

How to Improve the Efficiency of Technical Co-Operation Activities of Statistics

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1. Introduction

Technical co-operation in statistics is one of the fundamental principles of official statistics adopted by the UN. Bilateral and multilateral co-operation are seen as necessary tools in ensuring the quality and international comparability of national statistics. Technical co-operation in official statistics increased enormously in the European Community about ten years ago. The Phare programme for the Central European countries and the Tacis programme for most of the Newly Independent States of the former Soviet Union are the main EU funding instruments. The total amount of funds allocated within these programmes during 1990-99 was approximately MEUR 190. The EU has several other assistance programmes in statistics for various parts of the world. The World Bank and other financial institutions have their own development funds. Quite a few economically developed countries have their own programmes for bilateral co-operation, also in statistics.

Although statistics co-operation takes only a relatively small portion of all the funds and even if it may achieve good results as compared with some other activities, we should ask whether transfer of technical know-how in statistics takes place in an effective and cost-efficient way. The question can be asked for several different reasons. First, there is a problem in the supply of expertise since it can be delivered mostly by the statisticians working in the national statistical offices. The NSIs in the EU countries are facing problems in providing experts for external projects due to excess of other activities. Second, it is a question of the ownership of co-operation projects. How strongly do the recipient organisations take the overall responsibility of the development? Third, in spite of the political wish the targets of co-operation are sometimes unclear.

The UN recommendations for Some Guiding Principles for Good Practices in Technical Co-operation for Statistics constitute the basis of this paper. We aim to focus on the different aspects of technical co-operation and try to find the most effective combination for the implementation of the activities. The rationale primarily stems from the experiences gained from the technical co-operation between the Statistical Offices of the EU Member States and the Phare and Tacis countries.

2. Modes of technical co-operation activities

The effectiveness of co-operation is linked to the modes of co-operation, i.e. how co-operation is organised. The main modes of co-operation currently used are the following:

1) **Bilateral/one country projects:** The transfer of know-how takes place between two countries/institutes. The bilateral mode can also refer to the funding of the project.

2) **Multi-country/regional projects:** The mode refers to the situation where a few recipient countries in the same region are receiving assistance simultaneously. Examples can be found within different funding programmes.

3) **Expert/team approach:** This mode refers to the situation where just one expert works for one or several countries in a certain subject area. The other alternative is the team approach where the project is managed by the National Statistical Institute which uses many experts who are working together in the project.

4) **Subject matter/twinning approach:** The project may cover just one area or it can include many domains. By twinning it is often referred to a long-term co-operation agreement with a sister organisation in another country. The co-operation fosters close ties between the institutions as well as between individual civil servants and experts in the co-operating countries. The agreement ensures the recipient institution of access to experts in all domains of statistics.

The recipient institutions participate in all types of co-operation. The co-operation forum often seems to be full of different kinds of activities, even within one subject area. The mode as such may not be decisive when assessing the effectiveness of single co-operation projects. It is much more important how the recipient institute can take advantage of various activities and put them into proper context in its development strategy.

3. How to attain sustainable results from co-operation projects?

In most of the cases there are many projects and many partners. If all the partners have the same “agenda”, then the implementation can be quite straightforward. But often the “agenda” is not clear or the targets of the co-operation are understood differently even between the recipients and donors.

The assessment of the recipient’s needs is a very important step in avoiding situations where donors and beneficiary organisations have not decided on the targets to be achieved and use different tools. We can take Latvia as an example. After Latvia regained its independence, the Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) started to develop the statistical system on a new basis determined by the transition of the country to the market economy, in accordance with the international statistical standards, classifications and methodology. In the case of Latvia it was necessary to build up a practically new statistical system. To start this process it was necessary to prepare:

- 1) clear statement of the goals to be achieved;
- 2) prioritisation of the work to be done;
- 3) estimation of expenditures;
- 4) definition of the necessary assistance.

Starting the process of transforming the statistical system the following key directions of activity were defined:

- 1) restructuring of the framework of organisation according to the functional blocks of the market economy;
- 2) reorganisation of the statistical accounting system in line with international standards and the EU requirements;
- 3) working out of a strategy for professional development and competence building of the staff;
- 4) development of a modern information technology system;
- 5) creation of a new system of co-operation with data users and data providers for the dissemination and marketing of data.

It was not possible to fulfil such tasks without the technical assistance of foreign experts or it could be done at a considerably slower speed. Due to the EU and EFTA timely and farsighted policies just after the recovery of independence, the national statistical institutions of the Baltic States became involved in the international co-operation programme in the field of statistics.

Taking into account the fact that it is possible to receive technical assistance from several programmes, the **role of programming, management and co-ordination of technical assistance** is extremely important. As for Latvia, in 1997 the CSB worked out its first medium-term statistical and strategic plan for the years 1998 – 2002, which concerned mapping out the development strategy of the Latvian statistical system, work plans and the necessary resources for their implementation. Each year the CSB prepares annual plans based on the strategic plan. Such a detailed planning procedure excludes the possible duplication and overlapping of activities within the various programmes.

Planning the co-operation within the technical assistance programmes the CSB has to solve the following questions in order to ensure the maximum outcome for the system development:

- 1) selection of a team of experts with good professional and language skills;
- 2) elimination of the impact of staff rotation on the co-operation result;
- 3) training and competence building of the staff;
- 4) efficient distribution of financial resources.

It is the task of the donor organisation to pay special attention to the **selection of proper experts** for transfer of know-how. The experts need not only have good knowledge of their own statistical field but additionally they should have:

- 1) awareness of the methods used in other developed countries in addition to their own country;
- 2) knowledge of the general statistical infrastructure (international recommendations, legislation, quality issues, organisation, fundamental principles, basic dissemination and marketing principles, etc.);
- 3) project management tools like planning, budgeting, reporting and monitoring;
- 4) communication competence (knowledge of culture and history in the country in question, pedagogical and consulting skills, good language skills).

The donor organisation normally also has a clear interest in minimising administrative costs of technical co-operation, in advance planning of the activities, in co-ordination of other donors' activities, in improvement of project and methodological documentation.

4. The ideal model

The basic aim in most technical co-operation projects is to revise a statistical system or set it up from the very beginning. The following model in transferring and absorbing know-how has proven to be workable:

Phase 1: The study of the theory and practical solutions. Should be done during the formal training sessions and by using self-study. Many statistical organisations have good training programmes; in Europe the TES Institute provides courses in official statistics and so on. Study visits may demonstrate good examples of practical solutions. Their usefulness can be assessed with regard to the operational environment of the recipient country. The knowledge gained should be shared with the colleagues at home.

Phase 2: Drafting the plan for the development of the statistical system. It should be made by those responsible for the execution of the development project. The external experts may give advice in drafting it. The real possibilities for the implementation should be taken into account. The users of statistics have to be heard at this stage.

Phase 3: Piloting and analysing the results of the pilot. It is important to have a piloting phase. The analysis of the results after the pilot could help to avoid further mistakes and errors. At this stage regional co-operation can be of great importance. Learning from others' experiences has shown to be effective. There are a lot of examples from this kind of exchange of experiences.

Phase 4: Revision of the implementation plan. The lessons learned from the pilot study/survey should be reflected properly in the further implementation of the project. In this phase it could also be beneficial to take advantage of others' experiences.

Phase 5: Implementation of the statistical system. This is a task for the staff working in the beneficiary statistical office. The external experts may give support, but they should not implement the systems.

Phase 6: Documentation of the system. The documentation is the key to success. If it is not made, the accumulation of know-how cannot take place in the beneficiary organisation.

Phase 7: Continuous monitoring of the quality and further actions for improvement. The experience of any statistical office indicates that the systems are never complete. The idea of continuous quality improvement should be adopted after the co-operation project.

Even if the ideal model is adopted, there still remains the question about the results of co-operation. What are the concrete results of co-operation? How sustainable are they? Can they be assessed on the basis of new indicators, publications or other products?

5. Main findings

In order to improve the efficiency of technical co-operation in statistics the following measures could be necessary:

- to allow the recipient organisation to own and lead co-operation projects (to set up clear goals and follow up on their implementation)
- to improve project management (planning, follow-up)
- to exchange experiences with countries at the same stage of introduction of new methodologies (e.g. at the regional level)
- to adopt better consultancy skills in transfer of know-how
- to assist partners to solve problems, not to solve them
- to put efforts in development of performance measures for technical co-operation.

RESUME

Les mesures suivantes peuvent contribuer à améliorer l'efficacité de la coopération dans le domaine de la statistique :

- *l'organisation recevant l'assistance possède et gère les projets de coopération*
- *l'amélioration de la gestion des projets*
- *l'échange d'expériences avec des pays qui sont dans la même phase de développement*
- *adopter de meilleurs modes de consultation en matière de transfert des connaissances*
- *aider les partenaires à résoudre des problèmes, au lieu de les résoudre directement à leur place*
- *mettre au point des indicateurs de performance pour évaluer la coopération.*