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Technical Assistance and Strategy Development

Introduction

Technical assistance is generally defined as any form of aid given to less developed countries by international organisations such as the United Nations and its agencies, individual governments, foundations and philanthropic institutions. The objective of technical assistance is to provide those countries with the expertise needed to promote economic development. More specifically, the World Bank defines technical assistance as the transfer of ideas, practices, knowledge, technologies or skills with the objective of fostering economic development. Technical assistance is classified according to the function it performs, for example, policy or institutional development, capacity building or programme support. National export strategy projects fall under the category of ‘capacity building’.

Since 2004, the Commonwealth Secretariat has provided technical assistance in the development of national export strategies in 14 countries in Africa, the Caribbean, Central America and the South Pacific.¹ In some of these countries – namely Belize, Botswana, Fiji, Grenada, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Swaziland and Uganda – project work was undertaken in collaboration with the International Trade Centre (ITC). This collaboration no doubt enriched the process and led to efficient and cost effective delivery of the technical assistance by the two organisations.

Discussions at the NES Learning Workshop² focused on how to make technical assistance more effective. A locally driven process was considered to be particularly important for an NES project. As workshop participants reflected on their experiences they agreed on some key recommendations that would facilitate the NES process. Below is the model that emerged.

A 5-Step Process for Developing the Strategy

Step 1: Establish stakeholder commitment

The first step in any strategy process is to establish its relevance to those who stand to benefit from it, the stakeholders. The NES stakeholders are spread throughout the economy and range from government ministries to private sector institutions,

civil society and academia. They also include individuals involved in activities that are directly or indirectly involved in export business. Use two approaches to determine the relevance of the strategy to these stakeholders. First, review documents that are readily available in the public domain and those that the stakeholders can provide. Second, engage in direct discussions with key representatives of these stakeholders. This process would ideally be carried out by the NES lead organisation, as mentioned above.

The government should focus its review on long- and medium-term national development plans. They come in different forms but generally the long-term development plans, which many countries call 'vision statements', would cover a period of 20 to 30 years while the medium-term plans cover periods of four to six years. Some countries have shorter 'rolling' development plans covering three years. The content of these documents would usually be explained in more sector-specific instruments, such as papers on trade or investment or industrial policy. The review should focus on the extent of support shown for export development in the country. If export development is not reflected in the long- and medium-term development plans of a country, then this might be an indicator that exporting is not a priority for the government. In such cases it would be unlikely that resources would be made available to support the implementation of any resultant strategy.

The strategic and business plans of private sector institutions would provide information on the importance of exporting to the private sector. These documents would also provide information on what direction the private sector would want to take in the exports business. Most civil society organisations produce brochures, pamphlets and reports on issues that are of interest to them in so far as they affect the unrepresented members of the general public. The issues that relate to the export business could range from remuneration of workers in the exports sector, use of pesticides, pollution and environmental concerns of any kind as a result of activities relating to exports. Regarding academia, a review of annual reports and other educational material would provide insights on the human resource competence in the exporting business. Discussions with private companies involved in exports, or those intending to do so, will provide a clear picture of where the country stands as these are the people who actually produce goods and services for export.

Step 2: Prepare the case

Step 1 above will provide all the background information required to formulate a 'Case for a National Export Strategy'. This should be a brief document that clearly explains the following:

- Overall objective of the national export strategy;
- Benefits of an NES to the economy in general and to the individual stakeholders in particular; and,
- Responsibilities of each stakeholder group.

Organise a meeting of representatives of the key stakeholders to present the 'Case for a National Export Strategy' and to seek endorsement for the initiation of the project.

It should be noted that an effective relationship between the public and private sectors would provide a sound foundation for the successful formulation of the NES. One cannot work without the other. According to the UK Department for International Development (DFID):

The capability of a state underpins political and economic stability and helps ensure human rights, personal safety and security of property are respected. And the state is generally primarily responsible for the provision and regulation of infrastructure, health and education. The State also plays a critical role in providing the institutions required for private companies to grow... Markets themselves can be seen as a type of institution with their own rules of the game that are set by historical, political and cultural factors. It is the role of the state to arbitrate between competing claims on resources and to maintain stability... (2008, p. 17)

Step 3: National resources

Experience shows that national resources will be allocated for the development of a national export strategy if there is enough understanding about its importance. The resources include money, people, mandates and political commitment. Use the following pointers to make an initial assessment of available resources and further needs.

- ***Institutional strength of the mandate holding organisation.*** This organisation would normally provide the NES Secretariat. Assess its capacity to carry out this function and if there is need for strengthening then this should be recommended.
- ***A secure mandate for the NES process.*** This relates to the level of domestic public demand and support. For effective development of the strategy, it should have broad support across the government, the private sector and civil society. Assess the extent to which key stakeholders are engaged and involved in the process through membership of the national team or the various sector teams.
- ***A stable and sustainable source of funding for NES development and implementation.*** Good practice would dictate that this funding is included in the country's national budget. Securing a legislated mandate for the NES process would guarantee the allocation of resources from the national budget. Many NES projects have failed in the past because they were either funded by government or development agencies as one-off initiatives.³
- ***Political commitment at the highest level.*** This is the key to effective development and implementation. First, it ensures that priority issues can be addressed from a multi-sectoral dimension rather than from narrow sector standpoints. Second, it enables the NES co-ordinating system to work across

the economic structures. Third, it ensures that the NES vision and objectives incorporate political goals consistent with national aspirations and are reflected in political aspirations, development plans and policy statements. Fourth, it ensures that policy implications of the NES are followed and considered throughout the NES process and not merely at some end point.

Step 4: Seeking technical assistance

Once steps 1 to 3 are adequately covered, the country is ready to start the actual process of developing a national export strategy. The national institution with the export development mandate should initiate the formation of a small NES team with membership from the government, the private sector, civil society and academia to oversee the process. The team should approach an international organisation working in the area of economic development for support and to bring in international experience and good practice.⁴ Different organisations use different criteria to assess projects for support but the foundation set out above would be sufficient for any one of them to positively consider providing technical assistance on the development of a NES. When the development organisation considers that a country is ready for support it seeks verification and agreement to proceed. For example, the Commonwealth Secretariat undertakes a scoping mission to the country to carry out an independent assessment of the need for assistance.⁵

Step 5: From project launch to strategy completion

The following activities are recommended for taking the country to document completion:

The launch of the project should take two to three hours and include three main features. First, ensure a high political profile (for example, the presence and involvement of the Minister responsible for trade development) to demonstrate political support of the project. Second, all public and private sector and civil society organisations concerned with trade development should be represented at the highest levels to demonstrate their buy-in. Third, invite electronic and print media not only to cover the event but also to participate as agents of development.

Follow the launch with a **kick-start workshop**, lasting two to three days, with the participation of senior government and private sector and civil society representatives with responsibility for developing, influencing and implementing trade and export related policies. Workshop outputs include the confirmation of an **NES national team**, agreement of roles and responsibilities of the members and the development of a work programme with clearly agreed time frames. The national team is representative of the stakeholders. It typically comprises 12 to 15 members drawn from the public sector, private sector, civil society and academia on a ratio of 3: 3: 1: 1. The higher representation of the public and private sectors is a reflection of their size and scope relative to civil society organisations and academia.

The design and consultative process takes place at local level and is led by the national and sector teams. These teams agree objectives and timelines, set criteria for decision-making and prioritise the areas on which to focus. The process requires the right degree of governance, a balance between creativity and accountability, and, critically, advance notification of commitments. Progress can only be made if everyone sticks to the calendar of events as much as possible. The NES consultative process ensures that inputs are received from a large cross section of the economy. These views form the basis for the draft NES document.

During this phase momentum will depend largely on the ability of technical experts and sector representatives to provide quick responses. Use of web-based technology, where available, may facilitate the NES consultative process. Use of audio or video conferencing may be an option for supportive contact between the donor organisation and the national team. The working arrangements for the NES teams vary from country to country. Some countries request a consultant to provide the teams with technical support while others request a co-ordinator to manage the activities of the teams.

A **national retreat** should be organised at the end of the main NES consultative meetings and regional workshops. The aim of this retreat is to review the raw data that has been collected, assembled and collated at both national and sector levels, and to harmonise it for accuracy and consistency. The output of the national retreat is a **draft NES document**. Participants at the retreat include the members of the national team and members of the **NES sector teams**, which represent the priority sectors. Each sector has about six members.

A **national symposium** accords the NES national team the opportunity to present the draft NES document to a wide range of stakeholders for their final views and inputs. These views and inputs are reviewed by the national team and to the extent possible incorporated into the **final NES document**.

The **launch of the project document** marks the official completion of the NES development process and the official beginning of its implementation. The official launch should be a high profile event involving the country's top political leadership. The launch provides the political direction for effective implementation.

Notes

1. Botswana, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda and Zanzibar (Africa); Grenada and St Vincent and the Grenadines (Caribbean); Belize (Central America); Fiji, Samoa and Tonga (South Pacific).
2. 'Small States in Transition: From Vulnerability to Competitiveness', Port of Spain, 18–21 January 2004. For context see 'Preface' above.
3. Countries that provided resources to develop and implement NES projects through their national budgets include Botswana, Fiji, Grenada, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Tonga, Uganda and Zanzibar. These countries are registering good implementation results.

4. Websites of organisations that work in the area of export development include: the Commonwealth Secretariat, www.thecommonwealth.org; International Trade Centre, www.intracen.org; World Bank, www.worldbank.org.
5. The mission evaluates the project's relevance to the country's development priorities, and the extent of the stakeholder's buy-in and commitment. It reaches agreement in principle on the scope of the project and submits a report with appropriate recommendations. A scoping mission may not be necessary in countries that have recently received technical assistance from the Secretariat. Instead, an appropriately developed questionnaire may be used to capture salient features on the new request regarding ownership, counterparts and other organisations contribution to the project, and clarification of issues that might not be evident in the request. Once the project has been approved the Secretariat requires the preparation of a project design document covering project objectives, relevance, overall development impact, and sustainability as well as project design and framework. The approval of this document by the Secretariat's senior management will release the required resources to implement the delivery of the technical assistance.