

10 Critical Elements from the perspective of a development agency to ensure the success of regional initiatives

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The strategic role of regional initiatives in development

Regional approaches in development co-operation projects are frequently based on the following rationales: 1) increased efficiency in the implementation and administration of projects that need to be carried out in several countries; and/or 2) enhanced shared management and problem solving contributing to an enhanced sustainability of the project.

Enhanced management efficiency is based primarily on the short-to-medium term perspective of the donor or the implementing agency for which economies of scale and the simultaneous advancement of an agenda in several countries may be important from a strategic point of view. Examples of this approach include the development of simple post harvest technology in one country and its subsequent diffusion in a region (Project POSTCOSECHA), and the germplasm enhancement by international research centres leading to the distribution of advanced breeding material through a regional network).

The second rationale - that is, that regionalisation will bring about shared management, institutional strengthening and enhanced sustainability, is the principal focus of the present paper. Although this is frequently quoted as a reason for regionalising a project, it is often unclear how the mode of operation of the project will facilitate reaching this objective and how its achievement will be measured.

In 1999, the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC) conducted an internal study of networks and regional projects. This study led to a Guide for the rapid appraisal of regional initiatives. This

guide is based on an assessment of the coherence between objectives, mode of operation and frame conditions, and can be used in the preparation of the planning or evaluation of a regional initiative. The following ten points resulted as some of the key elements determining the success of a regional initiative.

Critical element 1: Clarity about goals and objectives

Regionalisation implies a diversification of project partners with varying perceptions of the “common problems” and the priority they should be given. If these partners are actively involved in the decision making processes as the second rationale (see above) would require, it frequently leads to a broadening of the projects objectives. This is particularly the case when the theme of the project is very comprehensive (e.g. natural resources management, urban development, etc.). While regional projects can contribute towards broad goals (expected impact of the project), it is very critical that the objectives or the purpose (i.e. the expected effect during the project lifetime) are established very realistically. Such clarity in the objectives takes to arrive at in a participatory way. Up to 18 months and sufficient flexibility may need to be budgeted in the project planing process.

Critical element 2: Maintaining a clear focus

Regional initiatives, which attempt to deal with complex issues (e.g. natural resources management, rural development, urban development, etc.), are slower in the development of methods, in the establishment of objectives and the implementation of workplans. Socio-economic factors and subjective perceptions play a more important role in problem solving, and variations of the key factors influencing success may be larger between countries

than within countries. Such projects frequently have to face the impatience of nervous foreign donors who rapidly start micromanaging the project and thereby tend to exacerbate the project's difficulties. The SDC study showed that such regional initiatives have been more "successful" when they have worked towards objectives such as enhanced information availability, the sharing of tasks and capacities, the diffusion of methods/products among countries, capacity building and institutional strengthening.

Where the objective was to bring about a *change at the "grassroots" level*, the success of the project depended on too many factors, which were not under control of the regional initiative. Much of the expected changes

needed to be brought about by local or national institutions/NGOs which did not have sufficient resources and/or independence from the regional co-ordination to act in a demand driven way.

Critical element 3: The right type of network to fit the objectives

The Rapid appraisal guide refers to a number of types of regional initiatives characterised by their mode of operation. These types are not necessarily mutually exclusive as a regional project may combine several of them and may evolve from one type to another over time. The guide argues that this *modus operandi* needs to fit with the objectives set for the regional initiative.

	Modus operandi	Realistic objectives
Type A:	Close to members, co-ordination unit plays a facilitating role, moderate (or discretionary) funding by foreign donor, links between members are emphasised	Enhanced information availability, the sharing of tasks between members, the diffusion of methods/products among countries, capacity building and institutional strengthening
Type B:	Strong co-ordination unit, high level of funding, link to and capacity of intermediaries is actively promoted, relationships between members and the co-ordination unit prevail over those between members	Diffusion of a successful technology or method for which adoption by beneficiaries is essential. Changes at grassroots level.
Type C:	Centrifugal type of regional initiative centred around an institution (centre of excellence), relationships between members and the co-ordination unit prevail over those between members	Diffusion of a successful technology or method for which adoption by beneficiaries is not essential. E.g. training centre, biological pest control by inundation, etc.

Critical element 4: Membership is a question of costs and benefits

In the case of regional initiatives of Types B and C, each new country added to the project means additional costs and complexity. Since the regional initiative functions in a centrifugal way, additional members/countries are additional users/consumers but not really contributors. The key question here is whether economies of scale really outweigh the limitations linked with the regional approach (more difficulties to adapt to specific national frame conditions or to change them). Therefore, each new member needs to be assessed carefully (total funds available; additional costs versus additional impact). Furthermore, it is feasible to plan the

phasing out of interventions in one country in order to focus on new ones.

In the case of Type A regional initiatives, the following questions need to be answered:

- Can the new member (new country) be brought to buy-in to the essential consensus already reached by the existing group?
- Is it likely that the potential new member will contribute additional capacities, resources, ideas, etc. and increase the likelihood of achieving the goal and objectives?
- Will these additional benefits outweigh the additional cost resulting from the new member's participation?
- In some cases the objectives may require new members to be included even if the answer to the above questions is negative (e.g. regional co-ordination at policy level).

Critical element 5: Avoiding dominance by donor or implementing agency

Whenever empowerment of member institutions is an objective, the interactions between members of the regional initiative and the network's sensitivity to their priorities and challenges is essential. This is very difficult to achieve if the donor and/or the implementing agency are very dominant (in terms of funding, or technical content). To avoid such dominance, an increased share of the funding may need to be provided on a discretionary basis (given adequate control and management mechanisms), the total budget may need to be reduced to ensure that member institutions can match the external funds adequately, and decision making mechanisms may need to be revised. The character of the co-ordinator (co-ordinating team) is essential and the donor's and implementing agency's ambitions for higher regional visibility may need to be moderated.

Critical element 6: Enhancing interactions at operational level

In order to capitalise on the advantages of a network, regional interactions should happen at the level of those who are expected to work together between meetings. Many regional initiatives would gain from a reduction of the Steering Committee meetings and an increase of interactions between specific working groups. This also reduces the risk for micro-management and means that operational decisions are delegated to a more relevant level (subsidiarity).

Critical element 7: The role of centres of excellence and experts

Centres of excellence and experts play an essential role to guarantee the quality of the regional initiative's activities and outputs. They also facilitate links of the regional initiative with relevant partners at the international level. If the role of these centres is very dominant, progress will be impressive, but empowerment of the partner institutions and identification of these with the initiative will be low. It takes a lot more time for a regional initiative to develop an annual

workplan in a truly participatory way, than for the centre or implementing agency to suggest it. The dominance of a centre of excellence will also polarise the interactions in the network (at the cost of the relationships between members). It should be noted that the dominance of the implementing agency is sometimes exacerbated by the donors requirements for rapid and tangible results.

Conflicts of interest may also arise between a centre of excellence needing to affirm its international authority through high level policy or research, and the members of a regional initiative who are seeking to enhance their own profile and solve the sometimes very "down to earth" problems in their constituency.

Critical element 8: Seeking complementarity between regional initiative and donor's bilateral programme

Rapid and durable impact at the level of end users depends to a large degree on the existence of active intermediaries, which respond and convey the demand of the end-beneficiaries, and need to be well connected to the regional initiative. The regional initiative is seldom given the means to activate such intermediaries. In such cases, a bilateral or multilateral programme needs to specifically take care of this function in close co-operation with the regional initiative.

Critical element 9: The quality of Management

The personality of the co-ordinator, but also the quality of decision making and management processes play a key role in the success of any project. In the case of regional initiatives decision-making processes and communication are frequently more complex and frame conditions affecting the partner institutions are more difficult to influence. Furthermore, country representatives in the decision making fora are often higher ranking (in hierarchy) than their colleagues who will have to implement the agreed workplan, which makes co-ordination very challenging.

Critical element 10: The commitment of donors

The commitment of donors towards regional initiatives needs to take into account the time needed to reach the objectives and the fact that regional priorities compete with national ones when it comes to the allocation of restricted national budgets. *Regional co-ordination to exchange information, harmonise positions and raise awareness of policy makers* (Type A) is extremely important for the empowerment of institutions and organisations in a country. The need for this type of regional initiative is frequently long-term. Donor commitment to such initiatives should be long-term with little “strings attached”, but restricted in quantity (part of the co-ordination costs) and made dependent on a proven demand by members (i.e. preparedness to contribute at least in kind to the co-ordination costs). In some cases it may be best to limit the funding duration to certain milestones (e.g. international conference) or the achieving of specific results (e.g. until a given number of countries join an international convention on Human rights).

Research for development can make very good use of the opportunities of regional co-ordination. However, it requires more than just funds for co-ordination since member countries frequently do not have the means to carry out an agreed workplan. The challenge is for the donor to provide funds for operations without “taking full control” of the network. This means that the funds need to be quite discretionary or distributed through a competitive funding mechanism for which the rules are established with the network members. Intermediaries may need to be activated through a separate project, which could also include funds for them (as users) to pay for services from the regional initiative (as supplier).

In large regional programmes of Type B, multi-donor support is usually preferred in order to avoid risk or because the costs are too high for one donor. In both cases it is difficult to achieve a real empowering effect at the level of member institutions / countries, because the quantity of funds involved usually requires a separate regional or

international institution to be mandated with the management of these funds (e.g. implementing agency, UN-Agency, etc.).

When continuous generation or development of technological solutions is needed in the case of a public good (health, natural resources management, etc), donor commitment must be long-term (> 10 years). This is true whether the donor chooses to strengthen national institutions or whether the work is to be done through a regional centre of competence. Excessive restrictions to the funding and micro-management will prevent the implementing institution to follow strategic long-term goals and force it to be opportunistic.

The nature of a regional initiative can change, or be changed over time through the influence of donor funding and commitment. This needs to be part of the sustainability strategy for the regional initiative.

Regionalisation as a donor approach

Regionalisation of a whole co-operation programme has been considered by donors and international institutions instead or complementary to a bilateral approach. The rationales for doing so are analogous to those for regionalising a single project. The following, albeit incomplete and debatable list of pros and cons of a regional donor approach is intended as a basis for discussion. It is likely however that a donor’s regional approach can only be as good as the regional approaches of the specific projects it entails.

Advantages of a regional donor approach:

- Integration into a regional thrust and dynamic
- Strengthening of countries’ capacity to deal with globalisation
- Risk avoidance and flexibility for the donor
- Higher catalytic function of the activities (impact in more countries)
- Higher empowerment effect
- Opportunities for complementarities between regional and bilateral
- Can apply to work with governments or /and NGOs
- Better integration with multilateral initiatives

Disadvantages of a regional donor approach:

- In case national priorities change substantially, and supplant regional ones, there is a risk of increased donor dependence (sustainability).
- Ownership of national stakeholders may be difficult to obtain/increase.
- Impact is more indirect and hence less under the control of the donor
- The visibility and direct influence of a donor at the national level may be reduced
- Less influence on objectives such as decentralisation and local governance (unless complemented by the necessary bilateral projects)
- Intermediaries (such as national networks, institutions, NGOs, etc.) need to be activated in each country to facilitate the transfer between the regional initiatives and the end beneficiaries.
- Limited influence over the frame conditions at national policy level. Success requires a number of minimum frame conditions to be met.

Regional initiatives have a strategic role in development co-operation

Regional initiatives can help to reach critical mass and facilitate complementarity. When resources are scarce and problems are common to several countries, a regional approach can help development or research activities reach a critical mass of participants in order to come to a meaningful sharing of burdens, make more efficient use of the members' different capacities and thus reach a solution in shorter time. This has been recognised by the European Commission, which requires research proposals to include a critical mass of relevant partners within the region.

Regional initiatives can help capitalise on specific experiences. By allowing formal and informal mechanisms of peer review as well as a certain competition between members to take place, regional initiatives make more of the individual experience of members. They also help underpin a regional "institutional memory".

Regional initiatives can facilitate consensus building and participation. The development of a "common language" within regional

initiatives, allows for more efficient collaboration across national and cultural frontiers. Regional initiatives facilitate the identification and definition of common problems, as well as agreement about common approaches to solving these problems. They also allow the setting of common standards at regional level.

Regional initiatives can make investment into development more efficient. Member institutions jointly participate in the identification of problems and selection of approaches to solving these. Significant benefits can arise from this common undertaking (simultaneous problem solving in the member institutions or countries). As long as the context is comparable and the problem shared among several countries, a regional initiative can allow considerable economies of scale and speed up the diffusion of successful solutions.

Regional initiatives can foster empowerment. If well oriented and managed, regional initiatives emphasise the contribution and value of each member towards the common objectives. The visibility and the influence of the member institutions can thus be enhanced at the regional and at the national level. By taking a common stand, the members of a regional initiative can obtain a voice in forums in which they would not normally be heard. E.g. regional groups in large international conferences. In development agencies, we are frequently reluctant to strengthen national (or national level) institutions. However, their empowerment needs to be seen as complementary to the empowerment of the end-beneficiaries.

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Annex 1: To what extent do specific regional initiatives contribute to capitalising on the regional approach of SDC in a given region

- ++ = yes
- + = to some extent
- 0 = no

Advantages:	Rating	Comments
Within the regional initiative, SDC and its counterparts are integrated into a regional thrust and dynamic that goes beyond what would be possible with a sum of simple bilateral projects		
Through the regional co-ordination/integration resulting from the initiative participating countries and institutions are strengthened in their capacity to deal with globalisation		
The initiative contributes to spreading SDC's risk in the region and provides it with additional flexibility with regard to geographic emphasis of its interventions		
The regional initiative makes best use of synergies, complementarities, and economies of scale thus raising cost efficiency and optimising likelihood of impact at a regional and national scale		
The regional initiative contributes significantly to the institutional strengthening of its member institutions (empowerment) and raises their profile at a regional and national level		
The regional initiative makes use of all the opportunities for complementarity and synergies with relevant bilateral and multilateral projects in the region		
The regional initiative is temporarily preserving the provision of an important public good in the member countries, while a new partner basis is being established at the national level to provide this public good		
Disadvantages:		
Higher risk of donor dependence as priorities of participants at national level do not coincide with the ones of the regional initiative (no demand for a regional approach)		
Impact is more indirect and will take longer to be achieved, than through a sum of bilateral projects		
The visibility and direct influence of the donor at the national level is less than with a sum of bilateral projects		
Little impact on SDC's objectives such as decentralisation and local governance (unless complemented by relevant bilateral projects)		
Additional costs through the need to activate intermediaries (such as national networks, institutions, NGOs, etc.) to facilitate transfer between the regional initiatives and the beneficiaries.		
A number of important frame conditions for achieving the specific objectives are not met and are placed outside the sphere of influence of SDC because the initiative is regional instead of a sum of bilateral projects		