secretariat to describe its free-standing technical assistance which is not tied to existing programmes or regional organisations and is driven by the requests of individual countries.

The study criticises technical assistance on the grounds that 'many technical advisers report to the development agencies rather than to national authorities' and 'donors have often made acceptance of foreign expertise a pre-condition for other assistance'. It acknowledges, however, that 'the development community has agreed a new aid paradigm with a focus on poverty reduction, partnership, accountability and coherence among different policies.' (p. 2)

The study finds some tensions in the strategic gap filling programme between strategic objectives of the Commonwealth members as a whole and objectives of individual countries, and between different views held by member states on flexibility vs. planning, institutional development vs. poverty reduction, free-standing activities vs. donor co-ordination, and perhaps fundamentally about the purpose of the gap-filling programme. Despite challenges, results are favourable and strategic gap filling seems to have had impact well beyond what might normally be expected from a small budget. The study concludes with 25 recommendations which focus primarily on improving monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and improving coordination and sharing of information about activities in each country.

Denmark

Danida, 2005, 'Technical Assistance in Danish Bilateral Aid', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark. <http://www.amg.um.dk/NR/rdonlyres/D56DA3AB-BA60-41B6-8527-FB9E13154605/0/TechnicalAssistanceInBilateralAidDecember2005.pdf>

This policy paper sets out Danida's new strategy for technical assistance following a major restructuring of Danish aid in 2003. The paper argues that technical assistance has made significant contributions to development, but the impact of TA has been reduced because (p. 5):

- Instead of generating independence in partner institutions TA increased their sense of dependence, thus weakening the commitment and ownership of national actors.
- TA sometimes undermined the functional role of institutions it aimed to assist by circumventing local procedures and systems and setting up parallel structures, draining already weak institutions of scarce human and other resources.
- TA at times encouraged adoption of wrong policies, organisations and institutions and, more recently, too complex and expensive solutions.

A 2001 study found that demand for technical advisers increased during the 1990s, and that their use was 'frequently more driven by the demands of Danida than by those of the partners.... The use of advisers... was accompanied by the introduction of parallel structures and salary incentives that distorted the host institutional environment and undermined civil service reform. Danida funded advisers are considered loyal to Danida by themselves and by partners. Many advisers reported a lack of supervision and access to technical back up.' (p. 6-7)

The paper outlines the following principles for the use of technical assistance:

- A strong partnership of donors and partners must be built around delivery of TA based on confidence, predictability and collective efforts.
- TA must be firmly aligned behind the country's own development aspirations and reflect the national context.
- TA supported capacity development must be owned by partners and be designed to support their reforms and emerging institutional structures and in accordance with their capacity and preparedness to absorb advice.
- The various TA instruments must be used flexibly to respond to the variety of requirements for capacity development and circumstance.

European Union

European Commission, 2008, 'Reforming Technical Cooperation and Project Implementation Units for External Aid provided by the European Commission: A Backbone Strategy', EuropeAid, European Commission, Belgium. http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/what/delivering-aid/aid-effectiveness/documents/backbone_strategy_on_tc-pius_final_en.pdf

In this new strategy for the European Commission, technical cooperation and technical assistance (the latter 'refers to the personnel involved in the implementation and the management of technical cooperation services') are seen as important tools for capacity development, providing policy and/or expert advice, strengthening implementation of development initiatives, and preparing the way for and facilitating other forms of cooperation.

The strategy aims to provide 'good quality technical cooperation that supports country-led programmes, based on strong partner demand and which is focused on achieving sustainable development results' and provide 'support through partner-owned Project Implementation Arrangements with a substantial reduction in the use of parallel Project Implementation Units.' (p. 8) It sets out eight guiding principles (p. 8-9):

- Focus on capacity development
- Demand-led approach where TC is not provided by default

- Adopting a results orientation (inputs/activities are linked to targeted outputs which in turn lead to sustainable development outcomes)
- Country-owned and managed TC process
- Taking account of country and sector-specific requirements
- Working through harmonised and aligned action
- Avoiding the use of parallel PIUs and promoting effective Project Implementation Arrangements
- Considering different and innovative options for the provision of Technical Cooperation

The European Commission is developing a new web site at www.capacity4dev.eu, to be opened later this year, to support the roll-out of the new guidelines and improved approaches to technical cooperation for capacity-building.

Court of Auditors, 2007, ‘Special Report No. 6/2007 on the effectiveness of technical assistance in the context of capacity development together with the Commission’s replies’, Official Journal of the European Union, C 312.

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2007:312:0003:0024:EN:PDF>

The European Court of Auditors, reviewing the European Commission’s technical assistance programmes, found that ‘project results vary considerably but ... in the light of the often difficult environment in which they take place, project results and the contribution made by the technical assistance used can be considered as reasonable. The quality of the technical assistance provided was generally found to be satisfactory, but other important factors have reduced the effectiveness of the support provided.’ The following key areas of concern and opportunities for improvement were identified (p. 6):

- Inadequate assessment of institutional capacity weaknesses or guidance on the role of technical assistance in institutional development
- Project design often suffers from over-ambitious objectives, tight timeframes and insufficient assessment of the institutional environment and level of local ownership
- Project implementation is often hindered by long preparation and start-up phases, which makes project design outdated by the time implementation starts, reduces the time available for implementation, and hinders recruitment of technical assistance
- Procurement procedures for contracting technical assistance are not conducive to the participation of public institutions, while in certain areas better qualified experts may be found within such organisations.
- Donors still provide technical assistance support mainly through separate, uncoordinated projects, while implementation arrangements do not encourage local ownership
- There is no management information system in place to assess and record the performance of technical assistance companies or experts and provide information when decisions on the procurement of technical assistance are taken.

The Court of Auditors made the following eight recommendations (p. 14-15):

- In its Country Strategy Papers, the Commission should make a comprehensive and structured analysis of existing institutional capacity weaknesses and of capacity development needs.
- The Commission should develop guidelines on technical assistance, defining its role in the area of capacity development and providing a sound approach and tools to consider when and how to use it.
- Design of capacity development projects should be improved, by facilitating effective ownership and leadership of the national part of the process, by better defining specific capacity development objectives and related technical assistance requirements, by avoiding overly complex implementation structures, by being more realistic in terms of objectives to be achieved and by planning longer implementation periods.
- The procedures governing the project preparation and start-up phase, including the procurement of technical assistance, should be reviewed in order to create more time for implementation. More flexibility should be allowed during the inception phase to adjust the

project design and/or the Terms of Reference for the technical assistance to changes in circumstances.

- The evaluation criteria in technical assistance tenders should be reviewed to better reflect the quality and previous experience of the experts and the consultancy company.
- Other options for procurement should be considered to allow the best possible choice of technical expertise, including expertise from public institutions and expertise available in the beneficiary country or the region.
- In line with the Paris Declaration commitments, the Commission should increase its use of technical assistance through coordinated programmes and apply, where possible, implementation arrangements which encourage local ownership.
- Technical assistance performance by companies and experts should be assessed systematically and a management information system for recording, reporting and consulting this performance should be developed.

International Monetary Fund

IMF, 2005, 'Evaluation of the Technical Assistance Provided by the International Monetary Fund', International Monetary Fund. <http://www.imf.org/external/np/ieo/2005/ta/eng/013105.htm>

This paper reports on a six-country evaluation of IMF technical assistance. Key findings included (pp. 8-14):

- TA activities are driven, in large part, by IMF-supported programs and Fund-wide initiatives. There were weak links between TA priorities and PRSPs, but in general TA activities do not appear to be guided by a medium-term country-based policy framework. Attempts to introduce more strategic coherence have not been successful.
- Counterparts in member countries have generally been satisfied with the resident experts provided by the IMF.
- In terms of cost, the relative merits of missions versus resident experts depend heavily on country-specific circumstances.
- The involvement of the authorities in the preparation of terms of reference (TOR), particularly for long-term experts, has been generally passive. Greater upfront involvement by local officials was generally associated with better results.
- TA effectiveness has often been undermined by a lack of awareness of institutional, organizational, or managerial features of the recipient country.
- More informal and iterative discussions on a broader set of options before the wrap-up meetings at the end of a TA mission might contribute to enhancing ownership of recommendations.
- Inadequate dissemination of TA reports within and across agencies in the country is a major problem in environments where bureaucratic and institutional practices limit the free flow of information.
- There were many instances of weak coordination between the IMF and donors working in similar areas.
- The present IMF documentation and reporting does not unbundle and track the different stages of TA progress toward its final objectives, which limits the ability to use past track records in implementing TA in making decisions about future TA
- Frequently, political interference or lack of support by the authorities prevent agencies from using effectively the new knowledge transmitted by TA
- Tensions among government agencies, a high rotation of officials, and a weak judicial framework are major constraints to the effectiveness of TA.
- Stronger involvement by the authorities in designing TA activities and early commitments to better empower the agencies receiving TA to implement their new knowledge may help signal ownership and commitment, and the possibility of success.

The authors make six recommendations for future IMF technical assistance (pp. 14-19):

- The IMF should develop a medium-term country policy framework for setting TA priorities, incorporating country-specific strategic directions and linked to more systematic assessments of factors underlying past performance.

- The IMF should develop more systematic approaches to track progress on major TA activities and to identify reasons behind major shortfalls.
- Greater involvement by the authorities and counterparts in the design of TA activities and arrangements for follow-up should be emphasized as a signal of ownership and commitment.
- Stronger efforts should be made by TA experts to identify options and discuss alternatives with local officials prior to drafting TA recommendations.
- The program of ex post evaluations of TA should be widened and more systematic procedures for disseminating lessons put in place.
- The prioritization filters should be discontinued or replaced by ones that would more effectively guide TA allocation. Either course of action involves strategic decisions on trade-offs that need to be taken explicitly.

United Kingdom

DFID, 2006, 'How to provide Technical Cooperation personnel', United Kingdom Department for International Development. <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/mdg/aid-effectiveness/tc-how-to.pdf>

This short 'how-to note' describes the stages of technical cooperation and gives recommendations for good practice. DFID TC includes personnel, training, and knowledge and research. DFID spending on this has decreased as a proportion of its bilateral programme from 2001-2006 from 17% to about 12%. TC is useful in contexts ranging from fragile states to low-income and middle-income countries. TC is often criticised as high cost, supply driven, lacking partner ownership, and low impact. DFID's vision is of a market-oriented approach to TC, untied from donors and procured directly by partner countries, and nationally managed. TC should also be harmonised and coordinated with national strategies.

DFID's recommendations for good practice include:

- A rigorous and joint design phase, aiming for a shared understanding of purpose and clear identification of demand and country ownership.
- Strengthening the procurement process so that it can select the right combination of TC personnel, including a mix of local and international personnel with the right skills. This also includes ensuring that aid is untied. National partners' procurement systems should be used where sufficient capacity exists.
- Moving towards pooling to increase local ownership and alignment, and to reduce transactions costs and donor fragmentation.
- Improve management and monitoring, preferably directly by partner countries

Oxford Policy Management, 2006, 'Developing Capacity? An Evaluation of DFID-funded Technical Co-operation for Economic Management in Sub-Saharan Africa: Synthesis Report', Synthesis Report EV667, UK Department for International Development. <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/performance/files/ev667.pdf>

This report evaluates the contribution of technical cooperation to the development of organisational capacities for economic management in Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and Zambia. The study highlighted the following findings (p. xv-xvii):

- The wider institutional setting has been a major factor in determining the effectiveness of TC. Relevant factors include political commitment, limits to capacity development, pay and management structures, quality of leadership, and national policies on technical cooperation and capacity development. However, even where the environment was unfavourable, appropriate design of activities improved the chances of success and it was still possible for TC to be used effectively in a more transactional role.
- An understanding of the wider institutional context, as well as the specific features of the organisation, is critical in designing TC activities and for effective capacity development.
- There has been some tendency to overestimate partner capacity and commitment.
- The most successful activities reviewed were marked by high levels of government ownership and consensus between DFID and other development partners on priorities and approach,

and on close involvement of the organisation receiving support in the selection of TC providers.

- One should not draw general conclusions about the relationship between the “type” of technical cooperation provided and its effectiveness and impact; the overall context in which the support is provided and the quality of the design and management of the activity appear to be more fundamental determinants of success.
- Effectiveness is likely to be enhanced where the choice of contractors is a joint decision by DFID and Government and where rigorous interview based selection of consultants is used.
- The quality of certain types of project is likely to be enhanced by the provision of an independent, properly qualified Quality Assurance overseer, who can advise both Government and DFID as an honest broker.
- The use of project management units operating outside the normal civil service structure may be useful and necessary for the task of carrying through a particular task like the management of the development of a new IT system but impact and sustainability is in question unless underlying staffing and capacity constraints are addressed.
- The use of special allowances and performance bonuses was not judged successful in the cases reviewed.
- There has been significant progress in improving harmonisation and alignment driven in large part by moves towards providing general budget support and sector support

The study recommended:

- DFID’s practice should continue to emphasise and reinforce the Paris Declaration commitments and the principles behind them, including strengthening the capacity of governments to manage and use technical cooperation resources.
- A more rigorous and systematic approach to the assessment of the institutional and organisational context is required
- Achieving transformational impact requires a wider framework of action that addresses institutional and organisational issues.
- TC can be highly effective in a range of contexts (including ones where the institutional setting for capacity development is poor – indeed it may be of most value in achieving transactional impact in such conditions)
- For long-term technical cooperation staff (whether provided as consultants or seconded staff), the quality and appropriateness of skills for the role and organisation are critical, with interpersonal skills being particularly important. Selection processes should be as rigorous and individualised as would apply for the appointment of permanent staff within the organisation.
- Even in relatively unfavourable environments for capacity development, greater attention to the design of activities could be expected to increase the capacity development impact.
- Lack of progress in civil service reform emerges as the most significant factor in explaining the limited capacity development impact achieved in three of the four country case studies.

The country studies are available at <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/performance/files/ev667-vol2.pdf>.

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