

THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF “EMERGING” DONORS AND THEIR SUPPORT TO EDUCATION & SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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Brazilian Technical Cooperation: formal versus informal

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This note compares the recent efforts of Brazil to become a major player in technical cooperation with one very small experiment along the same lines, but conducted by a single individual, essentially, on his own. It shows the contrasts between a massive and hurried approach by the government with the fine-tuned and surgical small set of training programs created by one person, only indirectly connected with the State machinery.

On becoming a big player in technical cooperation ¹

All along, Brazil has been a minute player in offering technical cooperation. In fact, not long ago, it was a major recipient. However, the situation has changed drastically in less than a decade. According to some sources, expenditures above 1.2 billion dollars put it ahead of Canada and Sweden, traditionally generous donors. Other sources cite figures reaching 4.5 billions dollars. This disparity results from the fact that the funds comes from many sources, making it difficult to tally the totals and getting into definitional matters.

Whatever might be the right figure, it is surprisingly high. Much beyond what well-informed Brazilians would guess. Why would the country want to spend so much to help other nations, having so many pressing problems on its own and relatively high levels of poverty?

More than likely, it is a combination of reasons, perhaps, not particularly original. Solidarity and humanitarian motifs are always part of the official rhetoric. There ought to be a grain of truth in the official proclamations, but how to tell? Another reason is Brazil's need to assert its position in the world – and nasty souls would say, overcome an inferiority complex. Commercial reasons and competition with China are more tangible justifications.

¹ Sources for this section come mostly from an article by Ambassador Rubens Barbosa, “Assistência Financeira ao Exterior”, *Estado de São Paulo*, October 10, 2010

Finally, Brazilian diplomacy wants to improve its odds of becoming a member of the UN Permanent Security Council. Many educated Brazilians have two views on this subject. Some say it is a bad idea, being expensive and contentious. Others say that it is not reachable, particularly after some recent blunders of the Brazilian foreign policy.

Contrary to what happens in most other countries, the funds for technical cooperation come from widely different sources. Curiously, the Foreign Office is a minor donor, with a contribution of only 52 million dollars.

Very substantial funds go to humanitarian programs and aid agencies, such as FAO, to support to the Gaza Strip, Haiti and other regions. Looking at the breakdown of such programs, it includes 300 million dollars in food (corn, beans, rice, powdered milk), going to regions as Gaza, El Salvador, Haiti, South Africa, Jamaica, Armenia, Mali, Kirgizstan, Mongolia, Iraq and Sri Lanka. This is an odd list. Understanding its logic is beyond the capabilities of the present author. It may have something to do with the Security Council Eldorado, but also with an eagerness to compete with China.

Most of the above aid is humanitarian. In principle, one cannot disagree with the merits of such programs. However, the down-to-earth problems of ensuring that it reaches the most dispossessed are less than trivial, as the experience of other countries show.

Considerable funds are spent to spearhead Brazilian economic policies. Unavoidably, some hits and misses are expected. On more solid grounds, loans from the Brazilian Development Bank and Banco do Brasil are partly targeted to fund Brazilian firms operating abroad. It is a tropical version of Eximbank. But some of the funds are targeted to local borrowers, increasing enormously the risk of default.

In addition to these humanitarian and commercial-banking activities, there are two significant lines of programs that deserve attention. One is vocational training. The other is tropical agriculture. In both, Brazil has a superlative performance, by any standards. Therefore, it makes sense to try to export them.

In these two areas, it is a fair bet that something can be achieved. But it is not a sure bet, as First World countries have failed miserably in attempting to export their crown jewels (to wit, the Germans, with their sacrosanct Dual System).

Brazilian SENAI is known as one of the best vocational training system of the Third World, on par with that of highly industrialized countries. *Prima facie*, it makes sense for Brazil to set up vocational training schools in six African countries.

Is the system exportable? Will it travel? The good news is that it has survived well in the poorest states of Brazil. In addition, half a century ago, the system was exported to all but two Latin American countries, with considerable success. Can it survive in Africa? It is too early to tell. However, a few decades ago similar

initiatives were undertaken, in the case of Portuguese-speaking Africa, and the results were credible.

Tropical agriculture is a fascinating case. For centuries, Brazil imported wheat, soybeans, pears, apples, grapes, butter and dozens of other foodstuff. Worse, the productivity of local crops was meager. Overall, agriculture was backward, as were the plantation owners.

However, after blindly copying European agricultural practices for almost five centuries, a major science and technology revolution took place in Brazil. In the last three decades, several thousands masters and Ph.Ds in agriculture were trained, first abroad and subsequently in the country. The most critical step was the creation of EMBRAPA, a huge agricultural research (public) enterprise. As of now, it employs around two thousand Ph.Ds in agriculture and related fields. At the same time, at least ten major universities developed graduate programs in agriculture, with significant research capabilities.

The result was an extraordinary increase in the productivity of most agricultural products. According to the Nobel prize winner, Norman Borlaug, Brazil was the next stage of the Green Revolution. In fact, many crops that never could be cultivated in Brazil were modified and became highly productive export crops. A few decades ago, soybeans could only grow in temperate climates, hence only in the southern tip of the country. Presently, there are soy plantations right on top of the Equator line. Brazil has become the number one soybean exporter.

The productivity of sugar cane has skyrocketed. The same happened with the technology for distilling alcohol, making it an eco-friendly and economically competitive fuel (with no subsidies). Using only the available technology, ethanol can have its production doubled, without planting a single extra hectare. It is just a matter of replicating well-proven techniques.

The same technical achievements go for cattle, that only now is beginning to benefit from the genetic research, making Brazil a formidable exporter of meat. All the fruits that were imported a few decades ago are now being exported. As a curiosity, the country is producing decent wine on the parallel 8^o, an exploit that had never been achieved.

EMBRAPA is setting up a research outpost in Ghana and a model farm for cotton in Mali. These are interesting experiments. Brazilian scientists have mastered the technology of adapting food crops to different tropical climates. Will the Africans be able to replicate the success?

More mature European countries have had mixed results in technical cooperation. With better organization, better logistics, more money and better education, they failed, more often than not. On the positive side, Brazilians are more used to precarious conditions and fragile governments. Will they fare better?

The informal sector in technical cooperation

This is the story of a man who was trained as a sociologist, but has worked most of his life in the capital of Brazil, either in the Ministry of Education or in the Ministry of Science and Technology. He was vice-President of CAPES, the Brazilian agency for post-graduate education.² Subsequently, he was Vice-Minister for Higher Education. He then moved to the Science and Technology Ministry, where he occupied several important positions.

As part of his duties, he has been creating and managing training and research programs, in both ministries. While Secretary for Science and Technology for his native State of Ceará, he got very involved in training primary school teachers in Mathematics. He was also one of the main supporters for the creation of a national Mathematics Olympics and later on, Portuguese language Olympics.

His professional trajectory and side interests attest to his energy and initiative. But it so happens that he is married to a career diplomat. Therefore, he has had to accommodate his own professional life to that of his wife.

Two recent events are relevant to the present tale. The first is that he has retired, with still plenty of energy and initiative. The second is that his wife is now the Brazilian Ambassador to Cape Verde.

Given his post-retirement activities, he is coming and going to Cape Verde, quite frequently. And of course, his interests in education remain alive. Visiting schools and the Ministry of Education, it came to his attention that primary teachers were inadequately prepared. Neither did they fully master the subject matter, nor did they learn how to teach effectively. To make matters worse, their handling of the Portuguese language is less than perfect, since they speak a creole language at home.

On his own initiative, he developed a program to take all Mathematics teachers of Cape Verde (a small country, to be sure) to the State of Ceará, in order to improve their math teaching skills. Being the husband of the Ambassador made arrangements easier in the Cape Verde government. And being friends with the science and technology establishment in Brasilia also helped in getting funds for the project. In Ceará, he contacted the most respected mathematician of the State to become the technical supervisor to the project.

To make a long story short, groups of math teachers have come to Ceará, for month-long stays – after an induction program still at home. There is first-hand evidence that the returning teachers have become more effective in the classrooms and several have taken leadership roles.

Now that he is running out of math teachers, an equivalent program has started with Portuguese teachers. Altogether, around 300 teachers have already spent

² At that moment, the present author was the President of CAPES

time in Ceará, upgrading their skills. Repeating his successful experience in Ceará, he created a Mathematics Olympics in Cape Verde.

Meanwhile, he travelled to Guiné Bissau and started a program to bring university professors to Ceará, to learn about higher education policies and also to improve their classroom skills. Thirty professors have already participated.³ Several other projects are ready to be implemented.

What can we say about these initiatives? First of all, they should be classified as belonging to the “informal sector”. After all, he is not a government official and the training is not part of any official program. Granted, it is funded by the government. However, it was a retired individual who knocked at the door of a government agency and asked for funds. Being well known and respected, he got what he wanted.

From then on, he was on his own. He hired mathematicians, teachers, scholars, hotels and buses, conducting his courses without any government intervention or oversight.

Are these initiatives successful? From all we can tell, yes. This man is a smart operator in public bureaucracies. And he definitely knows where are the best minds to implement his programs. Of course, not having the weight of the civil sector machinery makes things much easier and quicker.

The trajectory of a conventional foreign aid program is long and tortuous. It goes through the hands of several civil servants, usually not very capable of capturing the specific needs of the receiving country. After all, they are generalists, at best. On the providing end, the heavy government machinery has difficulties in identifying the best institutions and experts to hire. The results tend to be lukewarm, at best.

None of this was true in his case. He was the critical and only figure on both ends. And he has been organizing such programs all his life. The critical factors in this initiative are: (i) The close match between the need for such programs and the possibility to respond to them with the very best cadres that Brazil has to offer. (ii) The fact that the initiatives short-circuited the usual heavy bureaucracies, on both ends.

Lessons: Small and effective or big and ineffective?

As in many other areas, there is a dilemma between the highly efficient interventions that are restricted and well focused and the big programs, which end up in the hands of ponderous bureaucracies.

³ The present author taught at this last course

Can such unusual experiments be replicated at larger scale? Surely, this is not an easy task. Many of the reasons for the success, have to do with personalities, individual talents and networks developed along many years.

Yet, some lessons can be applied. For instance, reducing the number of bureaucratic layers dealing with any specific project. Or, appointing people with the right profiles on an *ad hoc* basis, to develop a specific project. Or, giving greater autonomy to operators, in other words, decentralizing processes and imposing accountability for the final results.