

Contributions of the Project Cycle to the Design of an Evaluation Framework for South-South Cooperation within a Triangular Arrangement*

Contribuciones del ciclo del proyecto al diseño de un marco de evaluación para la cooperación Sur-Sur dentro de un acuerdo triangular

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KEYWORDS

South-South cooperation; Triangular cooperation; Project cycle; Evaluation.

ABSTRACT This article analyzes the experience of a triangular cooperation project between FAO, Brazil and six other countries in developing an innovative project cycle to incorporate South-South cooperation principles, harmonize managerial standards, improve joint decision-making and eliminate overlapping of monitoring and accountability systems. It also contributes to operationalizing indicators and designing evaluations of South-South and triangular partnerships and their contributions to the 2030 Agenda.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Cooperación Sur-Sur; Cooperación triangular; Ciclo del Proyecto; Evaluación.

RESUMEN Este artículo analiza la experiencia de un proyecto de cooperación triangular entre la FAO, Brasil y otros seis países en el desarrollo de un ciclo de proyecto innovador para incorporar los principios de cooperación Sur-Sur, armonizar

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los estándares de gestión, mejorar la toma conjunta de decisiones y eliminar la superposición de los sistemas de monitoreo y rendición de cuentas. También contribuye a la puesta en práctica de indicadores y al diseño de evaluaciones de las alianzas Sur-Sur y triangulares y sus contribuciones a la Agenda 2030.

MOTS CLÉS

Coopération Sud-Sud; Coopération triangulaire; Cycle de projet; Évaluation.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse l'expérience d'un projet de coopération triangulaire entre la FAO, le Brésil et six autres pays, sur le développement d'un cycle de projet innovant, pour intégrer les principes de la coopération Sud-Sud, harmoniser les normes de gestion, améliorer la prise de décision conjointe et éliminer le chevauchement des systèmes de surveillance et de responsabilisation. Il contribue également à la mise en œuvre d'indicateurs et à la conception d'évaluations d'alliances Sud-Sud et triangulaires et de leurs contributions au Programme 2030.

Introduction

Triangular cooperation between developing countries and international organizations, which is gaining momentum in the context of the Sustainable Development Goal 17¹, exhibits a series of distinctive characteristics. The potential increase in development impact is commonly pointed out as one of the main advantages of this type of partnership, resulting from the combination of technical, human, material and financial contributions. Nevertheless, this modality challenges traditional management approaches through complex governance architectures, multiple operational procedures and considerable transaction costs (PIFCSS, 2015; Lawson, 2009). Against this backdrop, this article lays out the experience of the Regional Project 'Strengthening the Cotton Sector through South-South Cooperation' (hereinafter referred to as the *Project*) in tailoring its own project cycle to achieve functional convergence between South-South cooperation principles and programmatic mechanisms adopted by UN agencies. The same exercise yielded valuable inputs for designing evaluations of this modality.

On-going since 2013, this initiative is being developed by the Government of Brazil and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). It serves an umbrella for six '*trilateral cooperation*'² country-projects with Argentina, Bolivia,

1 Especially in regard to SDG 17.6, which reads: "Improve North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation and access to science, technology and innovation, and increase the sharing of knowledge on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination between existing mechanisms, particularly at the United Nations level [...]" (*UNGA Resolution A/RES/70/1*, 2015).

2 The Brazilian government adopts the term 'trilateral' for South-South cooperation partnerships between two or more developing countries and a third partner, either an in-

Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru. Under this cooperation arrangement, a myriad of agricultural research and rural extension organizations, farmers' associations, ministries of agriculture and international cooperation agencies share knowledge, expertise and technology. FAO provides technical inputs, facilitates the exchanges and implements in-field activities together with the developing country partners. The Project is financed by the Brazilian Cotton Institute (IBA). IBA was created in 2010 to manage funds granted by the United States government as a compensation payment in the aftermath of a World Trade Organization cotton subsidies dispute settlement (WTO, 2010). A part of this fund was applied to South-South cooperation under specific norms.

In South America, the cotton sector has a great historical and traditional significance. Today, however, it faces challenges in productivity, profitability and environment sustainability (FAO, 2017). The consequences of this have social and economic implications for both small- and large-scale farmers (FAO and ABC/MRE, 2017), and represent lost opportunities in trade, generation of income and employment in rural areas. To tackle these constraints, the Project works at three levels of capacity—individual, organizational and interinstitutional—under a comprehensive view of the problems faced throughout the cotton value chain (FAO and ABC/MRE, 2017). The final goal is to yield an endogenous change process that is led by national and local actors.

With a view to boosting the competitiveness of national cotton sectors, the Project supports the design of rural and agricultural development policies focused on improving cotton quality, production capacity and sustainability, and strengthening farmers' access to public services. It also fosters sector-wide governance and integration between the cotton, textile and clothing sectors. At ground level, the Project promotes technological innovations in sustainable cotton production through technology transfer and adaptation, by using local knowledge and upgrading farmers' practices. To disseminate innovations, agricultural and rural extension agencies staff participate in training programs, international technical missions and regional knowledge sharing workshops. Farmers' field schools utilize 'learning by doing' and exchange techniques to prepare farmers to discuss, adapt and test the most suitable solutions for their farming systems (FAO and ABC/MRE, 2017). Farmers associations' capacities in management and cooperativism are also enhanced through training.

Combining management practices in light of South-South cooperation principles

The Project adheres to a South-South cooperation referential framework as set out in the 2009 Nairobi Outcome Document (Resolution A/RES/64/22, UNGA, 2010). This UN General Assembly Resolution mentions principles of an eminently

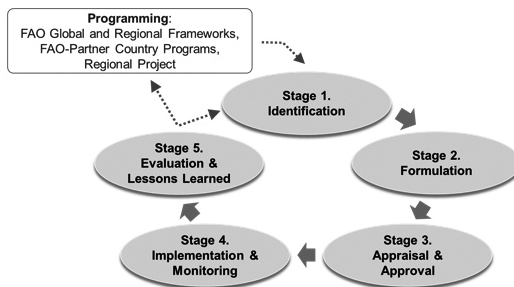
international organization, a traditional donor or a third developing country (ABC/MRE, 2017, p. 17).

political nature, such as respect for national sovereignty, non-conditionality and non-interference in domestic affairs. Some of these and other elements highlighted by that document are especially relevant to this modality in its *practical* dimension: equality—here referred to as “horizontality”, multistakeholder participation, national ownership, mutual benefit, and alignment with national development priorities and internationally agreed development goals. Additionally, it recognizes capacity development and knowledge sharing as delivery mechanisms for South-South cooperation.

Soon after the Regional Project’s inception, the partners realized that the country-projects required a good deal of dialogue to trilaterally agree on how to work together, jointly establishing objectives, planning, carrying out activities and measuring the benefits generated by collective action. In light of this, there was a need for harmonization between the programmatic approaches employed by the international organization (FAO, 2012) and Brazilian South-South cooperation management practices (ABC/MRE, 2017).

In order to build a shared understanding of how triangular cooperation would function in this particular case, the project cycle was chosen as a flexible and customizable tool, capable of connecting different project management mechanisms. South-South cooperation principles and elements were used to map the key decisions, their timing and criteria, along with assigning procedures, tasks and responsibilities at each stage of the country-project’s lifetime (FAO and ABC/MRE, 2017). Hence the relevance and usefulness of this instrument in enhancing communications, information flows, operational efficiency and coordination (European Commission, 2004). The ensuing country-project cycle (Figure 1) has the following stages: identification of the project’s idea and preliminary assessments; planning and project formulation; proposal appraisal and approval; implementation and monitoring; evaluation and dissemination of lessons learned (FAO and ABC/MRE, 2017).

Figure 1. The Brazil-FAO Trilateral South-South Cooperation Project Cycle



Source: Adapted from UNICEF (2015), ABC/MRE (2017) and FAO & ABC/MRE (2017), all written by the author.

The harmonized project cycle is a common denominator that encompasses a variety of managerial standards under a mutually agreed methodological framework. It

integrates FAO's Human Rights-Based Approach, gender equality and environmental sustainability as reference pillars for programming, Results-Based Management, and capacity development through knowledge sharing as a means of implementation for South-South cooperation (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Harmonization of South-South cooperation principles and FAO's programmatic approaches within the Project Cycle



Source: Adapted from UNICEF, 2015 (written by the author).

Applying South-South cooperation principles to the triangular project cycle

The next paragraphs set forth the author's analysis of how South-South cooperation principles and elements apply as references in every step of these triangular country-project cycles. Table 1 at the end of this article reflects these alignments and proposes them as evaluation questions associated with each stage.

From the beginning, it is essential to ensure that each country-project is based on the development needs of the partner country. At the first stage of the project cycle, the Identification Stage, the country-project's idea was aligned with relevant partner country policies and plans, as well as with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Likewise, the country-project strategy was articulated with bilateral programs between the multilateral partner and the partner countries, and between both partner countries.

At the Formulation Stage, each country-project design derived from multistakeholder participation (FAO and ABC/MRE, 2017). First, a comprehensive mapping of

stakeholders in the beneficiary partner country was carried out (ministries of agriculture, rural development agencies, agricultural research centers, farmers' organizations, cotton sector public-private arrangements, development cooperation agencies) (ABC, 2017, p. 35). Second, capacity availability and gaps in the individual, organizational and intersectoral dimensions were identified (ABC/MRE, 2017; FAO, 2010). Then, the data collected through these participatory assessments fed the country-project baselines and logical frameworks.

The horizontality of South-South cooperation was concretized through the effective participation of the three parties (in this instance, Brazil, FAO and the partner country) in country-project strategic coordination and technical execution. This idea of joint implementation, with shared responsibility over country-project ground-level activities (FAO and ABC/MRE, 2017), runs counter to rigid and vertical cooperation models whereby 'providers' and 'recipients' take on active and passive roles, respectively. For this reason, at the Implementation and Monitoring Stage, the roles of partner organizations were defined according to their contributions and responsibilities (ABC, 2017, pp. 23-24). In this example, it was achieved as follows: provision of financial resources (IBA), administrative and financial execution (FAO), coordination (national organizations representing the government and FAO), and technical implementation (organizations deploying in-kind inputs for the South-South exchange—like knowledge, technology, materials and experts).

In this way, field activities can be planned and executed with direct and active participation of actors and stakeholders from both developing country partners, and governance structures can be built on the basis of contextualization to each country-project. Within the Project's experience, for example, a tripartite steering committee was established for joint strategic decision-making, planning and monitoring at international level, composed of development cooperation agencies and ministries of agriculture from Brazil and the partner country, together with FAO. A technical committee is responsible for the integration of local actors and stakeholders. It deliberates on day-to-day issues and functions as the main source of technical and operational information and recommendations to the tripartite committee. FAO, through its information management systems, is in charge of gathering monitoring data that is used to elaborate periodic reports under a single reporting system.

Having an inclusive and representative governance structure at field level, as in this case, allows the country-project to continuously line up its expected results with the beneficiary partner country development policies, besides serving the purpose of promoting participation and ownership. Likewise, in this stage, collaborative learning and knowledge management methods can be employed to underpin South-South exchanges and ensure applicability, accessibility, adaptation and appropriation of external technical inputs.

At the time of publication of this article, the Regional Project was scheduled to undergo one mid-term evaluation in 2018, and a final evaluation at the end of

operations. When the Project gets to the Evaluation Stage, it should also be possible to incorporate South-South cooperation principles and elements to decisions about 'what', 'when' and 'how to evaluate'. Evidence should be collected on the capacities developed through the project, in all their dimensions (*e.g.* farmers' skills in cotton cultivation, competitiveness-boosting policies, production system innovations), as well as on their contribution to the achievement of project effects at impact level. Ideally, this would include contribution analysis³ of capacity development in delivering positive changes to the beneficiaries' livelihoods (*e.g.* higher profitability rates; small-scale cotton farmers accessing key rural development services; incremented incomes). Overall, the evaluation of results should encompass the perspective of national partners and stakeholders.

Country-project evaluation will have to address the operationalization of South-South cooperation principles through indicators of horizontality and multistakeholder participation. The principle of ownership can be merged with sustainability indicators to determine whether knowledge sharing methods have been successful in empowering partners and stakeholders to the degree that they will be able to autonomously sustain and upscale project outcomes after its completion. Another factor related to ownership and sustainability is assessment of the extent to which the strategic alignment with national priorities and internationally agreed goals was maintained throughout the entire project cycle.

Methodological considerations for future project evaluation

Contextually, at international level, as the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development calls for new and better partnerships, the effectiveness of development cooperation is ever more in evidence. At project level, evaluation exercises respond to the need to be accountable to project partners and national constituencies regarding results and the use of public resources. Furthermore, the adoption of this harmonized project cycle in particular was based on the assertion that it would account for and create coherence between the partners' managerial and programmatic approaches, besides rationalizing procedures and control. In theory, this project cycle is supposed to have generated synergy between the various types of inputs from partners as the basis for a promised increase project impact. Additionally, it might have led to greater data availability, understanding and trust among partners and, in the same way, improved efficiency and horizontal decision-making.

In what concerns accountability for results, both FAO and the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC) use criteria-based models. ABC's criteria are presented in its *Manual*

³ See Holzapfel (2014) and Leeuw and Vaessen (2009) for discussions on the attribution gap and contribution analysis.

for *South-South Technical Cooperation Management*' and include efficacy⁴, efficiency and sustainability (ABC/MRE, 2017, pp. 122-126). In turn, FAO uses the United Nations Evaluation Group's criteria: relevance⁵, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability (FAO, 2015). These two sets of standards are results-based and emphasize, respectively, "the perspective of beneficiaries" (ABC/MRE, 2017) and "the needs of the population" (FAO, 2015, p. 4) when referring to effectiveness and relevance criteria. As in other cooperation modalities, their application allows for judgments as to whether the country-projects have been successful in achieving outcomes in accordance with the indicators presented in their respective logical frameworks.

What will differ in this case will be the need to count on criteria and indicators capable of translating South-South cooperation principles into management mechanisms, starting with the operationalization of political notions such as solidarity, equality and horizontality, as well as mainstreaming values such as multistakeholder participation, national ownership and mutual benefit. Hence, the evaluation of this Project requires methodological innovation, which opens with instrumentalization of concepts and moves on to definition of a single set of criteria to apply systematically and transparently in order to judge merit (Peersman, 2014, p. 01), both by compatibilizing parameters already in place and generating new ones.

There is also room for innovation when it comes to evaluating the processes permeating these partnerships. This is because the characteristics differentiating South-South cooperation from North-South or bilateral cooperation, for example, may not reside in the desired development outcomes—for they are shared by national development efforts and international cooperation alike—but in management processes, governance and knowledge sharing, which, in this case, have arguably been guided by the principles emanating from Nairobi, 2009. In this regard, a complementary purpose of evaluation would be to produce lessons learned and recommendations on triangular partnership operation and performance.

Evaluations have a function in learning, besides that of accountability (Scriven, 1991). There are opportunities in additionally asking 'how' and 'why' the desired development outcomes have or have not been achieved, focusing on partnership quality and processes as well. The evaluation of aspects such as alignment of needs and priorities, levels of participation and joint decision making, in combination with elements such as trust, consensus, common vision and mutual respect could also support the identification of the added value of triangular arrangements.

4 "Efficacy refers to the extent to which the project effects have attended to the needs of beneficiaries in relation to the initial situation/problem, according to their own perspectives" (ABC/MRE, 2013, p. 113).

5 As in FAO (2015: 4), relevance could be interpreted as the strategic alignment to national and international development goals under FAO-partner country cooperation agreements, including coherence with human rights-based approaches.

Among the methods that facilitate learning, “theory-based approaches” (Chen, 2012) go beyond the expected results to look at possible unintended effects, positive and negative. Complementing summative evaluation, the Regional Project’s mid-term and final evaluations could profit from the utilization of the formative approach (Patton, 2005; Scriven, 1991), and by emphasizing learning when “experimenting something new” (Patton, 2005). Formative evaluations gather information required for project improvement where the aim is to identify what is working well, what could be done differently and what should be changed to increase performance (Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman, 2004: 34). Sometimes referred to as process evaluation (Boulmetis and Dutwin, 2005: 47), this type of evaluation would be suitable for planning the Regional Project’s second term and for assessing and validating the compatibilized management methods created for this triangular partnership.

Following on from the considerations above, it could be argued that the Project seems to be operating under the assumption that employing common systems will enhance mutual accountability, which could counter transaction costs. North defines these costs as “the cost of measuring and enforcing agreements” (North, 1990, cited in Peters and Pierre, 2010: 88). Consequently, in a loose sense, transactional costs would be related to establishing acceptable agreements for all parties and making sure that partners comply with agreed terms and conditions, for instance by taking timely action, deploying resources and reporting accordingly. When it comes to international development cooperation, establishing metrics for “abstract notions” such as transaction costs can be quite difficult (Lawson, 2009). Nevertheless, because they naturally increase with the number of partners and affect performance and efficiency, project evaluation can start by investigating their sources and effects on a qualitative basis.

With that in mind, it would be worth asking if and why the Project was successful in bringing together different development cooperation mechanisms, whilst dispensing with supplementary monitoring, reporting and evaluation structures. Other relevant questions in this respect help investigate the drivers for possible losses in performance and efficiency and their association with transactional costs (*e.g.* bureaucratic procedures, delays in deployment of in-kind resources, information asymmetry). Likewise, they facilitate assessment as to whether governance structures have been conducive to building consensus, and help shed a light on the balance between transactional costs versus resources actually allocated and outputs delivered. Furthermore, they would be helpful in understanding the differences between this triangular project, similar initiatives and bilateral projects.

Conclusion

The project cycle presented here developed out of the needs of one triangular cooperation initiative for a common managerial standard that would provide convergence between the project management mechanisms adopted by FAO and those used by

its partner countries. This cycle currently guides tripartite processes by facilitating coordination, articulating multiple actors, promoting participation and improving communication for joint decision-making. It eliminated duplication of managerial tasks while removing the need for overlapping monitoring and accountability structures, ultimately counteracting transaction costs.

What is more, an analysis of the development of this instrument allowed for identification of practical questions for developing evaluation matrices and modelling indicators for this and similar partnerships. These questions are presented in Table 1, below.

Monitoring and evaluation systems for South-South cooperation within bilateral and triangular arrangements require specific methods, yet to be advanced. Expectations grow in international forums for an objective demonstration of the contribution of these modalities to the transformations sought by the Sustainable Development Goals. In light of this, evaluation frameworks for South-South cooperation should evolve in context, going beyond incremental compatibilization of approaches already in place, and break new ground by incorporating into criteria and instruments the characteristics that differentiate these initiatives. Consequently, given the importance of partnerships in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, these new frameworks should be designed for both purposes of accounting for development results and learning from partnership processes. By operationalizing the Nairobi 2009 principles, this experience offers valuable reference for developing innovative evaluation methods, a significant topic for consideration during the debates of the upcoming UN Conference on South-South Cooperation (BAPA+40 Conference) in Buenos Aires.

Table 1. Indicators for evaluation of triangular cooperation: Suggested questions for an evaluation matrix based on the Brazil-FAO Triangular South-South Cooperation Project Cycle

South-South Cooperation Principles & Mechanisms	Suggested questions for the evaluation matrix
Project Cycle Stage: Identification	
Alignment with National Development Priorities and Internationally Agreed Goals	Was there a clear alignment of the project idea: (i) With the partner country's national development priorities, plans and/or strategies? (ii) With the cooperation framework agreed between the international organization and the requesting country? (iii) With internationally agreed development goals (e.g. SDG)?
Knowledge Sharing / Capacity Development	Have the principles of inclusion and participation been taken into account when mapping actors and stakeholders in the requesting partner country? Has this mapping fed the design of the project strategy? Has an assessment of gaps and availability of capacities been conducted (at individual, organizational and intersectoral/enabling environment dimensions)? Was it carried out through inclusive methodologies and participation of actors and stakeholders in the partner country (national, sub-national and local public and private sector organizations)? Has the identification of in-kind contributions of external partners (technical inputs in the form of knowledge, data, practices, expertise, technologies and materials from Brazil and the international organization) been based on the triple convergence between (i) their relevance to capacity gaps in the requesting country, (ii) their complementarity with the capacities already available, and (iii) the potential to catalyze the generation of new knowledge and technologies?

South-South Cooperation Principles & Mechanisms	Suggested questions for the evaluation matrix
Project Cycle Stages: Formulation, Appraisal & Approval	
Horizontality / Multistakeholder participation	Was project design jointly carried out (trilaterally), with active and effective participation of partner country partners and stakeholders, particularly in regard to the results matrix and the action strategy?
Knowledge Sharing / Capacity Development	Has the project proposal taken into account learning/capacity needs in the individual, organizational and enabling environment dimensions? Was the project proposal approved on the basis of verification of complementarity between: (i) Capacity needs in the requesting country and the external technical inputs to be mobilized? (ii) Expected results (capacities to be developed) and the strategic value of the technical inputs to be shared? Were such complementarities reflected as part of the project's action strategy?
Alignment with National Development Priorities and Internationally Agreed Goals	The project's strategic framework (expected objectives and results) has been clearly aligned with development objectives and/or plans at the national, subnational and/or local level, in addition to internationally agreed development goals?
Project Cycle Stage: Implementation and Monitoring	
Horizontality / Multistakeholder Participation / National Ownership	Have strategic, planning and monitoring decisions been made within effective shared governance mechanisms, such as the tripartite steering committee? Have responsibilities over management and technical implementation been shared? Has knowledge sharing and technical implementation in the field counted on the active and effective participation of national/subnational/local actors from the public and private sectors? Have local partners and stakeholders been active participating in technical guidance and decision-making, e.g. within a national technical committee?
Knowledge Sharing / Capacity Development	Have the technical inputs from external partners been successfully adapted to the context of the partner country (practices, knowledge, expertise, material resources)? Have they maintained continuous relevance in regard to capacity needs and knowledge sharing throughout the project cycle? Has the project adopted a knowledge management strategy to ensure accessibility, adaptation, applicability and appropriation of external knowledge inputs and exchange? If so, has this strategy been effective in supporting capacity development in such a way that it resulted in autonomous innovation processes by the partner country? Has the project counted on effective collaborative learning methods underpinning the South-South exchanges? Have the new knowledge, skills and competences developed through the project been successfully applied by individuals and organizations into their ordinary activities and processes? Have the capacities already available in the partner country at project outset been effectively shared and applied during project implementation?
Project Cycle Stage: Evaluation and Lessons Learned	
Alignment with National Development Priorities and Internationally Agreed Goals / Mutual benefit	Has the project been effective in strengthening the partner country's public policies or programs? Has the South-South exchange produced gains benefiting both partner countries? What are these gains? How did this process take place?
Knowledge Sharing / Capacity Development	To what extent have project goals and achieved results reflected the needs of national and local stakeholders according to their own perspective? Has the project been effective in developing capacities through knowledge sharing mechanisms, that is, in producing a 'qualitative leap forward' in the competences of partners and beneficiaries, through exchanges between the developing country partners? What were the key factors in these processes? Has the project contributed to the generation of endogenous development solutions? Has the project been successful in equipping partners to autonomously conduct new cycles of knowledge exchange/innovation in the long term, beyond project completion?
Strengthening South-South cooperation and contribution to SDG 17	Has the project developed and applied successful South-South cooperation mechanisms and strategies? How? Has the triangular arrangement been able to integrate management mechanisms, without entailing overlapping of monitoring and evaluation systems or creation of additional operational procedures? What impact have the project's management mechanisms (including governance arrangements) had on transaction costs, especially in contrast to bilateral cooperation mechanisms? Has it contributed to the achievement of SDG17? How?

**** The questions on this evaluation matrix have been based on the author's contributions to BRICS Policy Centre, 2017 and preceding original presentations (Dei Svaldi Rossetto, J. 2017; 2016).**

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