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Seizing the potential of South-South Cooperation: using knowledge exchange to achieve food and nutritional security

Utilizando el potencial de la Cooperación Sur-Sur: el empleo del intercambio de conocimientos para lograr la seguridad alimentaria y nutricional

CHRISTIANI BUANI, YASMIN WAKIMOTO
AND BRUNO VALIM MAGALHÃES*



KEYWORDS

South-South Cooperation; Knowledge Exchange; Knowledge Production; Food and Nutritional Security; BAPA.

ABSTRACT This article analyzes the World Food Programme Centre of Excellence against Hunger in Brazil (WFP CoE's) trajectory in providing technical assistance and facilitating policy dialogue between Global South countries, further contributing to three knowledge-related recommendations of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action: 24, 25 and 32. To this end, the article used the CoE's partnership with the African Union as a showcase of the alignment with these three recommendations.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Cooperación Sur-Sur; Intercambio de Conocimiento; Producción de Conocimiento; Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional; PABA.

RESUMEN Este artículo analiza la trayectoria del Centro de Excelencia del Programa Mundial de Alimentos contra el Hambre en Brasil (CdE del PMA) al proporcionar asistencia técnica y facilitar el diálogo sobre políticas entre los países del Sur global, contribuyendo además a tres recomendaciones relacionadas con el conocimiento del Plan de Acción de Buenos Aires: 24, 25 y 32. Con este fin, el artículo utilizó la asociación del CdE con la Unión Africana como una muestra del alineamiento con estas tres recomendaciones.

MOTS CLÉS

Coopération Sud-Sud; Échange de Connaissances; Production de Connaissances; Sécurité Alimentaire et Nutritionnelle; BAPA.

RÉSUMÉ Cet article analyse la trajectoire du Centre d'excellence du Programme alimentaire mondial contre la faim au Brésil (CdE du PAM) en fournissant de l'assistance technique et en facilitant le dialogue politique entre les pays du Sud Global, contribuant ainsi aux trois recommandations du Plan d'Action de Buenos Aires relatives aux connaissances : 24, 25 et 32. Le partenariat du CdE avec l'Union africaine est utilisé en tant que vitrine de l'alignement avec ces trois recommandations.

Introduction

Over the last 40 years, South-South Cooperation (SSC) became an essential tool for developing countries to share and produce knowledge on common policy issues. In fact, one of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action's (BAPA) objectives is to promote the exchange of experiences between Global South countries, to reach effective solutions for development.

Aiming to fully seize the potential of SSC, the World Food Programme Centre of Excellence against Hunger in Brazil (WFP CoE) works with nearly 30 countries to develop sustainable strategies in fighting hunger and malnutrition. The WFP CoE promotes policy dialogue between governments, and provides technical assistance to design programmes that improve food and nutritional security (FNS).

While developing solutions with partner countries, it is essential to consider the specificities of their issues and contexts, building knowledge-based and context-sensitive answers to latent policy problems. No solution is universal. Still, learning from previous experience allows countries to adopt lessons when dealing with similar problems.

This article will analyse the evolution of SSC as a tool for knowledge exchange and production, through the lenses of the CoE's trajectory in facilitating policy dialogue between Global South countries. The study will identify how the CoE's work has contributed to deliver BAPA's knowledge exchange objective, by following recommendations 24, 25 and 32 of the Action Plan. Further, the study will use evidence from the CoE's actions to show how UN agencies could better contribute to recommendation 36—which provides space for North-South Cooperation to complement SSC.

To operationalize this analysis, the article will use data from the WFP CoE's cooperation with African countries, as well as information from studies on the CoE's work across the African Union.

This article's discussion is divided into 4 sections. The first section contextualizes the adoption of the BAPA, and presents its knowledge-related recommendations. Section 2.2 describes the World Food Programme Centre of Excellence's work methodology, and contains two short subsections on south-south cooperation and policy transfer. Section 2.3 provides an analysis of the WFP CoE's work with the African Union, further connecting its strategies with BAPA's knowledge-related recommendations. Finally, section 2.4 briefly approaches north-south cooperation as a complementary modality to SSC, which could enhance the potential for sustainable policy development, and act as an important discussion point for the BAPA+40 conference.

This study's main finding is that the exchange of experiences between Global South countries can strongly contribute to produce effective solutions for FNS, and it has been a growing modality of south-south cooperation.

Discussion

The Buenos Aires Plan of Action and its knowledge-related recommendations

The BAPA was adopted in 1978 by representatives from 138 States, under the auspices of The United Nations Conference on Technical Co-operation among Developing Countries. By recognizing important changes in the prevailing world order, the document represents a landmark for the structured implementation of south-south cooperation strategies.

Further, it acknowledges cooperation among developing countries as “a vital force” to “create, acquire, adapt, transfer and pool knowledge and experience for their mutual benefit and for achieving national and collective self-reliance, which are essential for their social and economic development” (UNDP 1978: 6).

Since BAPA's adoption 40 years ago, SSC has established itself as an increasingly important tool for developing countries to share and produce knowledge on common policy issues. As stated above, one of the BAPA's objectives is to promote the

exchange of experiences between Global South countries, aiming to reach effective solutions for development. This is reflected specifically in three of the plan's recommendations: 24, 25 and 32.

Recommendation 24 calls on members of the United Nations Development System (UNDS) to promote the exchange of development experiences. With that intent, UNDS is expected to, "at the request of interested developing countries, provide assistance in their respective sectors in preparing programmes and projects through which the rich experience accumulated in these countries [...] could be shared and extensively applied" (UNDP, 1978: 20).

Recommendation 25 focuses on governments and international development organizations roles in fostering technical collaboration among developing countries. This collaboration would result in the conception of so-called "problem-solving networks" among nations with similar policy objectives (Ibid).

Finally, recommendation 32 highlights that UNDS should mobilize all efforts to guarantee that Technical Co-operation among Developing Countries (TCDC) becomes and remains a widespread approach to programmes, projects and dialogues among the nations concerned (UNDP, 1978: 22-23).

The WFP CoE: the SSC approach embodied into new institutions

The World Food Programme Centre of Excellence against Hunger (WFP CoE) is a hub for knowledge exchange on food and nutrition security (FNS), through SSC. The WFP CoE was established in 2011, as a partnership between the United Nations World Food Programme and the Government of Brazil. Since then, the WFP CoE has engaged with numerous countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America to strengthen their capacities, aiming to develop and enhance Zero Hunger initiatives, mainly focusing on actions to advance home-grown school feeding policies and programmes.

School feeding programmes have been shown to benefit the education, health and nutrition of school going children, who are often seen as their primary target population. Moreover, if well-designed, these programmes may also have positive effects over entire communities, by stimulating local markets through home-grown modalities – where products for school meals are procured locally (WFP *et al.*, 2018).

Aiming to fully seize the potential of SSC in fighting hunger and malnutrition, the WFP CoE works with nearly 30 countries to develop sustainable strategies in the area. With that intent, the WFP CoE promotes policy dialogue between governments, and provides technical assistance to design programmes that improve people's FNS. While developing solutions with partner countries, the CoE considers the specificities of their policy issues and contexts, building knowledge-based and context-sensitive answers to latent policy problems. No solution is universal, and there are certainly no pre-made recipes to end hunger and malnutrition. Still, experience shows that

learning from previous practices allows countries to adopt important lessons when dealing with similar problems.

The CoE acts in two main fronts: 1) providing direct or remote technical assistance to partner countries; and 2) promoting policy dialogue among these countries for knowledge exchange. For the first modality, the Centre collaborates with countries on the advocacy, design, implementation and improvement of FNS programmes and policies, which may or may not involve field visits, workshops, meetings, and others. The second modality consists in fostering collaboration for development among partner countries through networks, partnerships, platforms and others. Both modalities promote the exchange of knowledge, be it by presenting best practices and lessons for policy learning (1), or by stimulating exchanges between countries with similar policy problems, contexts and objectives (2).

Both these examples are reflected in the WFP CoE's partnership with the African Union (AU). Some of these countries have benefited from direct and remote technical assistance for the advocacy, design, implementation and improvement of school feeding programmes and policies. However, all of them have been part of the integration process fostered by the AU, in partnership with the WFP CoE. This will be analysed in more detail in section 2.3.

For now, the following subsections will briefly approach two essential elements in the WFP CoE's work methodology: SSC as a means, and knowledge sharing as a method. Brought together, these two elements result in the exchange of policy ideas and lessons between Global South countries described in the activities above —the provision of technical assistance and the promotion of policy dialogue.

The means: South-South Cooperation

In line with the principles set out in WFP's South-South and Triangular Cooperation Policy, the WFP CoE considers SSC as the process whereby two or more non-donor developing countries, either or not facilitated by WFP, pursue their individual and/or shared objectives through: 1. exchanges of knowledge, skills, resources and technical know-how; and 2. through regional and inter-regional collective actions —including partnerships with governments, regional organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector (WFP, 2017b).

To reinforce WFP's suitability to cooperate, the WFP CoE catalyses the organization's substantial support to capacity development, by identifying SSC opportunities that can best serve the purpose of sensitive and sustainable progress through networking, mutual learning and horizontal exchanges of knowledge and experience.

WFP's Policy for South-South and Triangular cooperation (WFP, 2013) aims to further expand WFP's engagement mechanisms with developing countries, to support

progress on the objectives of the Zero Hunger Challenge and SDG 2. Accordingly, for WFP, SSC is an important source of support for nationally-owned efforts and WFP's evolving role in strengthening country capacities and inspiring innovation in policy-making processes.

The WFP Centre of Excellence recognizes that strong and sustained national capacities for school feeding policymaking are critical to addressing the multiple causes of hunger and responding to the food security and nutrition needs of vulnerable populations over the long-term.

Therefore, the Centre considers three criteria to be essential for state and non-state policy makers to effectively plan, implement and review their efforts to deliver sustainable programmes and policies to achieve zero hunger:

1. *An enabling environment domain*, including supportive laws, policies, strategies and procedures.
2. *Well-functioning organizations*, that operate and deliver on their mandates and that enable the coming together of individual capacities to holistically and harmoniously work to achieve goals.
3. *Educated and skilled people* working on the development of policies (WFP, 2017a).

The method: Policy diffusion and knowledge exchange

The phenomenon of policies and policy ideas traveling from one place to the other has been widely observed and studied, thereby building a scholarship and different concepts to define this movement. This process—which can be called policy diffusion—is not only old, but, with increasing levels of technology, has become an extremely common and widespread practice (Oliveira and Pimenta, 2017; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). Further, evidence seems to show that diffusion and related processes are an important cause of policy innovation (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996: 355).

The growing body of literature that deals with this phenomenon will vary in terminologies, approaches and focus. Authors may talk about lesson-drawing, policy convergence, policy diffusion, policy transfer, among others. But, despite these important differences, they are all concerned with processes “in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting” (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000: 5).

Policy diffusion, as all other changes in policy, is a byproduct of the dualities between structural and agential factors within society, acting upon different ideas and interests.

These developments will influence on which policies are chosen for implementation, for which reason, and in which moments. Although the study and analysis of these factors is important to better navigate the process of diffusion, transfer or learning from a certain policy, this is not the purpose of this sub-item. Rather, here, the aim is to simply present this diffusion as a vehicle for knowledge exchange, which applies to the work of the WFP CoE with the AU in two ways:

1. In the case of technical assistance to countries, successful Brazilian FNS policies serve as an inspiration for African countries to build their own models and programmes for zero hunger.
2. For policy dialogues facilitated by the CoE, knowledge on the same topics—but more specifically on school feeding—has been constantly exchanged between AU countries, through different formats of association.

This item's objective was to shed light on processes, within the CoE's *modus operandi*, where policy knowledge and ideas on FNS are diffused through SSC. These processes help countries to draw on previous lessons and experiences, to build their own national, context-sensitive solutions for zero hunger.

Operationalizing SSC for policy improvement: the African Union case

In addressing the root causes of hunger, school meals are an important social protection policy, as well as a tool to promote sustainable development. WFP has been a traditional implementer of school feeding programmes in 60 developing countries. In 46 of these, WFP provides support to build capacities of governments, so they can take ownership of school feeding programmes, reaching a total of 45 million children annually. The WFP Centre of Excellence in Brazil currently provides direct technical support to 23 of these 46 countries (African Union, 2018).

Between 2013 and 2014, the WFP CoE hosted several national delegations from African Union (AU) member states and organised many regional and international events in Africa for disseminating the idea and advocating for school feeding. In 2015, a high-level delegation of AU staff from the Department of Human Resources, Science and Technology (HRST), and ministers of african countries visited Brazil to learn and exchange with the brazilian government on their experiences in achieving Zero Hunger, especially in terms of school feeding (Buani and Magalhães, 2018: 11).

Following these events, AU Heads of State decided to put school feeding as a priority in their regional agenda, instituting the celebration of the African Day of School Feeding (ADSF) on the 1st of March of every year. This celebration functions as a locus for the diffusion of new ideas, knowledge and information (Buani and Magalhães, 2017: 12).

Further, the AU heads of State commanded the development of a study on the state, relevance and impact of school feeding in AU member countries. The study, called

Sustainable School Feeding Across the African Union, was released in the 3rd ADSE. The study portrays the diversity of school feeding models currently implemented in AU countries and analyses the returns of these programmes across different sectors. Further, the document leverages on experiences of existing programmes to identify best practices that have worked across the board, thus serving as a useful resource for the development of school feeding across Africa (African Union, 2018).

Another initiative of the partnership between the AU and the WFP CoE was the creation of the AU School Feeding Cluster, in 2017. The cluster is a body of experts in school feeding, be they technicians or politicians, who work to operationalize the AU's objectives and agenda's in the area. This mechanism serves as a tool to assist member-states in delivering the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 (CESA, 16-25).

Finally, the online platform for the Pan African Network School Feeding and Nutrition (REPANS) was also created under the auspices of the CoE – AU partnership, in 2016. The platform functions as an online knowledge hub, gathering useful tools for African leaders, technicians, practitioners and experts. Accordingly, it offers access to information on best practices, lessons, and intelligence on school feeding, while minimising costs of information exchange and maximising the outreach of policy ideas (Buani and Magalhães, 2018).

The WFP CoE's advocacy at the national level of AU member states, along with the fostering of associations within AU countries, strongly contributed to the recognition of the school feeding agenda as an effective solution for hunger relief and the promotion of social protection and local development. It also influenced the content of the agenda, successfully making the case for:

1. The potential of school feeding as an intersectoral policy with multidimensional impact.
2. The importance of government ownership of school feeding initiatives.
3. The need to establish legal and institutional frameworks for school feeding to guarantee sustainability (WFP, 2017a).

In that context, the lessons learned from Brazil, as well as from african countries, consist in important evidence to design and implement more efficient and sustainable school meals policies and practices. The exchange of knowledge on school feeding design, implementation and enhancement is continuously promoted by all the products listed within the AU partnership.

With the support of the WFP Centre of Excellence, the Gambia, Zimbabwe, Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Burundi and Côte d'Ivoire have become noteworthy examples of countries that have been strengthening national capacity to implement sustainable

school meals programmes. All these countries have some sort of legal or institutional framework that regulates school feeding implementation, be they laws, policies or programme documents. Further, they are currently developing procedures to allocate resources for school feeding, which not only shows State commitment to the task, but also represents a step towards national ownership of school feeding programmes (WFP, 2018).

The knowledge generation and exchange products described in this item are relevant activities in the CoE's work on the promotion of policy dialogue. Included here are the Sustainable School Feeding across the AU study, the annual meeting for the ADSF, the AU case studies, the CESA School Feeding Cluster and the REPANS online platform.

These products work as tools or spaces for the exchange and diffusion of policy knowledge and ideas. They foster relevant and continuous dialogue among African countries, building on experiences and best practices on school feeding to help these countries reach common objectives in the area. The activities here inscribed are strongly connected to recommendation 25 of the BAPA, on fostering global technical collaboration and forming "problem-solving networks" among global south countries.

As pointed out by Rogers (1995), innovations in policy may spread because potential influencers read the same evidences and/or attend the same conferences, meetings and policy networks. Spaces such as the meetings, partnerships and associations described above can serve precisely as such innovation vehicles (Buani and Magalhães, 2018: 8).

Other activities described in this item and performed within the AU – WFP CoE partnership consist in the provision of technical assistance for capacity development, as in organizing study visits, providing consultancy on relevant policy issues, helping countries to develop institutional and legal instruments to support the implementation of school feeding, among others. These products are essentially connected to recommendation 24 of the BAPA, as they consist in instruments of assistance in preparing programmes and projects through which the experiences of Brazil and AU countries in school feeding can be shared and regionally applied. This exchange of knowledge helps countries to develop evidence-based and more responsive school meals programmes.

Recommendation 32 —on UNDS agencies' role to guarantee SSC as a widespread approach to programmes, projects and dialogues— is cross-cutting to all the above-mentioned activities.

A way forward: recommendation 36 and North-South cooperation

The previous sections shed light on how SSC cooperation acts as a tool to share knowledge and lessons learned on zero hunger policy issues. Having established that, this item aims to reiterate that neither it is BAPA's purpose nor it is part of

Global South plan to replace North-South cooperation by SSC altogether. On the contrary, these two modalities can act together as propellers of sustainable social and economic development.

In fact, BAPA's recommendation 36 highlights the importance to integrate development assistance initiatives to technical cooperation among Global South countries. One good example of this combination can be drawn from the WFP CoE's work alongside the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program. This long-standing U.S. aid programme helps to support education, child development and food security in low-income, food-deficit countries around the world. McGovern-Dole projects are conducted by non-profit charitable organizations, cooperatives, and the WFP. Complementary to WFP CoE's work on school feeding policy cycles and country capacity strengthening, McGovern-Dole provides for the donation of U.S. agricultural commodities, as well as financial assistance, to support school feeding and maternal and child nutrition projects (WFP and USDA, 2017).

Despite this example, seeking convergence with the Global North has not been a central strategy of cooperation for development, as the North's role has been restricted to funding of projects. This is, to large extent, consequential of the movement that originated BAPA's inception in the first place. In such occasion, Global South countries claimed for ownership and leadership throughout their processes of development. Therefore, development assistance —consisting mainly of aid— was considered an imbalanced and unequal process, whereby donor countries financed and imposed projects that did not reflect the contexts and realities of the South (Mingolo, 2005; Moyo, 2009). Although these arguments were extremely valid at that time, this is not the case of McGovern-Dole school feeding aid currently implemented in Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire, for example. These projects combine traditional aid features with WFP's and BAPA's principles in a constructive manner (Kimetrica, 2015).

Given that nowadays SSC already features prominently in knowledge exchange plans of multiple UN agencies, it is now worth reflecting on how this tool can be further improved and on how it has been evolving over the years. Bringing Global North countries back in the game might become an important point of discussion for BAPA+40. This movement would not feature countries from the Global North as central players, but as collaborators, embracing policy techniques and methodologies issuing from the Global South —which have been proved to reliably lead to desired results.

UN agencies have a key role in contributing to this better use South-North and North-South cooperation as a tool to complement SSC, and further strengthen policies in the Global South. Thus, it is expected that recommendation 36 is not only featured as a discussion for cooperation innovation in the BAPA+40 conference, but that it be effectively applied.

Conclusion

This study has provided an analysis of the WFP Centre of Excellence against Hunger's contribution to three knowledge-related recommendations of the BAPA: 24, 25 and 32. To this end, the article presented an overview of the WFP CoE's work methodology, further using its partnership with the AU as a showcase of the alignment with these three recommendations.

The article established that, by using south-south cooperation as a tool for knowledge sharing, the WFP CoE contributed to the advocacy, design, implementation and improvement of sustainable FNS policies across the AU in two ways:

1. Technical Assistance: providing specialized remote and direct technical assistance to countries aiming to implement school feeding policies and programmes.
2. Policy Dialogue: fostering the creation of partnerships, networks, meetings, communities and other associative forms that function as spaces for knowledge exchange on common policy issues.

The activities competing to the first item strongly contribute to recommendation 25, while the activities related to policy dialogue are connected to recommendation 24. Recommendation 32 is fulfilled by the set of activities composing both groups, and the approach applied to their realization.

Finally, the closing section of the study highlights the importance of UN agencies—the WFP included—to take the lead in combining north-south cooperation strategies with SSC. The blend of these tools can provide elements that enable new approaches to cooperation for development and, therefore, be a relevant point of discussion for the BAPA+40.

This study's main finding is that the exchange of experiences between Global South countries can strongly contribute to produce effective solutions for FNS, and it has been a growing modality of SSC. This is exemplified by the work of the WFP CoE in the AU, where knowledge exchange has been a central instrument for policy development in school feeding.

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