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Health cooperation beyond aid

International health cooperation in today's world calls for a major renewal. We need less of the classical Official Development Aid (ODA) approach, and more of a modern, second-generation, cooperation principles and practices among countries and civil society organizations which can catalyze national health efforts and resources.

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Unfortunately international health cooperation is very much piecemeal, oriented towards fragmented and disconnected projects, extremely vertical and compartmentalized. In many respects this is an old paradigm of cooperation that ought to be revisited if greater effectiveness and alignment with national needs and priorities is desired.

The capacities associated in greater degree with institutional building, providing upstream policy advice, leveraging partnerships, strengthening regulatory capacities ,issuing and adapting norms and standards , harnessing the potential of civil society and social networks in health policy development, strengthening the public health infrastructure, generating necessary evidence for advocacy and sound accountability practices, and strengthening health systems need to be emphasized.

International Health Cooperation has to go beyond aid and should do the necessary to advance the following functions:

- a) Support to countries to respond to national development challenges in a wide range of areas
- b) Normative and technical support to countries to ensure that no-one is left behind
- c) Support to countries to address global development challenges
- d) Support to South-South and triangular cooperation
- e) .e) Partnership-building and engagement of multiple actors
- f) Integrated policy advice/advocacy
- g) Strategic innovations in development

Particular attention will be required to strike the right balance between social equity concerns and the financing of global public goods as well as to enhance the mobilization of additional domestic and international resources for the larger financing needs of a global development agenda. The traditional North-South framework for pursuing global development cooperation is losing its hold. Sustainability has moved out of its environmental confines and is set to become a centrepiece of a post-2015 development agenda. A new narrative of international development cooperation is urgently needed that matches the changed development landscape.

The fundamental principles emanated from the Paris, Accra, Busan, and Mexico High Level Meetings as well as from the ECOSOC Development Cooperation Forum, are of paramount

importance for ensuring the harmonization and alignment of international health cooperation with national needs, plans and priorities.

However international cooperation is disperse, not optimally aligned with the need for producing institutional strengthening and capacity-building efforts in Member States.

The main problems in connection with “way of doing business” by the dominant actors and of international cooperation can be summarized as follows:

- Lack of consistency, harmony, coherence and uniformity of processes
- Unclear division of labour (the lack of clear division of labour, segregation of activities, roles, and accountability across the international cooperation organizations lead to duplications, weak effectiveness and efficiency and low impact, especially at country level)
- Insufficient monitoring and accountability;
- Lack of synergy between the different levels to allow for the delivery of well-defined products and services;
- Insufficient development of triangular or South-South cooperation while countries are helping each other solve problems that all countries face, regardless of level of income, such as those related to integrating economic and environmental agendas, reaching marginalized groups with public and social services, and improving and innovating the way in which public services are delivered.

A framework of effective international cooperation for advancing the health agenda at country level, needs to address these problems and has to create the necessary platforms for:

- ensuring an adequate national ownership of the national priorities ,strategies and plans;
- aligning international cooperation with the national plans
- harmonizing the myriad of actors, processes and projects of cooperation to have a coherent , rational and synergistic support to the national efforts as well as a catalytic action for mobilizing resources
- managing results and therefore obtaining impact measured not only in terms of health outcomes but also in terms of systems and program enhancement
- establishing processes of clear accountability, especially to beneficiaries.

The following strategic issues related to the building of national capacities can be identified:

- The need for a theory of change that identifies the expected contributions from the International to the national transformative agenda for advancing a sustainable development paradigm;
- The importance of ensuring the existence, among the International Cooperation Stakeholders , of “**capacities to build capacity in Member States**” , considering them the primary way of delivering technical cooperation;
- The need for the International Cooperation to play a **catalytic role** in support of the transformative agenda associated to the post 2015 era and to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals;
- The need for a shift of intellectual and organizational capacities among the International Cooperation Stakeholders required to perform the functions that International cooperation is expected to perform in the post-2015 era;

- The relevance of having international cooperation approaches that have the ability to mobilize capacities of Member States;
- The need for building synergies between the international cooperation capacities and the national capacities so there can be a meaningful impact generated in an integrated manner; and
- The importance of differentiating the capacities depending on the economic, social and political context of each Member State.

This evolution of the International Cooperation capacities to build national capacities, ought to undergo substantial modifications in the way of "doing business" both in quantitative and qualitative terms and be accompanied by a revision of the International Cooperation practices for rationalizing the work of its different stakeholders and for defining a solid basis for a financial sustainability.

International cooperation policies, strategies, technical developments, program management practices, partnerships, initiatives and resource mobilization efforts will have to be better coordinated and should present a common front to the national interlocutors. This will require a very different set of skills and staffing patterns among the international cooperation stakeholders in this field, which in turn should translate in qualitatively different capacities.

The capacities that dominate the business models of International Cooperation stakeholders, especially at country level, are not necessarily the same capacities needed for the new development cooperation agenda and for fulfilling the new roles warranted. The proliferation of activities funded by voluntary contributions has favoured a model of capacities for project implementation, filling gaps that Member States cannot fill, and formulating and implementing direct services in lieu of or in parallel with national counterparts. There is a need to incentivize a shift so the International Cooperation consolidates the capacities to build national capacities, to provide policy advice, to broker knowledge, to catalyse national action, and to convene stakeholders that can have a catalytic role in supporting the advancement of the transformative agendas at the national level.

The increasing capacity of many Member States, in particular of middle-income-countries, should encourage the International Cooperation stakeholders to reflect on the need for development cooperation practices among countries that are more centred around knowledge sharing, joint endeavours, common platforms of action, collective efforts for undertaking basic and applied research and technology transfer supported and catalysed by the international cooperation practices. This has major implications and highlights the need for re-profiling current capacities that are excessively driven by project implementation and resource mobilization imperatives at the expense of capacity-building capacities.

MMI working group on Effective Health Cooperation: www.medicusmundi.org/mmi-ehc

MMI discussion paper "Health Cooperation: Its relevance, legitimacy and effectiveness as a contribution to achieving universal access to health (October 2016): Download [PDF](#)