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Leveraging South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation

Background paper prepared jointly by
UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP

Introduction

1. The United Nations has proposed that in its policy and operational work, South-South cooperation be defined as “a process whereby two or more developing countries pursue their individual and/or shared national capacity development objectives through exchanges of knowledge, skills, resources and technical know-how, and through regional and interregional collective actions, including partnerships involving Governments, regional organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector, for their individual and/or mutual benefit within and across regions.”¹ Triangular cooperation refers to South-South cooperation arrangements that also involve support from one or more developed countries and/or from one or more multilateral organizations.
2. South-South cooperation has been practised for decades; it was first addressed strategically at the 1978 United Nations Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries, and resulted in the Buenos Aires Plan of Action. In recent years, South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation have gained far greater prominence as a direct result of economic growth and capacity development in the South; countries have increasingly found it desirable to establish direct partnerships among themselves for development or humanitarian purposes. These have mostly occurred outside the traditional development framework. South-South cooperation can take several forms, such as “sharing of knowledge and experience, training, technology transfer, financial and monetary cooperation and in-kind contributions.”² It may occur in the context of a specific sectoral, cross-cutting or humanitarian initiative, or may be more far-reaching, involving multiple sectors or issues.
3. South-South cooperation is both an ever-increasing reality and a wellspring of huge promise and potential for development and for humanitarian action. The potential arises from the added economic resources of increasingly prosperous Southern countries, from the perceived value of development partnerships founded upon principles of solidarity, and from similar national experiences and shared understanding of needs among developing countries, which can increase the likelihood of achieving innovative solutions that are appropriate to the diverse country contexts. Countries in the South may have particular strengths relevant for the provision of assistance in humanitarian crises. These may be from geography (possessing shared borders), from direct experience of similar crises, from having been a recipient of humanitarian aid in the past, or from increasing economic and productive capability, enabling developing countries to engage progressively in the global humanitarian community.
4. A Southern country’s provision of support to other Southern countries does not mean that the provider has eliminated poverty and disparities within its own borders; as developing countries have emphasized, North-South development assistance remains critical to underscore and complement South-South cooperation in progress toward national objectives and priorities.

¹ *Framework of operational guidelines on United Nations support to South-South and triangular cooperation: Note by the Secretary-General (SSC/17/3)*, 12 April 2012.

² *Nairobi outcome document of the High-level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation*, adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 64/222 (2010).

Background on United Nations support for South-South and triangular cooperation

5. Sectoral, thematic or programmatic support to South-South cooperation are provided by various relevant departments of the United Nations Secretariat, development funds and programmes, regional commissions and specialized agencies in their respective areas of competence. The overall progress and achievements made by United Nations system organizations and entities are reported by the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation to the High-level Committee on South-South Cooperation and the General Assembly through the reports of the UNDP Administrator and the United Nations Secretary-General on a biennial basis.
6. United Nations support should apply principles, objectives and priorities articulated in existing United Nations guidance specific to South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation: the Buenos Aires Plan of Action on technical cooperation among developing countries (1978); the New Directions Strategy on technical cooperation among developing countries (1995); the Revised Guidelines for the review of policies and procedures concerning technical cooperation among developing countries (2003); and the Nairobi outcome document of the United Nations High-level Conference on South-South Cooperation (2009). The United Nations is currently formulating a framework of operational guidelines for South-South cooperation, to be issued by the Secretary-General. Individual United Nations organizations have agency-specific guidance appropriate for their mandates and areas of competence.
7. Among generally agreed principles relevant for South-South cooperation are the following: national ownership of development priorities by developing countries, based on the principle of solidarity; a focus on results; inclusive development partnerships; and transparency and accountability among partners.

I. Key issues and challenges

Opportunities for leveraging South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation to achieve internationally agreed development goals

8. South-South cooperation potentially multiplies the leverage available for reaching the poorest and most disadvantaged people and communities. Countries in the South are setting and implementing the agenda, while United Nations organizations support these processes. It is important to identify constructive catalytic roles for United Nations support in the context of South-South cooperation, building on United Nations comparative advantages. These advantages include convening power, global reach and country presence of field-based United Nations organizations, technical expertise according to specific missions and mandates, and ability to support impartial impact assessments.
9. Other comparative United Nations advantages may include the ability to catalyse and support the creation of systems – for social protection, national policy and regulatory environments, resilience, or humanitarian transition. Another may arise from the advantages offered by a multilateral approach to complement or amplify bilateral methods – by pooling resources and risks, sharing knowledge more widely, or establishing regional policies and standards. In this light, greater cooperation between the United Nations and regional organizations should be examined. The significance of United Nations organizations' cooperation in regional arrangements is underscored by the fact that most (though not all) South-South cooperation involves neighbouring countries. Similarly, the role of multilaterals in middle-income countries should also be examined with regard to South-South cooperation, as these countries have seen some of the greatest economic growth, and will originate much of the exchange.

10. Triangular cooperation may be useful in situations where a Southern country has skills, experience or resources relevant for another Southern country while a third actor (another country or a multilateral organization) may be able to provide additional capacity to support their application. Capacity in this context may be *institutional* (the capacity to manage development cooperation projects), *financial*, or *systemic* (the capacity to conceptualize and design whole-country approaches to solving key social challenges).

11. Many United Nations organizations already deliver much of their development and policy work through arrangements that, in fact, involve South-South cooperation of many different kinds. There is now an opportunity to formalize some of these arrangements. Careful consideration should be given to the possible advantages and disadvantages of formalizing such arrangements as ‘South-South cooperation’ instead of using whatever methodologies make sense for the objective being addressed; in some cases, these will be South-South cooperation; in others, they will take a different form.

12. In most cases, Southern countries wishing to share development cooperation will remain both providers and recipients of development cooperation. United Nations organizations may have an opportunity to provide technical support to national cooperation agencies in the design of approaches with relation to international standards, including with a human rights perspective.

13. South-South cooperation may prove to be particularly fruitful for a range of sectors: health; gender equality and women’s empowerment; climate change; human rights; food security; scientific and technological innovation; infrastructure; trade, finance and investment; and regional integration.

Roles for field-based United Nations agencies

14. A number of important roles can potentially be filled by United Nations agencies with a field presence:

(a) *Convening and advocating:*

- (i) Encouraging openness of Southern countries to South-South cooperation or triangular cooperation;
- (ii) Supporting and encouraging ongoing discussions on the principles that should govern South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation.

(b) *Building partnerships:*

- (i) Matching demand for, and supply of, resources (knowledge, training, technology, financial, commodities) that may be available through South-South cooperation, regionally or globally;
- (ii) Promoting, facilitating or leading development of appropriate bilateral or regional agreements, frameworks or memoranda of understanding for promoting South-South cooperation;
- (iii) Facilitating involvement of civil society and the private sector.

- (c) *Knowledge sharing and brokering:*
 - (i) Catalysing knowledge transfer and supporting knowledge management systems;
 - (ii) Supporting identification, documentation and dissemination of good practices.
- (d) *Analysing and monitoring progress:*
 - (i) Developing and deploying standards, norms and systems to evaluate the outcomes, impact, and cost-effectiveness of programmes designed and implemented in South-South cooperation or triangular cooperation contexts;
 - (ii) Providing support, upon request, through results-based data collection, monitoring and evaluation of South-South cooperation or triangular cooperation initiatives.
- (e) *Planning and policy support:*
 - (i) Assisting governments in identifying substantive programme or development issues requiring actions that reach outside national borders;
 - (ii) Facilitating development of inter-country policies and strategies on substantive issues.
- (f) *Programme support and capacity building:*
 - (i) Validating the results that can be expected from solutions offered via South-South cooperation or triangular cooperation;
 - (ii) Acting as a technical reference to help implement recognized good practices;
 - (iii) Supporting and strengthening regional organizations engaging in South-South cooperation or triangular cooperation.
- (g) *Promoting values and principles:*
 - (i) Supporting the implementation of human rights and other principles included in international conventions, agreements and conference outcomes, which the partners are party to;
 - (ii) Leveraging South-South cooperation to reinforce political will and commitment to international frameworks.

Challenges

15. The increasing importance of South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation requires the United Nations system to address its role as a facilitator for development in a more efficient and cost-effective manner, and to assess the broader implications for its role in an evolving international context. The growth of South-South cooperation increases complexity – on the process level, from the increasingly complex roles assumed by Southern countries that are now both giving and receiving development support; on the strategic level, from the questions that such cooperation invites from

traditional donors and the United Nations concerning whether, how and where to prioritize official development assistance.

16. The engagement of new States as sources of knowledge, capacity or funding for international development means that the methods and structures for development cooperation are changing, as are the ways in which policy is developed. More broadly, there are questions about leadership and priorities for development, and about how human rights can best be realized in the new environment. United Nations Member States agree in principle that standards of transparency and development effectiveness should apply in all development contexts. However, it remains a challenge for the United Nations to engage and support South-South cooperation in a manner that upholds these standards and protects the interests of the poorest and most marginalized groups.

17. Southern countries seeking to share valuable knowledge, technologies, or development resources with others may be limited in their capacity to do so, due to the need for strengthening of institutions for coordinating development cooperation outside national borders. Further evidence and analysis is needed to understand the possible impact of these circumstances.

18. A number of United Nations organizations have established coordination units and created strategies for South-South cooperation, but the majority have not. Appropriate organizational changes and development of strategic guidance is needed in order to mainstream support for South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation successfully into programme planning, management and evaluation processes.

II. Lessons learned

19. A few broad, strategic-level lessons learned are emerging from the experience of United Nations organizations thus far in supporting South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation. Among the more significant are the following:

- (a) Without capacity to systematically assess either the demand for development cooperation from potential beneficiary countries or the supply from provider countries, and how the two could be best matched, there is a risk to:
 - (i) Promote poor-quality solutions, especially with regards to international standards, including human rights principles;
 - (ii) Miss opportunities to scale up good solutions;
 - (iii) Exclude from South-South cooperation-driven initiatives the poorer and more disadvantaged nations of the South, as they often have less capacity to articulate their needs and to access information regarding such cooperation opportunities.
- (b) Experience thus far with supporting South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation indicates that the following are key enabling factors for successful United Nations engagement:
 - (i) Identification of a clear and relevant United Nations comparative advantage;
 - (ii) Broad and inclusive partnerships that allow the United Nations to offer a distinct added value that is recognized by the other partners;

- (iii) Opportunities to catalyse innovation;
 - (iv) Ensuring that adequate effort is made in each key area, such as policy, strategic planning and targeting of development and humanitarian cooperation, programming considerations, and operations-related challenges.
- (c) Humanitarian action deserves special consideration. Southern countries have provided humanitarian cooperation in the form of receiving refugees, supporting peace operations and funding humanitarian actions; some of this support has been channelled multilaterally. Continued efforts need to be made to ascertain that such support can provide benefits such as efficient aid delivery, visibility, and strengthened sense of partnership.
 - (d) Conversely, United Nations support for South-South cooperation initiatives in disaster risk reduction has seen some noteworthy successes. Multilateral mechanisms have enabled Southern countries to pool, price and diffuse risk much more effectively than they could do by going it alone. Facilitated peer review of national disaster management policies and plans, involving multilateral cooperation, is effective in strengthening the individual capabilities of Southern countries to respond to climate-related humanitarian emergencies. In addition, these processes have expedited entry points for South-South cooperation in broader areas of shared interest, such as national social protection systems and national budget management practices.
 - (e) The rise of South-South cooperation presents great opportunities for new or disruptive approaches that can lead to policy, programme or technological innovation. Disruptive innovation will have important implications for norms and standards, for cost efficiencies, and for programme delivery modalities, but these implications are difficult to foresee; effective adjustment will require ongoing vigilance, flexibility and wide sharing of good practices within and beyond the United Nations system.

Conclusion

20. Answers to a number of pertinent questions will help guide further development of principles, standards and implementation of support for South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation.
- (a) A truly coherent United Nations could help crystallize whole-country solutions to social problems implemented through triangular cooperation whereas a fragmented United Nations could potentially worsen problems arising from parallel uncoordinated development projects. What avenues for strengthening United Nations coordination are worth exploring in the context of South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation? What other principles, in addition to those cited under lessons learned, could help to identify fruitful opportunities for United Nations organizations' engagement with South-South cooperation?
 - (b) This paper cites a few of the apparent comparative advantages of the United Nations in South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation, namely convening power, global reach and country presence, technical expertise according to specific missions and mandates, impartiality in impact assessments, capacity to catalyse development of national systems, and capacity to catalyse development of regional and multilateral arrangements. Specifically with regard to UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS, UNICEF,

UN-Women and WFP, are there additional comparative advantages that can be identified and leveraged to support South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation for development and humanitarian action?

- (c) Sharing of knowledge, lessons learned and good practices is clearly essential for continued progress in leveraging South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation. What kind of measures for knowledge sharing between field-based United Nations organizations, focusing on South-South cooperation, would be appropriate to undertake? How can Southern countries be effectively encouraged and supported to share accurate, comprehensive information on South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation?
- (d) There is consensus that some form of rules and principles should apply in South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation, but the substance of the rules is not yet agreed. What role should United Nations agencies play in promoting and encouraging the development of such rules?
- (e) What merit is there in considering collective United Nations strategies for engaging with Southern sources of programme funding?
- (f) Significant human development challenges remain to be solved in countries emerging as providers of development cooperation through South-South cooperation arrangements. What implications does this have for how the international system prioritizes traditional forms of development and humanitarian cooperation and funding? What are the best ways to engage with countries that are both recipients of traditional aid and partners in South-South cooperation?
