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Research Report

China-Britain-Uganda: Trilateral Development Cooperation in Agriculture

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POLICY POINTS

TDC planning should build in time during implementation to allow for higher transaction and coordination costs.

Research and analysis is required to understand recipient countries' development needs in order to provide appropriate technical assistance.

Recipient countries need to play a dominant role, from inception, in trilateral projects so their priorities are not overshadowed by those of the donor parties.

TDC financing with China should revolve around a pooled fund modality, with contributions from all three sides.

China-Britain-Uganda: Trilateral Development Cooperation in Agriculture

Hang Zhou

SUPPORTERS ARGUE THAT TRILATERAL DEVELOPMENT cooperation (TDC) reflects the changing geographies of aid and help to forge new, more equitable partnerships. However, there has been scant fieldwork-based TDC research and even less concentrating on China's engagement. This brief seeks to fill this gap by focusing on one of China's first trilateral projects with traditional donors in Africa.

In November 2012, during the second Africa-Britain-China Conference on Agriculture and Fisheries in Beijing, the UK announced a TDC program called "Agricultural Technology Transfer to Low-Income Countries (AgriTT)". The Ugandan Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry, and Fisheries (MAAIF) presented a cassava project that garnered Chinese interest, which ultimately lead to signing AgriTT's MOU. This brief details key coordination challenges and critically examines two oft-claimed TDC "advantages": its contribution to a more horizontal and equilateral development partnership and its role in providing recipient countries with more suitable technical assistance.

The brief draws on fieldwork and interviews conducted in 2016. The author was unable to conduct interviews with the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) or the Foreign Economic Cooperation Center (FECC), in charge of negotiating and implementing this trilateral project on behalf of the Chinese government. Analysis of Chinese perspectives is primarily based on interviews with Chinese technical assistants sent by the FECC to support AgriTT implementation. These opinions might not reflect those of officials in the MOA or the FECC.

AGRITT

AGRITT AIMS TO FACILITATE THE TRANSFER of Chinese agricultural technologies to developing countries in Asia and Africa. Its first main component is to establish pilot development projects (PDPs) in low-income countries to disseminate Chinese agricultural technologies and practices. AgriTT planned one of two PDPs in the Ugandan cassava sector. The second component supports researchers conducting collaborative research to improve agricultural productivity in developing countries through the

Research Challenge Fund. 12 trilateral research projects, from 135 submitted concept notes, received between £150,000 and £300,000.¹

UGANDA'S PILOT DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

LANDEL MILLS, A LONDON-BASED DEVELOPMENT firm, was hired to lead AgriTT's management. They created the Program Management Office (PMO). The PMO's director went to MOA's European Affairs Bureau and the FECC in Beijing to clarify responsibilities, establish work plans, and facilitate a trip for Chinese experts to Uganda. In spring 2013, the MAAIF took these experts to visit potential implementing partners. The project proposal, budget, and work plans were then revised several times until approved by the Steering Committee in late 2013.

Almost exclusively, DFID funded the Ugandan pilot with a promised contribution of £1.25 million. The Chinese financial contribution was marginal, covering smaller components like the November 2012 Conference. MAAIF, was only responsible for paying taxes on imported Chinese machinery.

The pilot was implemented across four districts in Western Uganda: Hoima, Masindi, Buliisa, and Kiryandongo. Objectives addressed difficulties facing the Ugandan cassava sector, including a lack of disease-free planting materials, the declining productivity of cassava due to disease, and farmers' limited awareness of cassava's value chain. Uganda's 2010 and 2015 National Development Plans also emphasized cassava's role in ensuring food security, calling for exploration into its commercial and industrial potential in Uganda's development. The pilot focused on the entire cassava production value chain:

1. **Productivity:** propagation of clean cassava cutting and change in unit yield in the pilot area
2. **Processing:** organization of farmer groups to improve harvesting, post-harvesting, and primary processing of fresh cassava
3. **Transformation:** development of value-added cassava products

Productivity. The project was to promote the NASE 14 cassava variety. Developed by the Ugandan National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO), it has two advantages: high yield and disease resistance. 10 farmer groups, 25 farmers each, were to be established, each group contributing 5 hectares of land to create a mother garden. Outside farmers were expected to purchase the NASE 14 grown in the mother gardens, propagating its use on a larger scale. An additional component was to demonstrate mechanized cultivation methods to local farmers.

Processing. Improved drying and processing methods produce high-quality cassava chips and flour that fetch better prices and can be transformed into value-added cassava food products. A staple food, cassava is typically peeled manually and sundried, making effective processing dependent on inconsistent weather conditions. The project was to import one dryer for each pilot district. Farmer groups were encouraged to write business proposals, with a dryer awarded to the best business plans.

Transformation. The pilot was to develop value-added cassava food products, with local enterprises expected to join in the development of snack and biscuit lines with technical support from Chinese experts.

The PMO's head office was located in Beijing, with additional offices in Kampala and London. The PMO's three primary responsibilities included: 1) managing and disbursing funds, including signing contracts with implementing partners; 2) developing annual work plans and budgets with implementing partners; and 3) coordinating implementation of the project and taking charge of regular supervision and evaluation. A Steering Committee of representatives from the MAAIF, NARO, MOA (a member of the European Affairs Bureau and another from the FECC), and DFID-China were responsible for high-level decision-making and met once a year to approve annual work plans, budgets, and all significant changes related to the project.

Coordinated by MAAIF, the pilot included four Ugandan implementing partners. Within MAAIF, coordination was lead by the Directorate of Crop Resources. In charge of improving productivity, NARO provided disease-free cassava stems. The African Innovation Institute (AFRII), a Ugandan NGO specialized in developing the cassava value chain, led processing efforts by organizing local farmers and providing processing and business management training. Makerere University's Department of Food Science and Nutrition developed cassava food products. District production officers and district agricultural officers were required to mobilize farmers in support of pilot activities.

The FECC was responsible for identifying suitable Chinese experts and technicians, providing them with cultural and linguistic training, and organizing their replacement when necessary. The PMO, in consultation with MAAIF and the FECC, prepared the terms of reference for recruitment. Technicians and experts were selected primarily from Guangxi University and the Chinese Academy of Tropical Agricultural Sciences in Hainan Province, the two principal cassava production regions in China. The FECC also provided administrative support to facilitate TAGRIM's export of Chinese machines.

PROJECT PROGRESS AS OF MAY 2016

THE PROJECT'S PERFORMANCE ON THE THIRD objective was considered most promising. With the assistance of a Chinese expert on food products from Guangxi University, Makerere University succeeded in producing cassava biscuit and snack samples. Two companies, House of Rusa and Family Diet, joined the local team to learn relevant production techniques.

Despite delays, the implementation of the first phase met initial project expectations. Due to coordination difficulties, the project did not start planting in mother gardens until October 2014, with some planted as late as December 2014. Given delays, some farmer groups planted other crops in lands originally designated as mother gardens, while other decided not to plant because of the dry season. Ultimately, the project established 37 mother gardens on 145 hectares.² Chinese technicians helped with the planting process by demonstrating techniques to local farmers. Kiryandongo was the most successful district, as farmer groups planted earlier than the others, before the onset of the dry season. Kiryandongo has traditionally grown cassava, which may have impacted their level of preparation. The increase in cassava yields had encouraged many farmers in Kiryandongo to clear additional lands to plant the NASE 14 variety.

With imported production machines and a locally procured tractor, Chinese technicians made steady progress establishing demonstration plots in Kiryandongo. At the Steering Committee's 2016 annual meeting, they agreed to establish demonstration plots in the remaining districts, given the success in Kiryandongo. A training session was held in each district during which Chinese technicians gave a brief PowerPoint presentation about planting methods used in China before demonstrating how the machines worked.

In April 2015, a team of Ugandan representatives went to TAGRIM in Guangxi, China to identify appropriate cultivation and processing machines. They selected five cultivation machines with relative ease but encountered difficulties identifying a suitable processor. Since cassava is a staple food in Uganda, as opposed to its industrial use in China, concern arose around whether an industrial processing machine could produce cassava chips that conformed to Ugandan food safety standards. But, the bean dryer's energy source - coal, remained the largest obstacle. As the principal energy source in China, coal remains accessible and cheap while Uganda does not have any coal deposits. The director of the Starch Research Institution at Guangxi University suggested another type of small-scale dryer - the batch dryer -, which was able to efficiently retain heat through insulation and,

more importantly, be fueled by agricultural waste. Due to these delays identifying suitable dryers, the project made little progress towards processing cassava. AFRII did, however, manage to host a business management training to raise local farmers' awareness about cassava's commercial value.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

FOLLOWING A HIGHLY PUBLICIZED DISCOVERY of donor funding embezzlement, DFID suspended all its direct aid to Uganda for a period of time. As such, the PMO showed extra prudence when it came to funding disbursements and the creation of a specifically allocated account for those funds. Without this account, there was concern that "the money would be thrown into the sea and nobody could supervise it". Ultimately, MAAIF was unable to open a designated account and after many consultations and an open bid, the PMO recruited a local accounting firm to serve as an intermediary to disburse funds to Ugandan implementing partners.

MAAIF experienced significant difficulties in adapting to the system described as "rigid", "demanding", "slow in decision-making", and requiring too much paperwork for earmarked funds to be released. Tensions were triggered by differing priorities between the PMO and MAAIF. The former was concerned with ensuring proper use of DFID funds, while the latter prioritized the necessity of disbursing funds for timely project execution.

A MORE HORIZONTAL NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONSHIP?

INTERVIEWS WITH IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS in Uganda suggested the perception of an unequal relationship between the traditional donor, DFID, and the recipient country, Uganda, persisted despite the pilot's trilateral nature. We observe a sense of frustration by MAAIF resulting primarily from its subordination to DFID's financial management structure whose rules and procedures were referred to as "conditions" imposed by DFID, while DFID was also described as an "invisible partner" and a "hidden hand". In theory, stipulated in the Bogotá Statement, TDC is a process led by Southern countries. In practice DFID was a traditional donor, who financed the project, controlled the flow of financial resources, and held other partners accountable.

China adopted a prudent approach by limiting its engagement within this TDC, their role was akin to that of a technical assistance contractor. China did not engage substantially with either their British or Ugandan partners over differences on development policies or project management approaches. Nevertheless, this "weaker" modality is less likely to

contribute to effective mutual dialogue and learning. This pilot made it difficult to observe potential advantages that TDC could bring, like improvement of relations between traditional donors and recipients. However, it did give Beijing more maneuverability, permitting it to observe and learn DFID, without giving the impression of being in collusion with traditional donors.

CONCLUSION

PROJECT DESIGN RATIONALE HOLDS THAT CHINA shares more similarities in agricultural development experience with Uganda than the UK, therefore, Beijing could contribute know-how and technologies that better respond to Ugandan development needs. However, implementation has shown that reality is much more complex, and the supposed similarities between China and Uganda do not necessarily guarantee the adaptability of Chinese technical assistance to the Ugandan context.

The inclusion of a Southern donor like China does not necessarily lead to a more horizontal development partnership between the traditional donor (UK) and the recipient (Uganda). Similarities between the Southern donor and recipient in terms of development capacities, challenges, and experiences do not guarantee technology transfer success, which instead hinges on a deep and contextualized understanding of development differences in order for the technical assistance provided to be appropriate, properly targeted, and contextualized. This paper cautions against the tendency to assimilate shared identity and development experiences between the South-South TDC components.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. TDC planning should build in ample time during its implementation to attend to higher transaction and coordination costs associated with involving a larger number of interested parties.
2. Recipient countries need to play a dominant role from the inception of trilateral projects, so that donors' interests, policies, and priorities will not take precedence over those of recipient countries.
3. In terms of financial arrangements, traditional donors, interested in pursuing deeper trilateral cooperation with China, should establish a joint pooled fund with contributions from all three sides. ★

ENDNOTES

1. DFID. 'Annual Review (2) 202787'. DFID, February, 2016: 16, <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-202787/documents>.
2. Lila Buckley, "Trilateral cooperation in agriculture: Achievements and lessons from AgriTT," International Institute for Environment and Development, April, 2017: 15, <http://pubs.iied.org/Go4145/>

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