

Chapter 11

Promoting Reciprocal Learning in the South: A Case Study of South–South Cooperation between Benin, Bhutan and Costa Rica

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Abstract

The Programme for South–South Cooperation between Benin, Bhutan, Costa Rica and the Netherlands (PSC) grew out of bilateral Sustainable Development Agreements signed in 1994 between the Netherlands and each individual country. In 2005, based on the priorities agreed at the World Summit of Sustainable Development (Johannesburg) and the Millennium Development Goals, Costa Rica, Benin and Bhutan came under the umbrella of South–South cooperation, with a US\$13.2 million grant from the Netherlands. The PSC was established to execute reciprocal projects of common interest between 2007 and 2011, focusing on four components of sustainable development: economic development, social development, environmental protection and gender equality. The objectives of the PSC were to contribute towards the eradication of poverty, change in patterns of production and non-sustainable consumption, improvements in sustainable tourism, efficient use of energy and management and protection of natural resources. Gender equality was a cross-cutting theme throughout all the projects, since this was a major concern in all partner countries. The PSC strove to function as a political, administrative and financial framework to develop South–South cooperation with the intention of making this a replicable model.

The unique nature of this collaboration between countries in three different continents with vastly distinct languages, cultures and geographical settings has raised many eyebrows, but the PSC has shown that with the right kind of planning, commitment, partners and reciprocal respect this sort of South–South collaboration can produce

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impressive results on a very small budget.

1. Context and Background

The Netherlands (representing ‘the North’) and a limited number of selected ‘South’ countries, namely Bhutan (Asia), Benin (Africa) and Costa Rica (Latin America) joined hands to embark on an ambitious triangular pilot initiative. By 2007, National Mechanisms were designated in each country: Fundecooperación para el Desarrollo Sostenible in Costa Rica, Centre de Partenariat et d’Expertise pour le Développement Durable (CePED) in Benin and the Sustainable Development Secretariat (SDS) in Bhutan, to act as coordinators and to serve as platforms to articulate promising initiatives for sustainable development. It was hoped that this partnership would 1) bridge the gap between four world regions; 2) inspire the clustering of many similar small partnerships and real commitment between other countries; and 3) promote alliances between a wide array of local, national and international stakeholders.

1.1 The establishment of the Programme of South–South Cooperation

Despite marked geographical, cultural and religious differences, the three countries had collaborated successfully since 1994. In the wake of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (1992) in Rio de Janeiro, Benin, Bhutan and Costa Rica separately entered into bilateral sustainable development agreements with the Netherlands, which were formalized in 1994. During the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 the countries reaffirmed their commitment to pursuing sustainable development goals and mutual cooperation. Benin, Bhutan and Costa Rica signed a strategic partnership agreement with the Netherlands. What followed was a decade of promoting and supporting hundreds of projects in the three countries, delivering joint declarations at multilateral forums and debating policies towards achieving sustainable development.

Over the years they had developed bonds of trust and understanding that had enabled them to contribute to each other’s national development strategies. Mechanisms were in place to facilitate South–South cooperation not just through the National Mechanisms, but also governments, educational institutions, civil society and the private sector. Instead of terminating their relationship, then, the Netherlands,

Costa Rica, Benin and Bhutan in 2005 established a Programme for South–South Cooperation on Sustainable Development (PSC). This initiative would create an innovative framework of collaboration based on equality, reciprocity and participation that would re-imagine the traditional North–South relationship in development cooperation. The Netherlands agreed to transfer funds up to US\$13.2 million to support the PSC, and it was decided that Fundecooperación para el Desarrollo Sostenible, the Costa Rican National Mechanism, would act as the Secretariat and administrator for this PSC fund.

The PSC was adopted into the foreign policy and national plans of each partner country by the respective high-level representatives. This set the stage for each government to incorporate South–South cooperation into their international relations agendas. In Bhutan this agenda was included in the Five-year Development Plan, Benin adopted it into its national policy and Costa Rica incorporated South–South cooperation into its National Development Plan and state policy in 2007.

1.2 Sustainable impact: the PSC results go beyond the program

At the time of writing all the projects are continuing and most are being expanded, though the funding from the PSC has ended. For example, one project that was initially started to commercialize indigenous art and handicrafts in Costa Rica and Bhutan (Project code 24-B-08) was then expanded into Benin with the coordinators' own funds, independent of PSC funding. A similar situation occurred at the local level in Costa Rica, where a project that aimed to develop local capacities and environmentally friendly agricultural technologies through knowledge management processes between Bhutan and Costa Rica (Project code 05-B-07) set the stage for a change in the agricultural practices of small farmers. The project has been successfully replicated in different local contexts, adapted to a national scale; a new project was formulated with the intention of following up and replicating the results. The ease and success of these adaptations can be attributed to the simple but ingenious methodology of South–South cooperation that includes key aspects such as reciprocity, multi-stakeholder participation and equality of participants.

2. The PSC as A Mechanism for Reciprocal Learning

2.1 Structure, roles and responsibilities

The nucleus of the PSC program was formed by the National Mechanisms

in each partner country (see Figure 1). The National Mechanisms were designated by the governments of Benin, Bhutan and Costa Rica and were responsible for the daily running of the program in their respective countries. The National Mechanisms became the main link between grassroots projects and the PSC and it was their responsibility to present proposals to the management board for approval and funding decisions. Each National Mechanism had its own administrative budget for the implementation of the program. In order to guarantee the efficient management of the program, a Checklist for Organisational Capacity Assessment was applied to Fundecooperación and the other National Mechanisms; a positive evaluation of its capacities in effective and efficient implementation was received. Nonetheless, the program invested in quality management improvement that included continuous capacity building across all staff levels. National Mechanism staff members participated in training programs, workshops, study visits and national seminars in order to enhance their technical knowledge or general management skills.

The overall administration of the PSC was the responsibility of the Secretariat, run by Fundecooperación in Costa Rica. The management board was the highest decision-making body and included three directors or formally appointed representatives of the three National Mechanisms. The board jointly decided policies governing the PSC, approved projects presented and allocated funds to PSC projects and components. Each partner country had one vote and had equal standing on the management board. At the very top was the joint committee of the PSC, which was composed of high-level government and civil representatives from each partner country providing political support and policy direction to enhance the implementation of the PSC. The Embassy of the Netherlands in Costa Rica received financial and technical reports and was often consulted by PSC staff members in Costa Rica for advice or opinions.

2.2 Purpose, goals and expected results

The PSC identified four specific development goals that it would work towards.

- 1) To develop reciprocal projects that would generate knowledge and empower stakeholders. The results of these projects would be used as inputs for sector strategies and policy making.
- 2) To mobilize national governments, civil society and the academic

and private sectors in partner countries to renew and reinforce commitment to sustainable development.

- 3) To contribute to sustainable development and poverty reduction in partner countries, taking into account environmental, economic and cultural idiosyncrasies.
- 4) To explore the potential of South–South partnership to promote international commitments and mutual cooperation for sustainable development and experiment with a new north–South–South model of development cooperation.

These goals were set around four thematic areas: 1) sustainable tourism, 2) sustainable production and consumption chains, 3) conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and 4) access to sustainable energy and efficient energy use. Gender equality and female empowerment was a cross-cutting theme emphasized in all PSC projects.

Reciprocal projects developed under these thematic areas were expected to generate results that would empower local communities but also provide inputs for national policies. In areas where grassroots initiatives were already well developed, the PSC hoped to start second-phase projects that would form a bridge between micro- and macro-level implementation. The PSC was aiming to initiate grassroots and micro-level projects, the results of which would inform multi-stakeholder policy dialogue in the three partner countries. PSC projects were also expected to facilitate policy dialogue between the private and public sectors. The PSC would also streamline and systematize knowledge transfer and best practices generated by the projects to allow for ease of transfer to beneficiaries within and outside the projects.

2.3 A bumpy road to success

All the National Mechanism representatives interviewed for this case study admit that the initial logistical coordination was a challenge. To begin with there were the language and culture issues. All three organizations selected as National Mechanisms used English, but often the same word could be interpreted differently in each country.

Language differences were further exacerbated by cultural differences. ‘When we want to say something negative in Costa Rica we use an indirect way, we use many euphemisms. The Bhutanese are a lot more direct while the Beninese are also indirect, like us,’ explained Mauricio

Castro, the head of the Costa Rica management board delegation. Such cultural norms were bound to create misunderstandings and hurt feelings, and the partners decided to attend a three-day communications workshop in Bangkok to address these language and cultural barriers.

Interestingly, language and cultural disparities were an issue only for project coordinators. None of the 43 project beneficiaries and coordinators mentioned language as a barrier. When prompted to talk about any language difficulties, all mentioned that they had had no problems. While most project coordinators helped as translators, this was often not needed. Cecilia Mora, a project coordinator who began by translating between the Costa Rican indigenous communities and Bhutanese artisans, soon realized that they were communicating without her. 'They understood each other perfectly through signs and signals. After the introductions, they didn't need me anymore, they easily expressed their common knowledge on what they were doing.'

Another challenge that the PSC had to overcome during its nascent stage was the difference in time and technological infrastructure. There is a 12-hour time difference between Costa Rica and Bhutan and a 7-hour time difference between Costa Rica and Benin. Conference calls and any other type of communication had to be scheduled accordingly, which meant that coordinators had to often work late into the night to accommodate another partner country. Long-distance communication was also hindered by technological differences.

All these challenges notwithstanding, by the end of the first six months the PSC was off the ground and successfully working towards achieving its goals.

3. Program Results

3.1 Facts and figures

The value of allowing the southern partners take ownership of the PSC is reflected in the impressive results achieved to date. After only four years, by 2011 and with a relatively small fund of US\$13.2 million, the PSC has involved over 180 organizations and has achieved the following results:

- more than 3,000 direct beneficiaries

- 692 new products
- 179 new services
- 2,354 people working in a productive activity related to the training
- 1,100 women involved in decision making
- more than 140 new enterprises
- more than 400 people with augmented literacy skills
- more than 200 teenagers at social risk trained in technical skills and managerial capacity
- more than 200 community based organizations benefited

The results obtained by each of the projects exceeded the indicators that were set out at the beginning of the program. All interviewees stressed the positive impact that the PSC projects have had on their lives.

3.2 Knowledge exchange among countries

Although skeptics might question the value of collaboration between such culturally and geographically distinct countries, it was precisely their differences that helped develop positive results. Due to their first-hand familiarity with the problems on the ground, actors have been more efficient and effective in identifying and implementing solutions. For example, Beninese farmers learned from their Costa Rican counterparts how to grow organic pineapples while Costa Ricans learned from colleagues in Benin how to use edible insects to feed their cattle. ‘Since the beginning of our cooperation we managed to help Beninese farmers doubling their pineapple production,’ explained one interviewee, a Costa Rican farmer helping Beninese farmers. ‘But the most interesting thing is that this project builds long lasting capacities and leads the way to short and long term sustainability.’

The active participation of beneficiaries was achieved because the three countries have important similarities that have supported the effective exchange of experiences, knowledge and skills. This is partly due to the fact that the partners who linked up operate in similar contexts, have similar levels of income (no use of expensive northern consultants) and understand each other better than would be the case in a north–south transfer of concepts, knowledge and skills. As an important factor, a prior evaluation of executing agencies in order to look for reciprocity among the projects and complementarity among organizations was made.

The contributions of the 43 projects to more than 3,000 beneficiaries in the three countries have been not only financial but also technical, including services (training, technical assistance, information and business development services), market access, technology transfer, research and others. This was made possible by adapting to the national reality of each of the partners and the knowledge and the techniques exchanged. For example, the project that investigated the socio-economic benefits of national parks and protected natural areas established a basic methodology to determine the previous benefits of these areas in Costa Rica, and following several training sessions, the project has now been successfully replicated in different local contexts, adapted to a national scale and internationally transferred to Bhutan and Benin. The South–South cooperation between these countries did not simply permit the export of a Costa Rican methodology, but also provided the feedback, through monitoring and evaluation needed to ensure a successful national scale-up. In these cases, scaling up a local level project to the national level is an endeavor that cannot be accomplished without structural support from laws and policies. This is true in Costa Rica as well as around the world. The scaling up of the project was realized within the context of strong policy initiatives taken by the government of Costa Rica, and the international transfer of the project was facilitated by supportive national policies in Benin and Bhutan. The learning and knowledge sharing that resulted from this PSC partnership was largely responsible for the success of the program in each country.

3.3 Sustainability

Counterpart organizations and stakeholders were willing and able to implement a specific project with reciprocal characteristics. The PSC recognized that the participation of local and community organizations ensured project continuation in the medium- and long-term, by creating a strong sense of ownership among the stakeholders. In order to be eligible for PSC funding, the projects had to establish their sustainability in three ways:

- **Organizational:** each project described the organizational structure that would be in place when the contractual relationship (between the PSC and the organization) ended. Roles and responsibilities and the authority and control that would be exercised over the operations in each participating country were clarified at the outset.

- Economic: each project was expected to develop mechanisms that allowed actions to continue once the funding from the PSC ended. These mechanisms included the development of new commercial products and services, income generation, new job options, the improvement of efficiency in micro-enterprises and the development of new micro-enterprises.
- Environmental: each of the projects was required to efficiently manage water resources, energy, solid and liquid waste, and CO₂ emissions during project implementation.

The PSC catalyzed the transition to sustainability by supporting innovation in policies, seeding initiatives, replicating successes, establishing new partnerships between civil society organizations in the partner countries and disseminating information.

4. Success Factors

4.1 More equal relationships

With the PSC came a change in relationships between the providing and receiving partners. The Netherlands provided funds, but otherwise withdrew from the collaboration to an observant role. This permitted the southern partners flexibility that they had not had before. All the National Mechanism representatives as well as the Dutch Ambassador to Costa Rica agreed that the PSC had allowed the southern partners to take ownership of the projects. Instead of having solutions handed to them by the providing partner, the PSC programme allowed the partner countries to define on their own what the main problems were, where their priorities lay and what strategies should be adopted. PSC projects were proposed by the local community which identified the problem and proposed a project for its solution. The three National Mechanisms had a collective way in project approval, ensuring that problems were defined and solved collectively by the partners, with counterparts in each country sharing their knowledge and experience. This has led to a more equal relationship between the provider and the receiving partners.

4.2 Fostering mutual ownership

All the interviewees for this case study agreed that South–South cooperation has helped create a much greater sense of ownership. The biggest impact has been in the change of attitude of the receiving party. Traditional North–South relationships engender an expectation in the

beneficiaries that the North will always give them money as a 'gift'. So when the funding runs out, projects stop because the beneficiaries expect the donor to give them more money and to tell them what to do with it. The role of the beneficiary is that of a passive recipient, so there is very little hope for project sustainability.

By creating a sense of ownership, South–South cooperation has made the southern partners a lot more active in their projects. '[Our relationship] went from one partner only giving and the other partner only taking to a relationship of give-and-take', explains one interviewee. 'Giving' for the southern partners in this case took the form of teaching or sharing their knowledge and best practices with other partners. The opportunity to teach has forced the partners to play a much more active role in projects, since they know that the quality of the information passed on to the other partners depends entirely on how much efforts they put into the venture.

4.3 Fostering mutual accountability

Perhaps even more impressive than the results and benefits that the PSC has achieved is the program's stringent financial accountability. Realizing the enormous impact that even the smallest financial stimuli can have on the lives of local communities, the PSC has been very careful with how and where it invests the funds provided by the Netherlands. Each project went through a strict auditing process, submitting six-month and final financial and technical reports to the corresponding National Mechanisms. To further ensure transparency and accountability, the PSC decided to involve the North as an independent third party monitoring body. To that end it presented its results and accounted for the use of funds at several international forums including the European Parliament, the Dutch Parliament, External Cooperation Infopoint, European Development Days (Brussels) and the Third Annual Global South–South Development Expo (Geneva). 'Our auditors are very happy with how Fundecooperacion has used the funds', confirms the Dutch Ambassador of Costa Rica.

4.4 The 'North' role in the PSC

Although the PSC was the brainchild of Dr. Jan Pronk,² the providing country chose to take the backseat in this venture. To a large extent the PSC is run by the receiving countries. The Netherlands as the North

2. Minister of Development Cooperation of the Netherlands at the time of inception.

partner only serves a monitoring function. It receives annual technical and financial reports on all PSC activities and is invited to all management board and joint committee meetings, although it does not have the right to vote. Any representative of the Netherlands is free to solicit information from the PSC or to provide suggestions when they see fit, but it does not play an active role in the decision-making processes of the PSC.

All the stakeholders interviewed for this case study expressed great satisfaction with this set-up. Donor countries have a lot of priorities and often cannot afford to babysit every project that they fund. The horizontal accountability and individual ownership that the PSC provides reduce the amount of donor attention that would have been required by a traditional program of similar magnitude. This not only decreases monitoring costs but also permits the Netherlands to concentrate on other concerns while continuing to promote social and economic development in partner countries.

4.5 Exploiting comparative advantages

Many beneficiaries pointed out that it was easier to identify with their southern counterparts while engaging in a knowledge exchange project. South–South cooperation has a comparative advantage through the partners' in-depth knowledge of the situation and needs on the ground. Only South–South cooperation partners can correctly define and identify the most pressing development problems in their countries, and ample past experience has shown that the best solutions come from the grassroots and the beneficiaries themselves. Given the southern partners' closer grassroots connections, South–South cooperation is more likely to develop solutions that the local communities can identify with and will hence be more likely to take ownership of.

That being said, all the interviewees agreed that a reciprocal relationship with the North was relevant. While the grassroots beneficiaries find it easier to identify with their counterparts from the South, the overall coordination of projects can only be successful if it brings together the comparative advantages of North–South and South–South collaborations. Development projects often benefit from outside perspectives. The North can often shed new light on a problem or offer creative solutions that southern partners might not have considered before, but this has to be done in an environment of mutual trust and respect.

4.6 Successful technical cooperation

The success formula of the PSC was independence from donors, emphasis on real reciprocity and equality between members. Through the PSC the three countries came together to share skills and knowledge on agriculture, environmental issues, efficient use of energy and much more. The reciprocal knowledge exchange and mutual learning strengthened sectors such as academic, governmental and non-governmental organizations, private and civil society, and at the same time increased cost effectiveness, promoted transfer of appropriate technologies and ensured local ownership, leadership and capacity building. This experience has shown that South–South cooperation can help developing nations overcome constricting donor–recipient relationships and learn best practices from each other.

5. Lessons Learned

In conclusion, the PSC experience highlights several very important lessons for future South–South cooperation activity and for North–South–South triangular relationships.

Language, culture, religion and geography are not barriers to cooperation. Although language and culture posed some difficulties at the start of the PSC, six months down the line these problems were long forgotten. None of the project coordinators or beneficiaries interviewed for this case study cited language as a problem in their project. If anything, experiences from the PSC projects have shown that language ceases to be an issue at the grassroots level where beneficiaries learn through hands-on experience. All the interviewees were eager to learn about the culture of their partners and most projects involved cultural learning along with technology and skill transfers.

Permitting greater autonomy and responsibility among southern partners leads to a strong sense of ownership and accountability and hence more efficient results. The PSC has shown that when the providing partner is willing to allow the receiving partners to make their own decisions, the receiving partners take on responsibility for the project's success. They become accountable not only to their constituencies and to the provider, but also to each other. This horizontal accountability serves several purposes. First, it allows the providing partner to concentrate on more pressing issues, knowing that the project

will be managed well. Secondly, it permits the receiving partners to identify and solve concerns that are most relevant to them. Finally, it ensures more efficient fund management by the receiving parties thanks to the effective decision-making structure, accountable mainly to key southern stakeholders committed to this initiative. The fact that many outcomes of PSC projects have been used and incorporated by the national governments of the corresponding countries is proof that the autonomy of southern partners produces results that are useful on a macro-level.

Technology and knowledge transfer is most efficient when counterparts identify with each other. A common theme mentioned in all the interviews with beneficiaries and project coordinators was the comfortable learning environment that existed between southern counterparts. Many beneficiaries mentioned that it would have been different if they had been taught, for instance, organic farming skills by ‘experts’ who had developed techniques in a laboratory but had never implemented them in real life. Being able to see firsthand the success of other farmers or producers using the same techniques that they were teaching proved to be a lot more convincing for beneficiaries than any amount of empirical evidence. The hands-on learning experience also allowed them to retain more, and all the beneficiaries mentioned that they use, to varying degrees, the skills that they learned during the projects.

South–South cooperation has to be based on reciprocity, equality and participation in order to succeed. The absence of any one of these pillars would distort South–South cooperation, hampering the comfortable and conducive environment that allows partners to freely express their views. The PSC’s experience shows that it is best to include these principles in the agreement document that the partners sign at the beginning of the collaboration. This ensures that all partners are on the same page and everyone knows that they have the right to complain if they feel that one of these principles is violated. While the PSC has not had any problems in this context, it is a measure that all partners appreciate.

Professionalism and systematization need to be prioritized and can be learned from the North. While the PSC has been praised internationally for its impressive project organization and fund

management, this is something that the National Mechanisms had to learn the hard way. The first six months of the program were dedicated entirely to strengthening the organizational capacities of the National Mechanisms and to professionalizing their institutions. Today this has paid off and all agree that this investment was imperative for the program's success. Following the mid-term review of the PSC, it became apparent that the program did not use indicators to predict its success. This prevented the PSC from comparing actual results with expected results. Following the review this was corrected, and it served as a valuable lesson for the PSC. These are techniques that the North has used extensively in its vast development experience and is one of the things that South-South cooperation can learn from the North.

The North need not be afraid of being excluded from South-South cooperation. The PSC's north-South-South collaboration shows that development will only be possible if both the North and the South come together in a respectful and reciprocal partnership that makes the best of each other's comparative advantages and allows each partner to put in the greatest effort. Each partner has a lot to learn from the other and achieving development goals without help from the North would be impossible. The North has a vital role to play in South-South cooperation, provided that this role permits the southern partners the autonomy needed to carve out their own paths towards development.

Scenes from the PSC activities



Source: PSC

Appendix: List of Interviewees

Name	Affiliation	Interview date
Sonia Garcia Morale	Beneficiary, Project 05-B-07	1 July, 2011
Rogelio Martinez	Beneficiary, Project 05-B-07	1 July, 2011
Martin Kelber Salazar	Beneficiary, Project 16-P2-07	6 July, 2011
Isaac Gutierrez Funez	Beneficiary, Project 06-P2-07	7 July, 2011
Giselle Bianco Cordoba	Beneficiary, Project 06-P2-07	7 July, 2011
Eduardo Barroso	Beneficiary, Project 06-P2-07	7 July, 2011
Oswaldo Calvo Rodriguez	Beneficiary, Project 05-B-07	7 July, 2011
Alberto Chinchilla	Coordinator, Project 03-B-07	11 July, 2011
Jorge Sanchez	Coordinator, Project 03-B-08	12 July, 2011
Marilu Villalobos	Beneficiary, Project 04-P2-07	12 July, 2011
Mauricio Castro	National Mechanism, Costa Rica	13 July, 2011
Mathias Pofagi	National Mechanism, Benin	14 July, 2011
Marianella Feoli	PSC Secretariat, Costa Rica	14 July, 2011
Cecilia Mora	Coordinator, Project 24-B-08	14 July, 2011
Bernardo Aguilar	Coordinator, Project 06-P2-07	15 July, 2011
Maria Luisa	Beneficiary, Project 05-B-07	19 July, 2011
‘La negrita’	Beneficiary, Project 05-B-07	19 July, 2011
Dawa Penjor	Coordinator, Project 02-T-07	19 July, 2011
Dema Dolkar	Beneficiary, Project 02-T-07	19 July, 2011
Lawang Norbu	Beneficiary, Project 02-T-07	19 July, 2011
Kinga Wangdi	Coordinator, Project 04-B-07	20 July, 2011
Sanjay Rinchen	Beneficiary, Project 04-B-07	20 July, 2011
Matthijs van Bonzel	Dutch Ambassador to Costa Rica	4 August, 2011
Josea S. Dossou-Bodjrenou	Coordinator, Project 05-T-08	2 August, 2011
AMEGANKPOE Claudia	Coordinator, Project 06-P2-07	2 August, 2011
Clement D. Gnonlonfoun	Beneficiary, Project 05-T-08	2 August, 2011
Goglagonou Peirre	Beneficiary, Project 05-T-08	2 August, 2011
Rinchen Wangdi	National Mechanism, Bhutan	2 July, 2011