A noticeable feature of past and ongoing SSC projects is that they promote direct interaction between development workers and grassroots communities. South-South Cooperation is about partnerships among equal partners who both learn from each other. Once abroad, foreign development workers stay over long periods in the rural communities and participate in their life, long enough to build trust and make a real, thorough exchange of experiences possible.

Moving brains, a role for South-South cooperation

Most experiences that are shared, however, are not formally structured. They rest under the form of tacit knowledge, a knowledge that “is latent to a large extent— not available in books, but stored in the brains of those who need to use it”. It takes time and patience to make this type of exchange happen. “Tacit knowledge is acquired mostly through learning by doing” and not through formal education and training systems, as pointed out by Ricardo Haussmann, a professor of economics at Harvard University, where he is also Director of the Center for International Development. In his opinion, it is easier to move brains than it is to move tacit knowledge into brains.

Farmers, even illiterate, are genuine experts; their expertise has built up, generation after generation, over past centuries and millennia. It is, therefore, important to put in contact those farmers (and people who support them, e.g. extension workers, researchers) who thrive with good levels of productivity in a given environment, with other farmers striving against poverty in similar environments. The new FAO South-South Cooperation strategy foresees actions not only at grassroots level, but also at the level of institutions and policy. It entails a wide set of modalities for cooperating, from short- to long-term assignments of experts, study tours, training visits, exchange of training curricula, on-line meetings and video conferences. The purpose is to share all forms of experiences and knowledge, including tacit knowledge, through direct, human interaction.

Beyond the FAO/SSC initiative, FAO practises South-South Cooperation in many different ways. Every time expertise needs to be mobilized through an FAO project, it is useful and even necessary, to check the relevance of the SSC option. This implies that FAO and partners in the North must learn to take stock from important experiences in the South. FAO and partners should identify, cooperate more closely with, and learn from key institutions in the South that could be designated as genuine centers of excellence.

South-South cooperation for food security: achievements and challenges for FAO

FAO has been supporting South-South Cooperation (SSC) for more than 17 years. Over fifty SSC projects have been implemented from 1997 in support to special and national programs for food security. Through these projects, more than 1800 experts and technicians (from a total of 13 countries including China, Viet Nam, Cuba, India, Philippines, Morocco and Egypt) were fielded during 2-3 years in about 50 countries, mainly in Africa, but also in Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean islands.

Ugandan farmers visited a vegetable seedling company during a study tour to China.
Development actors have to focus on strengthening existing institutions, even those fragile and short-lived (from government, civil society or private sector), as only institutions can sustain long-term and sustainable impact. When State institutions fail to deliver public goods, civil society or private institutions often emerge. SSC should therefore facilitate the emergence of, and new partnerships with, institutions that represent the private sector and the civil society.

From China to Africa

Through FAO’s SSC initiative, China has deployed nearly 1000 aid workers in more than 25 countries, including Ethiopia, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda and Senegal. In Nigeria alone, almost 700 of these workers have been fielded in the 36 states of the country. Their work has been so much appreciated, in particular in the area of aquaculture that the Government of Nigeria now funds its own resources the fielding of more Chinese aid workers, whom they go interview and recruit directly in China, with full support of the Chinese authorities.

The Chinese Government currently supports FAO-implemented SSC projects in seven African countries and Mongolia through a 30 million US Dollars trust fund. Similarly, Vietnamese aid workers have helped Namibia, Chad, Senegal and Mali to make great strides towards food security through aquaculture, water control, rice production and diversification of food production. Cuban specialists were crucial when Cape Verde farmers introduced micro-irrigation, seeds and improved planting material.

Of course, difficulties and failures have also been experienced. In some cases, the poor preparation of the cooperating teams led to their early repatriation. Sometimes, language barriers made it necessary to use interpreters and to better train/select aid workers before their departure. Host Governments have sometimes not been able to meet their obligations (housing, transport and operational support).

In a few instances, local staff has also questioned the relevance of bringing in foreign specialists. Even if paid at very low rates compared to international rates, these are still higher than local salaries. It was not rare that staff in host countries considered that local graduates should be given priority in the allocation of resource and jobs.

Another important issue: the proportion of women in cooperating teams tends to be very low, and the understanding of the cultural context and gender roles is often limited in project design, leading to poor gender sensitivity of SSC actions. These difficulties are part of the endeavour and need to be addressed through enhanced and long-term dialogue. SSC cannot be developed in one day and FAO is learning by practicing it.

Governments also learn from each other. They make concessions as regards to the usual way of trading expertise and knowledge. For instance, they release international “experts” (at master degree level) and “technicians” (bachelors) at a very limited cost.

There is a South-South Cooperation spirit, made of altruism, desire to meet and share, solidarity and generosity among equal partners. Besides, this spirit makes everything simpler and less costly. SSC is also very good value for money!

The Four areas of Engagement

- **Policy Makers**
  - Providing upstream policy support
  - Policy Level

- **Experts**
  - Promoting knowledge networks platforms
  - Institutional Level

- **Practitioners**
  - Facilitating the exchange of development solutions
  - Grassroots Level

- **Fostering an enabling environment for effective SSC**

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Chinese experts conducting baseline research on agricultural markets in Senegal.