

Triangular co-operation for government capacity development in South Sudan

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■ Executive summary

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Regional Capacity Enhancement Initiative provides about 200 civil servant support officers (CSSOs) from neighbouring countries to South Sudan, where they are twinned with counterparts across a range of ministries and sectors to rapidly develop core government capacity in a coaching and mentoring scheme. The initiative is promising as a new and potentially innovative model of triangular co-operation for capacity development for four reasons. Firstly, it provides a model of large-scale support to rapid capacity development in core government functions. Secondly, the use of regional capacity to a certain degree mitigates the potential for resentment when external experts are brought into capacity-poor environments. Thirdly, the programme already shows some evidence of impact on core practices. Finally, there seems to be strong ownership of the programme at central levels of the South Sudanese government and among many of the twins.

In the future the IGAD initiative should maintain the number of CSSOs, but distribute them more evenly among ministries; ensure that core government functions and upstream institutions are included; deploy CSSOs at strategic and operational rather than tactical level; and ensure optimal matching between CSSOs and twins. Finally, more consideration should be given to programme implementation and in particular human resource management to ensure the maintenance of CSSOs' morale.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Regional Capacity Enhancement Initiative offers a unique example of an innovative approach to capacity development in fragile states. The initiative takes the form of a collaboration among the governments of South Sudan and Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Norway, with technical support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Through bilateral agreements, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda have seconded almost 200 civil servants to the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS), where they have been "twinned" with South Sudanese civil servants as civil service support officers (CSSOs) for a two-year term. The seconding countries retain their seconded staff on their payrolls throughout the period,

while Norway funds programme management and operational costs such as per diems and travel for the CSSOs. The accumulated budget approaches \$18 million for the first two years, on top of salaries paid by the seconding countries, making this project the largest of its kind. In addition to building civil service and institutional capacity, the initiative is of critical political importance in terms of tying the IGAD region together. The initiative also resonates well with the UN Civilian Capacity reform process and the calls for more use of regional capacity and more flexible and bottom-up approaches when supporting countries emerging from conflict.¹ For this reason, the initiative provides a really important case for the international agenda on capacity development in fragile states.

¹ For more on the reform process and links to the report of the Senior Advisory Group and subsequent reports of the UN secretary-general, see <<http://civcapreview.org/>>. See also De Coning and Karlsrud (2011).

We argue that four overall assumptions underpin the IGAD initiative's approach to capacity development. Firstly, it assumes that a stronger cultural affinity between themselves and South Sudanese staff increases the acceptance of the CSSOs. Secondly, it assumes that this cultural affinity enables enhanced adaptability on the part of the CSSOs and thus increases the flexibility of the programme. Thirdly, the ownership and effectiveness of the programme are assumed to be stronger, because capacity is not developed through the use of international consultants on short-term missions, but through a regionally organised capacity exchange that is expected to provide a better sociocultural fit and a more suitable professional match. Fourthly, the focus on embedded on-the-job learning and coaching is expected to lead to more sustainable and lasting capacity development and improvements in core GRSS functions, including positive behavioural changes among GRSS civil servants.

While the stated aim of the IGAD initiative is to support capacity placement in GRSS agencies through the rapid secondment of CSSOs from IGAD member states, the stated strategy for implementing this objective is the "coaching and mentoring" of GRSS civil servants by the CSSOs. Yet the study found that one-on-one coaching and mentoring practices have only materialised in a minority of relations. In the cases where such practices have been established, they generally only form part of the range of activities that the CSSOs are involved in. However, CSSOs have for the most part found other ways of transferring knowledge to groups, processes or institutions and have made remarkable progress in a very challenging environment. The twinning model has proved to be a flexible programme modality that has allowed the CSSOs to work with their twins on ever-changing issues of immediate relevance to South Sudanese ministries and institutions. The projects undertaken include reform and/or strengthening of core ministerial functions and processes such as records management; the drafting of strategic plans; the establishment of standard operating procedures, policy formulation systems and processes for policy approval; and support for work plan development and implementation. In the UNDP mid-term review of the IGAD initiative 82% of supervisors found that the participating institutions' service delivery had improved as a result of the programme (UNDP, 2013: 14). In the same review 80% stated that the skills of the twins had improved as a result of the programme. This positive assessment is also shared by the twins themselves, 95% of whom in the mid-term review agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they are learning a lot from working with the CSSOs (UNDP, 2013: 15). This study found that the support provided by the CSSOs has demonstrated the significant potential of twinning-based regional capacity enhancement models.

However, our study also found that implementation strategies often seemed to be inadequate. The allocation of CSSOs to ministries was done on a first-come, first-served basis. The Ministry of Labour, Public Service and Human

Resource Development (Ministry of Labour) requested ministries to identify their needs and communicate them to the ministry. Based on this the ministry prepared terms of reference/job descriptions to facilitate the recruitment of CSSOs. The Ministry of Health was particularly quick in its response and the health sector thus received a disproportionately high percentage of CSSOs who were often over-qualified for the tasks they performed and worked on operational rather than strategic levels. The allocation of many CSSOs to the health sector accentuated the acute need for frontline services for a population emerging from decades of conflict. Unfortunately the health sector in South Sudan, similar to many other health sectors in sub-Saharan Africa, suffers from war-ravaged health facilities and a lack of skilled professionals. Hence the CSSOs deployed to this sector experienced particular difficulties in identifying appropriate twins, which has limited the impact of the initiative. Other ministries also struggle with significant capacity gaps, but failed to provide their identified needs in a timely manner and did not benefit from the programme.

The technical implementation of the initiative has not always been optimal, despite many good intentions. Many CSSOs arrived at ministries where no twins had been designated; state-level ministries and supervisors were not adequately informed about the project; South Sudanese staff were afraid that the CSSOs would take their jobs; some CSSOs have primarily been "doing" rather than transferring knowledge; and substantive follow-up has been insufficient. While the programme staff and the Ministry of Labour tried to ensure that participating ministries all sent their staff to the induction training, the majority did not show up. As a consequence, in many instances the initiative got off on the wrong foot. The positive impact of the initiative would clearly have been greater if the ministries asking for CSSOs had been willing to make the necessary, and fairly simple, arrangements to enable collaboration between the CSSOs and their twins. This would have ensured that capacity transfer commenced from the very onset of the twinning process, as well as a shared understanding of the objectives of the initiative. It would also have reduced the initial resentment that some CSSOs were met with.

At the time of the mid-term assessment in May-July 2012 many of these initial problems had been ironed out and 83% of the CSSOs confirmed that they had a defined twin or group of twins that they were working with (UNDP, 2013: 21). Similarly, the expectations that CSSOs had before their departure about the conditions under which they would be deployed and the reality that met them on the ground were in many instances mismatched, weakening staff morale. Better preparation could have mitigated some of these shocks. The austerity measures put in place in 2012 further exacerbated the tendency of CSSOs to de facto fill regular posts and do day-to-day work rather than coaching twins. Absenteeism was mentioned repeatedly as one of the most hampering negative consequences of the austerity meas-

ures. Finally, austerity also severely limited the ability to develop and implement projects, procure key assets enabling service delivery, and fill essential staffing gaps in ministries.

Most CSSOs did not have a clear and specified mandate or usable terms of reference when they arrived at their designated institutions. While frustrating for some, this also provided CSSOs with the freedom and flexibility to adapt to the context and the needs on the ground. The challenges posed to the human resource management of a programme with this level of variation calls for a much higher focus on individualised experiences and challenges, something the UNDP-GRSS Project Management Unit (PMU) has not been able to accommodate due to resource constraints. It seems as if the complexity of the programme was perhaps not fully envisioned during the design process. Much more hands-on and in-depth management of the project by UNDP would have changed some of the fundamental characteristics of the programme, where UNDP initially saw itself as merely facilitating a regional exchange of capacity. Once the CSSOs were deployed, the programme design envisioned a fairly limited role for UNDP in terms of handling logistics and payments, but with limited substantive engagement.

The guiding principle of the project design was that the GRSS would provide substantive support to the CSSOs. The idea was that they should work in the same environment as their twins and not enjoy privileged access to UNDP support. For example, in cases where CSSOs lacked materials to perform their duties, they would need to work with government counterparts to address these issues and establish processes for procuring or identifying what they needed. While these principles seemed reasonable and appropriate in principle, they led to considerable frustration among CSSOs, who felt stuck between an unresponsive PMU and an incapacitated government unable to provide the most basic enabling environment for them to perform their duties. While the CSSOs are formally managed by the Ministry of Labour with UNDP operational and programmatic support, UNDP steps in where the GRSS is lacking after a request from the government through the board. Since this has happened rather often and ad hoc, many CSSOs ended up in between two management systems. Some felt that they were actually being managed by UNDP without enjoying the benefits that UNDP accords its staff. This generated some resentment among CSSOs. When contemplating similar initiatives in the future, partners should carefully consider the implications of such arrangements for the overall costs of the project and staff morale. Needless to say, more individualised and hands-on management of the project will have significant cost implications.

From a donor perspective, the IGAD initiative offers a number of interesting lessons. Norway should be commended for committing significant resources to an initiative where the impact and outcomes were very loosely defined at the outset. The same obviously goes for the countries sending

CSSOs to South Sudan. Having received much attention already and strong buy-in from its partners, the initiative has paid off in political terms. However, there is a need to match political buy-in with action on the ground. Preparations for the arrival of the CSSOs and subsequent follow-up to ensure that they have adequate twins or twinning groups and supervision have been less than optimal. Programme design should perhaps have foreseen these issues in a low-capacity environment such as South Sudan and could have devised mechanisms to address the gravest cases where CSSOs have been placed in very difficult conditions.

The first CSSOs will return home in June 2013 as the project's deployment cycle completes its two-year initial operating phase. The research identified a number of reasons why the project should be extended, if not expanded, beyond the two-year deployments to reap the benefits of the first phase's lessons learned and make room for adjustments to optimise the programme's impact and effectiveness. In the future partners should ensure that CSSOs are deployed according to national priorities and perhaps prioritise core government functions where the most impact can be made. The partners are considering including a diaspora component in the second phase of the initiative from mid-2013. While this could potentially be a positive step, it would seem logical that diaspora members should come in addition to the 200 CSSOs. Also, potential pitfalls should be considered very closely when introducing members of the diaspora into the South Sudanese civil service, given experiences from elsewhere. Resentment towards diaspora members has been an issue in every programme utilising this type of capacity, and effective ways to mitigate and counter this would also seem to be key in the context of South Sudan.

Recommendations

Partner countries

- Complement buy-in at the most senior levels in ministries and institutions with dedicated efforts to communicate the objectives of the programme and identify suitable twins at the lower levels.
- Aim for a more even allocation of CSSOs across ministries, and include more core government and upstream institutions such as the Central Bank, the Ministry of Justice and security authorities, perhaps focusing more on core government functions than service delivery functions (where the risk of ending up "doing" rather than coaching seems higher).
- Ensure proper matching of CSSOs with twins or twinning groups on appropriate levels and in core functions to leverage expertise and maximise impact.
- Consider group rather than one-on-one twinning to ensure the sustainability of capacity transfer and pre-empt high staff turnover.
- Consider widening the funding base by including other donors to keep the number at a minimum of 200 CSSOs. For instance, the funds for the diaspora programme could be fundraised for separately.

- Consider how the capacity hubs developing around the CSSOs in the ministries may be used as anchor points for other development initiatives.
- Explore further the gender potential of deploying female CSSOs.
- Expand the use of “reverse” embedding whereby South Sudanese civil servants are embedded in other countries’ civil services for a period of time.
- As CSSOs are secondees of the partner countries, embassies should consider hosting social events for CSSOs and should also give certificates of appreciation at the end of the period of service issued jointly by UNDP, the GRSS and the member state in question.
- Consider piloting the inclusion of members of the diaspora and the important longer-term contribution they can make, including an exit strategy to manage the expectations of all parties. This would include employing diaspora members as GRSS staff, not paying diaspora members more than local employees and laying down clear time limits to any benefits or allowances.
- Neighbouring countries also have obvious commercial and political interests in South Sudan, which could potentially lead to problematic practices among CSSOs, so this issue needs to be openly addressed.

UNDP/UN in South Sudan

- Consider measures to strengthen GRSS buy-in in the PMU, e.g. by including staff with civil service experience.
- Clearly articulate in future project designs the trade-off between a more hands-on approach to project management and a hands-off model, including cost implications.
- Dedicate more resources to organising knowledge exchanges among CSSOs. Facilitate this process and match CSSOs facing specific challenges with others who have overcome similar ones.

- Avoid downscaling the programme at this stage, where programme establishment costs have been absorbed and important lessons learned.

UN/IGAD/World Bank/member states/research

- Consider the IGAD capacity development model for developing core government capacity in other countries emerging from conflict.
- Establish mechanisms to roster or otherwise keep tabs on CSSO alumni as a group of specialists with post-conflict capacity-building expertise.
- Organise peer-to-peer learning between GRSS staff involved in the initiative and countries where similar activities are planned.
- Consider the IGAD initiative as a possible best practice initiative in the context of the new UN Capacity Development Strategy and use the initiative to inform the discussion at the UNDP Bureau for Development Policy Capacity Development Group, the OECD DAC Network on Governance, and the Learning Network on Capacity Development.
- Conduct further research on the cost-effectiveness/ impact dimension at the end of the project.

References

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