Making *Technical Cooperation* More Effective

The European Commission's Reform of Technical Cooperation in a Snapshot

A Note for Country Partners[1]

EUROPEAN
COMMISSION

Technical Cooperation (TC) is often criticized for being too expensive, supply driven, and fragmented – and for not contributing to sustainable results.

The European Commission (EC) has therefore launched a strategy to reform the way it provides TC, which is known as the Backbone Strategy. Member states of the European Union share this reform agenda and have adopted an operational framework to guide the design and management of TC[2].

> The EC reform has two goals:

➔ TC supports country-led programmes based on strong demand from country partners and focusing on achieving sustainable development results.

➔ TC is provided through partner-owned implementation arrangements, with a substantial reduction in the use of parallel Project Implementation Units (PIUs).

Achieving these goals requires changes in the way the EC and its country partners' work with TC. Together, they must:

➔ Make country **ownership** a real feature of TC support

➔ Base any support provided on clearly expressed **demand** and

➔ Ensure that TC contributes to concrete **results** beyond immediate activities.

This note briefly explains what the EC reform of TC means for country partners. It highlights core messages from the Backbone Strategy[3], and suggests what partner countries can do to make TC more effective.

For more material, please consult www.capacity4dev.eu, an open platform set up to support the TC reform or contact the EC Delegation in your country.

This note synthesizes key messages developed in the "Guidelines on Making Technical Cooperation More Effective", which are available at:

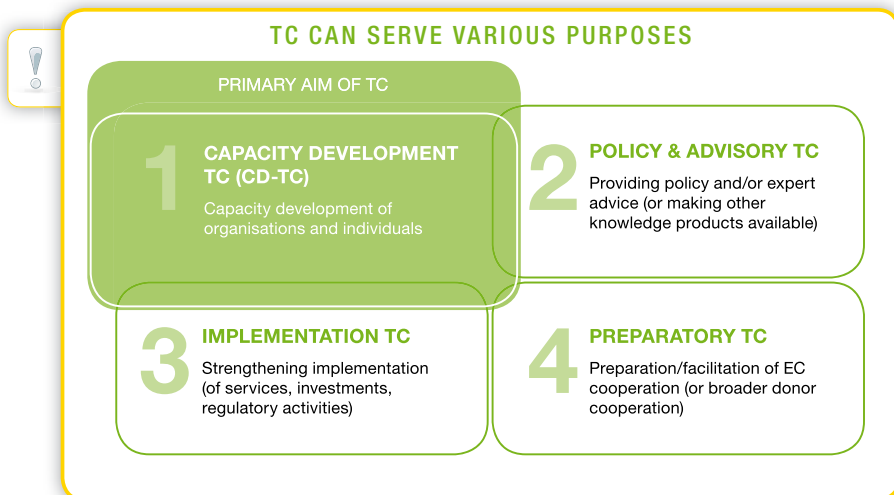http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/system/files/c4d/Guidelines_on_ TC_en.pdf.

The Key Messages

→ **Capacity Development (CD) is the primary objective of TC and requires strong country ownership.** While TC can serve various purposes, its main purpose is to strengthen the capacity of partner country organizations and sectors to perform. This is why country ownership and leadership is so critical.

→ **Results, not TC support, must drive dialogue, design and implementation.** The starting point for dialogue about TC is the expected results that the organization or sector seeks to achieve. Only once these have been agreed should attention turn to the domestic and external resources required to deliver the results.

→ **Focus first on what country partners can do with their own resources – second on possible TC support from the EC and other donors.** This implies focusing on a country's own projects and programmes.

→ **Encourage all donors to harmonize and align their TC support with country strategies and systems.** Doing so will further reinforce ownership of TC support, and help reduce fragmentation.

→ **Implementation of country-owned programmes requires sound implementation arrangements.** These must be led by country partners and specified for the entire programme combining both domestic and external inputs.

→ **Quality assurance and monitoring are key instruments for effective TC support.** Partners are encouraged to play a key role in quality assurance before and during implementation of TC support.

The following pages explore these messages in more detail.

> CD is the Primary Objective of TC and Requires Strong Country Ownership

Capacity development (CD) is the primary objective of technical cooperation support – but not the only one. It can also support provision of policy or expert advice; support the direct implementation of projects and programmes; or assist with the preparation/design of EC cooperation programmes (see box below).

TC CAN SERVE VARIOUS PURPOSES

PRIMARY AIM OF TC

1 CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT TC (CD-TC)
Capacity development of organisations and individuals

2 POLICY & ADVISORY TC
Providing policy and/or expert advice (or making other knowledge products available)

3 IMPLEMENTATION TC
Strengthening implementation (of services, investments, regulatory activities)

4 PREPARATORY TC
Preparation/facilitation of EC cooperation (or broader donor cooperation)

CD is only successful when there is strong country leadership pushing for change. Under these circumstances, experts, training or equipment, can make a positive contribution. When ownership and leadership is absent, TC usually fails to make a sustainable impact.

Therefore, TC support to a country-driven CD process must be based on clear demand, ownership and the commitment of local stakeholders. In practical terms, this means:

➔ country partners exercise hands-on leadership and participate actively throughout the cycle from formulation, through implementation to monitoring and evaluation.

➔ a real investment of partner resources (commitment, time, attention, etc.) with external support only coming in to supplement a partner's own resources.

Experience suggests that all too often, donors take the lead in the formulation process. The focus of discussions tends to be on what external partners will bring and less on what the partner country intends to do itself. Implementation often relies on the deployment of TA personnel with the country partner playing a secondary, support role.

Bottom-line: The EC provides resources that can help partners implement their own projects, programmes and processes – the EC does not make its own projects or programmes. Country partners need to proactively lead the identification and formulation process and assume a lead role during implementation.

OWNERSHIP AND COUNTRY MANAGEMENT OF TC SUPPORT: WILL THE EC SIMPLY OFFER THE SUPPORT THAT PARTNERS WANT?

Sometimes, the concept of ownership leads to frustration and tension: Country partners may think that it implies that donors should just offer the support that the partner wants – and when donors refuse to do this, they may be seen as not "walking the talk": But ownership and leadership does not mean unilateral decision-making: leadership means convincing, by arguments and evidence, that a certain course of action is the best, and ownership means actively supporting a course of action that is developed in dialogue with development partners.

So dialogue continues to be essential – and eventually, both country partners and donors have the right (and obligation) to say no to proposals that they cannot commit to.

Results, not TC Support, Must Drive Dialogue, Design and Implementation

Consideration of possible TC inputs, whether in the form of expertise, training or support equipment, should be the end point rather than the entry point of discussions. The focus upfront should be on expected results.

Dialogue should begin by discussing the outputs that the organization or sector aims to deliver, whether these relate to the supply of water, collection of revenues, delivery of primary education etc. Thereafter, the dialogue should discuss how far the organization(s) is able to deliver those outputs.

If it can, all is well and good. There is no particular need to design a CD/change process and TC will not be required.

If it can't, then a CD/ change process may be required. To help decide on the nature and scope of the required change, it will be important to understand the factors that are constraining performance – incentives, management, insufficient skills etc. A participatory capacity assessment can help do this. It should be lead by the organizations involved, but can of course require specialized support.

Thereafter, an intervention can be designed. First, it will be important to specify the expected changes in capacity that should result from the intervention. Examples might include improved competency of staff, clearer policy framework, upgraded processes and systems, more effective incentive framework, and better relations and networking with external stakeholders.
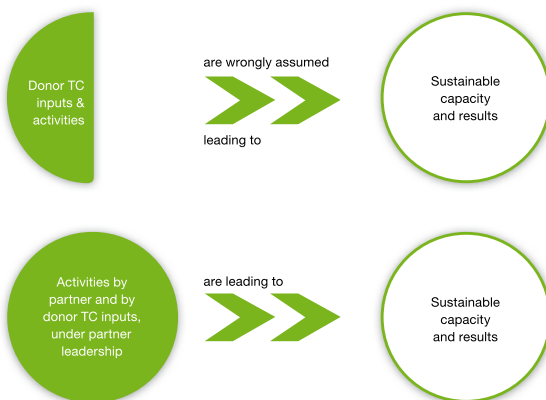
The next step is to decide on the activities and inputs that will be required to implement the CD/change intervention. As discussed in the next section, it is only at this stage that the possible contribution of TC, along side own resources, should be considered.

iRemember! Focus, first, on the results to be achieved before considering the inputs that will be required to achieve those results.

> Focus First on What Country Partners Can Do – Second on Possible TC Support

Very often donor-supported programmes focus on the contributions that external TC is expected to make, while local contributions are only factored in at the end – if at all. The expectation is that TC alone will bring about results. This may not only disempower local stakeholders but also under-estimate the critical role of country leadership and ownership. It also creates the impression that the project belongs to the donor, rather than to the country partner.

Donor TC inputs & activities

are wrongly assumed

leading to

Sustainable capacity and results

Activities by partner and by donor TC inputs, under partner leadership

are leading to

Sustainable capacity and results

Sustainable capacity development will simply not happen unless country partners invest resources, energy and commitment. It is like getting physically fit: outsiders can support, give advice, coach and motivate – but the exercises, the running and the hard efforts have to be done by those who want to get in better shape.

Country partners need, therefore, to think carefully how they will invest in their own programmes before thinking about any external input. Which resources of their own will they bring to bear, and how will they assume management responsibility?Own contributions must go well beyond offering office space and equipment for TC personnel. It means being much more than a good host. Country partners need to provide oversight, be responsible for critical decision-making and supervision, while partner staff need to be fully involved in implementation.

In this way, the CD efforts become an integral part of the organization's own priorities and work programme. It will not be treated as a donor project to be implemented by project personnel.

Only once country partner inputs and responsibilities have been identified, should attention turn to possible external support. In so doing, partner countries should think carefully about the kind of TC support that is most suitable:

- ➔ Should expertise be sourced locally, regionally or internationally?

- ➔ Are there innovative alternatives to the conventional use of international technical assistance?

- ➔ Should support be long-term or short-term and what kind of role should it play?

- ➔ What other forms of support could be useful - has consideration been given to peer learning, or to institutional twinning?

- ➔ If training is needed, is this best achieved through in-service workshops, in cooperation with local institutions like universities or through distance learning?

- ➔ Which mix of inputs offers the best value for money? Is sufficient information on cost available to make an informed decision?

- ➔ What lessons of experience can be drawn from the past? What has worked well and what did not and why?

In some cases TC may not be relevant at all and should not therefore be provided.

iTip: In the design phase, it is important to ascertain that key activities can be implemented and that inputs from all sources will be available. This ensures that a CD /change programme is feasible in the first place. But a significant degree of flexibility needs to be maintained during implementation. CD and related reform processes are not linear and blueprint planning will not work.

> Encourage Donors to Harmonize and Align TC with Local Strategies and Systems

Country partners taking charge of the design process is a first step towards harmonizing and aligning donor support.

There are situations when the support of just one donor, such as the EC, may be sufficient. But where multiple donor inputs are required TC should be harmonized and aligned as far as possible. This should be the subject of up-front discussion, so that entry points for harmonizing and aligning inputs can be identified.

→ Where a donor is unable to pool resources and requires a separate agreement, then at a minimum, proposed TC inputs should be aligned with the partner organization's objectives and harmonized with other donors, to avoid duplication and possible confusion.

→ Opportunities for conducting joint analytical work during the design phase (eg capacity assessments serving to identify possible support from various donors) can help prevent fragmentation of TC, and help ensure that the design process remains country-led.

→ Adopting a common performance management (results) framework that specifies the outcomes and outputs of the combined activities of all contributors to the intervention will reinforce mutual accountability. It will also help to strengthen country monitoring and accountability systems.

→ Where a programme-based approach is being used, then the option of pooling TC resources in a common basket can be considered. Doing so can help the partner assume a more direct role in the management of TC, including in procurement of TC services (see box below), and supervision of TA personnel.

GETTING INVOLVED IN TORs, AND PROCUREMENT

Drawing up high-quality TOR and tender documents is essential – and demanding. The preparation process always demands careful attention. It may require professional assistance to develop TOR or tender documents for complex programmes or CD support – but such assistance does not substitute for substantive involvement of country partners in the process.

→ Donor-produced TORs with only formal endorsement by the partner organization are unlikely to be effectively owned and will not lead to sustainable results.

→ Country partners must be involved in the TC procurement process. This includes screening and interviewing candidates for TA.

→ High-quality procurement takes time and effort: It may take 12–18 months to develop TOR, organize procurement and recruit high quality TA who are usually busy in the short term. Checking the references of candidates is essential!

> Implementation of Country-Owned Programmes Requires Sound Implementation Arrangements

Donor-driven, parallel programme implementation units (PIUs) may ensure effective execution in the short run – but experience indicates that results are rarely sustained or maintained when produced in isolation from country institutions. The EC vision is that the use of parallel PIUs be gradually replaced by partner-owned and managed programme implementation arrangements that are embedded in the local institutional context.

Making such arrangements effective requires a consistent focus on the governance and daily management of projects and programmes – and not just of the donor support to these.

A key strategic consideration is to strike the right balance between autonomy and integration of programme management arrangements. A degree of autonomy to decide over the use of resources is necessary to be efficient – and a degree of integration is necessary to cooperate, coordinate and engage with those affected – positively or negatively - by the programme. How much autonomy, and how much integration will depend on the nature of the programme.

→ A higher level of integration is appropriate when the goal is to strengthen the capacity of an organization or a system of organizations. For example, to enhance the capacity to deliver basic health services in rural areas, it is likely that a programme will have to work with nurse's training schools, medical supply chains, monitoring and reporting of morbidity and mortality etc – and that would require close interaction with multiple stakeholders and organisations. A high level of coordination and networking would be required, pointing to a highly integrated approach.

→ Greater autonomy is appropriate when the results are less dependent on inputs and resources from other organizations. For example, when building a bridge or road, the project is best served with a higher level of autonomy – it should not be dependent on daily decisions taken in a ministry far away from the construction site.

There is no right answer about how to make the best programme implementation arrangements. But based on the above, five basic organizational and governance parameters will need to be considered and clearly defined:

→ **Governance and accountability:** Who should oversee and govern programme implementation and who should the programme be accountable to within the country system? Should it be a single ministry or unit, or a board with broader composition, also including non-state actors?

→ **Management set-up:** Who will perform day-to-day programme management functions, and with what authority in relation to resource management decisions? Will it be a part-time manager with multiple other obligations, or a full time person seconded from his/her normal duties?

→ **Logistical autonomy:** Does the programme require its own vehicles, photocopiers, janitor and coffee service, etc., or should it share resources with others?

➔ **Relations between TC experts, partners and donors:** If contracted by the EC (or another donor), who are the experts taking instructions from and to whom are they accountable?

➔ **Role of EC and other donors in programme implementation:** Should donors play a role at all – and if so, what role should that be?

> *¡Remember! This is about partner programmes, and ensuring that the most appropriate implementation arrangements are in place to facilitate partner-led change. It means specifying the managerial and governance roles to be played by domestic stakeholders, as Well as the secondary roles played by any external partner. These implementation arrangements must cover domestic resources (e.g. managers, staff) as well as any external support.*

Quality Assurance, Monitoring and Evaluation of TC Support

Consistent with the focus on partner ownership of projects and programmes, partners are encouraged to play a key role in quality assurance and monitoring both during design and implementation. This is an ongoing process where the EC will also play its role, focusing on the five key criteria outlined in the box below.

QUALITY ASSURANCE OF TC SUPPORT

The EC's quality assurance criteria for TC support comprise 5 criteria:

1. Commitment and ownership of partner(s): There must be demonstrable demand for TC support and adequate country leadership and ownership of design and implementation.

2. Fit to context: TC in general and in particular TC aiming at CD, will only work if there is a reasonably positive and enabling environment.

3. Harmonized support: Harmonization arrangements must be clear and justification provided if TC supply could not be harmonized with other donors.

4. Clear links to outputs and expected outcomes: The full logical chain from outcomes and outputs back to the TC-support must be sound and results must be monitored.

5. Appropriate implementation arrangements: Based on the nature of the programme, the implementation arrangements must exhibit an appropriate balance between integration and autonomy, including effective governance by domestic stakeholders.

There are some key "checkpoints" for quality assurance during the preparation and implementation of TC-supported programmes:

➔ **Check quality at the end of the identification and formulation process, respectively.** For significant TC-operations, the EC's decision-making process will require an explicit quality assessment. Country partners can be invited to participate in preparing the assessment with the EC delegation in the country.

➔ **Monitor the quality of programme implementation regularly.** The main focus should be (i) on changes in organizational capacity and performance resulting from the intervention and (ii) the quality of the intervention including – but not limited to - the contribution of TC support. Importantly, the results of this monitoring should be considered and used by domestic stakeholders involved in governance and management of the programme, and not only be shared with donors.

➔ **Mutual performance dialogue between country partners and TC personnel.** It takes two to tango: Advisers and consultants cannot perform unless directed by those they should support. They need information, access and engaged partners. Conversely, consultants and advisers need to have motivation, the requisite technical skills, as well as cultural sensitivity and adaptability. To ensure optimal performance of TC personnel, it is therefore recommended to have a regular and systematic dialogue about how the cooperation is working and how it can be improved.

➔ **Evaluation:** Evaluations focus on the entire programme, and TC support will constitute but one element of this. TC on its own cannot deliver capacity and sustainability. Evaluations have therefore to look systematically beyond any donor contribution to a partner's programme.

Revisiting EC Procedures for More Effective TC

In the framework of its TC reform, EC procedures have been screened in order to highlight the options for taking forward the reforms; in particular, enhancing ownership, improving the quality of support, and facilitating the mobilization of relevant expertise.

The EC Delegation is ready to help with detailed information about the options, which are also described in an annex to the Guidelines on Making TC More Effective (http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/system/files/c4d/Guidelines_on_TC_en.pdf)

A key piece of advice regarding procedures is the need to plan ahead and to think about procedural options from the very start of any design process. Making TC more effective requires forward planning and thinking. Procedures can then serve as a means to get value for money and for assuring transparency. Doing things at the last moment will convert procedures into obstacles.

The recommendations for making TC more effective described in this note are valid whenever the EC is contributing to the programme in question, no matter how or by whom the TC support is contracted.

The EC procedures governing TC support are basically the same as those regulating other support from the EC. The menu of options available varies from country to country, but there are in most cases ample opportunities to:

➜ Involve country partners fully in preparing the specific requests for TC support (identification and action fiches).

➜ Involve partners in the screening and selection of experts and consultants, including considering their past experience and checking references.

➜ Explore alternatives to traditional technical assistance (peer support, mobilisation of expertise from public administration, etc) and to use more flexible procedures when justified.

> *iPlan ahead – and address procedural options early on in the dialogue. Getting the best out of TC support takes time and effort – but investing at the right moment is the key to reduce disappointing delays and avoid poor performance later on.*

Find out more about the EC's reform of Technical Cooperation on www.capacity4dev.eu
or contact us: Europeaid-TC-PIU@ec.europa.eu