

The Role of Technical Assistance in the Somali Development Process

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1. There is a mood of pessimism and scepticism about foreign assistance. «Does aid work» is the title of a study financed by the World Bank. I will try to answer this question as it refers to a very limited area — to Somalia — and to a specific form of aid there — to technical assistance. My answer is based mainly on personal experience as an advisor in the Somali Ministry of National Planning.

Let me first give you an overview of how I want to approach the subject. I will start with a definition of technical assistance and a description of the ongoing technical assistance to Somalia. In a second part I will investigate some of the major problems of technical assistance. Finally I will give some recommendations how it could be improved.

2. Let me start with *the definition*. Generally technical assistance, also called «technical cooperation», is understood to be that form of aid that aims to improve the performance capacity of people or organisations either by transferring knowledge and skills or by mobilising existing capacities. The rationale behind it is that the bottleneck for development is the human factor. The idea behind financial assistance — the other most important form of aid — is that the bottleneck is the lack of adequate funds. The most common instrument of technical assistance is the assignment of foreign experts. However, there are also other instruments — for example training scholarships. The assignment of foreign experts and technical assistance are therefore not identical. Let me repeat: technical assistance is defined by its goal — to improve the performance of people or organisation.

First some figures! Some of them are to a certain degree guesses — because no-one has really exact figures. The following are mainly based on a study by the World Bank and UNDP which was published in 1985, and on personal investigations.

Somalia is one of the countries in the world with the highest per capita assistance. Figures vary. However, they all indicate that overall disbursements in the last years and also in the coming years are between 350 and 400 million US Dollars per year. Around one third of this aid is technical assistance. For 1983 the figure mentioned is 120 million US Dollars — 24 US Dollars per capita — every child included assuming that the overall population is around 5 million. I do not know of any other country with such a high technical assistance per capita.

The *distribution per sectors* is as follows (according to the World Bank/UNDP study):

40.8	%	Agriculture, Fishery and Forestry
27.3	%	Education
11.3	%	Health
6.10	%	National Resources
5.9	%	General development problems (planning, statistics, evaluation etc.)
5.0	%	Miscellaneous

40% for the agricultural sector in the broad sense is a surprising figure. The explanation is that apart from three big technical assistance programmes: the North West Project, the Bay Region Project and the AFMET project — most investment projects have a technical assistance component and that most of them are in the field of agriculture, fishery and forestry. This by the way does also apply for other sectors. Almost all investment projects in Somalia have the secondment of expatriates as a supportive element parallel to the investment component. This emphasis on agriculture corresponds to the development policy of the Somali government.

The 27.3% for education also seems very high. However, about 80% of technical cooperation in education consists of Egyptian teachers at various levels and Italian support to the University. Altogether there are around 380 Egyptian teachers in the country.

5.9% for general development problems, on the other hand, seems low considering the weakness of the Somali administration in the area of macro- and micro-economic planning and of monitoring and evaluation. It also does not coincide with the official policy of the government in this area.

If we look at the regional distribution of aid we find a heavy concentration in the south and again a strong emphasis on Mogadishu. Although no figures are available, my guess would be that more than 80% of the expatriate experts financed out of technical assistance funds live in Mogadishu. This concentration on the south and particularly on Mogadishu reflects the political reality in Somalia. However, it contradicts what government and donors declare as their policy: that is, a priority on the development of the rural areas and regionally balanced investment policy between North and South. Technical assistance strengthens the role of the capital Mogadishu — in contradiction to the verbal policy of the most important donors. They preach decentralisation — but in their aid policy they do the opposite.

At the beginning of my lecture I said that the assignment of foreign experts is only one of the *instrument of technical assistance*. In Somalia, the funds for technical assistance are spent as follows:

42%	}	55%	long term experts
13%			short term experts
10%			training
26%			equipment
9%			miscellaneous

Just 10% on training — this is a very low figure, 55% for experts on the other hand, plus a big proportion of the 26% equipment since it includes supportive material such as cars, furniture, typewriters, copy machines! In absolute terms the number of experts is estimated at around 1,200 to 1,300, not including the Chinese where no exact figures are known. It shows that the effectiveness of technical assistance in Somalia depends on the success of the experts activities, that means on the traditional counterpart/expert relationship.

3. To come back now to my initial question: «Does technical assistance work in Somalia?» Of course, it is difficult to give a general answer and even World Bank/UNDP in their politely worded report come to the conclusion that «*the results of the massive effort can only be characterised as not satisfactory*. Externally-funded technical assistance projects tend to continue for long periods and to leave few visible results when discontinued. Many institutions that have been receiving assistance for a long time show few signs of being able to function without continued help». It is my impression that nobody familiar with the Somali situation would doubt this statement.

Why? What are the reasons for the desired improvement of the performance of people or organisations not taking place? I believe there are several causes. Because of the overriding importance of the *counterpart/expert relationship* I will put special emphasis on this problem. Let us start with the person of the expert. Somalia is a difficult country to live in for somebody from an industrialized country. Somalis are by their cultural heritage independent people. The professional level as compared to international standards is normally very low. What is needed in this situation is a person with experience in developing countries, with sensitivity for people and with the ability for and the interest in demonstrating, teaching, training or in other words, with pedagogic qualities. Donor agencies tend to neglect these qualities and overweight the professional side. In my three and a half years I have not seen one expatriate who failed because of lack of professional qualifications, but quite a few who failed because of their personal qualifications. And as far as the know-how transfer is concerned: if you select experts by their professional credentials then they tend to neglect the know-how transfer. They are oriented to performing the work themselves rather than engaging in a difficult longlasting process.

This bias to professional work meets very often with the interest of Somali institution. They look for a quick improvement to the quality of work. Outside pressure is often one of the reasons for this. Let us take the Ministry of Planning as an example. Public Investment Programmes, Implementation Reviews and other papers are required by the donors for consultative group conferences and others. They are preconditions for huge capital investment projects, budget aid, structural adjustment loans, stand-by credits and other programmes. A delay in their production would mean a delay in these programmes. Insufficient quality might mean that they are not accepted by donors. On the micro level, well formulated project requests or terms of references impress funding agencies. Quick-comments on studies speed up the preparation of new projects. *Outside pressure, self-interest of experts and the financial interest of the Somali government interact and are counterproductive to know-how transfer and institution building.*

Let us come now to the other side — the counterpart side. Ideally there would be the highly-motivated counterpart able and willing to absorb the knowledge

of the experts. However, this is not reality. Working conditions in the civil service are extremely unattractive. First of all the salaries are totally inadequate. They are so low that a civil servant can not afford to spend the whole working time in an office unless he has other sources of income. The monthly salary of university graduates in the Ministry of National Planning is around 1.500 So Sh which is equivalent to 12 US Dollars. The Permanent Secretary earns maybe 30 US Dollars a month.

Compared with other professions: a Permanent Secretary earns less than a house boy working for expatriates. If he become a taxi driver or a waiter in a good private restaurant he could easily earn 5 times as much as in the Ministry. However, inadequate salaries are only one aspect, the lack of a performance-oriented career system, for instance, another. The result is an extremely low working morale, high absenteeism, second jobs and a general tendency to leave the public sector. This leads to a situation in which no matter what is done to improve technical assistance, as long as there is no reform in the civil service especially an adequate salary system — all other steps will be in vain. *So civil service reform is really the heart of the matter.*

There are other reasons than those lying in the counterpart/expert relationship. One is the lack of overall *planning for technical assistance*. There is no human development scheme which connects with ongoing technical assistance programmes or vice versa — not in general, not for sectors and not for the individual institutions. Decisions on technical assistance projects are taken on a case-by-case basis without relating them to the general manpower situation. In addition, planning is often done by donor side. Expatriate experts formulate project ideas, terms of references and they review the studies written by foreign consultants. Project agreements and plans of operation are formulated by the donor side. This leads to a situation where donor interests prevail: for instance the priority for certain sectors or the understandable desire to support so called «own» investment programmes.

There is one last factor for the difficulties of technical assistance which I want to mention — *the language*. Since expatriate experts do not speak Somali, the counterpart and the expatriate specialist do not communicate in the counterpart's mother tongue. Even worse — except for Italians or people from English-speaking countries — it is also not the mother tongue of the expatriate. And the situation is even more complicated by Somalia's multilingual heritage, where Italian, English or Arabic are used in the educational system. The communication process in the expert/counterpart relationship, which in itself is a difficult process, is complicated even more by this factor.

4. Coming to the end, I would add some recommendations. They all follow directly from the problems mentioned above:

— As I said, *civil service reform* is the heart of the matter. The time does not allow to elaborate on this subject. It would fill another lecture. The Somali government and the donors involved have recognized the importance of the problem. First steps have been taken in recent years to get rid of redundant labor, so as to get leverage for salary increases. When I left Somalia in March two Ministries had more than doubled the salaries of their employees. A donor working-group had been set up to design adequate support measures for the government. However, taking into account the budgetary situation in Somalia it is not realistic

to expect a quick overall solution to the problem. This can only be reached step by step with donor assistance.

— Both donors and the Somalia Government have to put more *emphasis on know-how transfer* instead of quickly improving working results. The assignment of experts increases dependency unless it leads to a better performance of personnel. This means that donors have to pay attention to personal qualifications of their staff and not just to their professional credentials. The Somali side has to be involved in the recruitment process. It also means that both sides have to accept that know-how transfer and institution building is as important as the quality of reports, studies etc. Finally the training component in technical assistance programmes has to be increased.

— The *planning process for technical assistance has to be improved*. Manpower development plans have to be developed for all sectors and technical assistance programmes have to relate to them. The existing technical assistance has to be reviewed sector by sector and institution by institution. This might lead to a reduction of technical assistance in certain areas or even to an overall reduction. But, technical assistance can only make sense if it corresponds to the Somali capacity to absorb it.

— Finally, the language problem! All long-term experts should learn Somali! However, to be realistic: you can not expect expatriate experts to learn Somali in such a way that it really becomes a means of professional communication. Therefore, the only thing that can be done is that language qualifications are improved on the Somali side. This means, first of all, *a more coherent language policy*. Besides that *English language courses* for civil servants should be conducted on a large scale in those areas where the knowledge is necessary for professional activities.

There are a lot of other recommendations concerning the planning and design of individual projects. I have concentrated on some general problems and recommendations because — in my view — they have overriding importance for the whole technical assistance. These problems are not unknown, the recommendations not new. What is necessary is action — from both sides, the Somali government and the donor community.

References

UNDP and World Bank, 1985, *Somalia-Report of a Joint Technical Cooperation Assessment Mission*.