

With a little help from my friends: cultural affinity in regional support for capacity development in South Sudan

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Summary

The concept of cultural affinity has become increasingly prominent in international cooperation, where it is commonly understood as shared dispositions, values, language, cultural references and world-views. Cultural affinity is held to make cooperation easier, due to greater mutual understanding between counterparts. In the context of international capacity development, the idea of cultural affinity plays a role as an argument for preferring South–South cooperation over traditional North–South cooperation. The underlying assumption is that cultural affinity between counterparts creates more acceptable and effective relations, in turn leading to more sustainable programmatic outcomes. Hence the idea of cultural affinity enters programme design as an efficiency parameter. However, while all this would seem logical, the concepts and the idea that ‘Africans work best with Africans’ appear notably underexplored in academic research.

This policy brief discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the cultural affinity assumption in the context of the IGAD initiative in South Sudan. It concludes that the IGAD initiative does indeed seem to present significant comparative advantages compared to traditional North–South models, but that these perhaps depend more on the expectations and attitudes of the personnel deployed than on a more generic regional ‘cultural affinity’.

Introduction¹

The IGAD initiative is triangularly organized South–South cooperation for capacity development in South Sudan. Through bilateral agreements, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda have seconded 199 Civil Service Support Officers (CSSOs) to South Sudan where they are ‘twinned’ with counterparts across a range of ministries and sectors to rapidly develop core government capacity in a coaching and mentoring scheme for a two-year period. The seconding countries continue to pay the salaries of the secondees, while Norway funds the costs of programme management, travel and per diem allowances. The accumulated budget approaches USD 18 million for the two first years, in addition to the salaries paid by the seconding countries, making this project the largest of its kind to date.

With 199 civil servants seconded to South Sudan from neighbouring countries, cultural affinity is at the centre of what ostensibly makes the IGAD initiative unique. Indeed, a core assumption underpinning the IGAD initiative is that cultural affinity makes regional civil servants better positioned to mentor and coach their South Sudanese counterparts. The cultural affinity idea builds on the premise that cultural proximity ensures a tacit understanding of formal and informal social norms. It also suggests that the closely intertwined history of the countries as well as their regional proximity make it easier for civil servants from IGAD countries to relate and adapt to working in South Su-

¹ The team conducted three weeks of fieldwork in January 2013. In addition to covering all national-level ministries in Juba where CSSOs were deployed, visits were paid to Yambio in Western Equatoria State and Malakal in Upper Nile. 101 interviews were made with 147 CSSOs, ‘twins’, supervisors, as well as GRSS, UNDP and Embassy staff.

dan and with South Sudanese colleagues. In other words, it assumes that regional CSSOs have a better 'lived' understanding of the challenges at hand and the professional and cultural context in which they must be addressed, and therefore provide for a significantly better 'fit' with their national counterparts than other internationals. Cultural affinity and connectedness are assumed to increase programme effectiveness by enabling skills and knowledge to be transferred in a more culturally and contextually sensitive way. It is further assumed that local ownership will be greater because the project does not use international consultants on short-term missions.

Box 1: About the research

The field research on the IGAD initiative is part of a wider project that examines innovative forms of capacity development support. The research team has followed the IGAD initiative from its inception until the present. Initial field visits to Juba, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya were undertaken in August and October 2011, followed by a second round in January 2013. The research focused on two dimensions: capturing experiences, opinions and sentiments from those involved on all project levels, to find out what worked/did not work and how such projects could be strengthened; and second, to assess the impact and outputs of the initiative. In all, 101 semi-structured interviews with 147 people were conducted in Juba as well as in Malakal and Yambio from 7 to 28 January 2013.

Cultural affinity in South Sudan

The study found that, in the context of the IGAD initiative, cultural affinity is not just a theoretical assumption, but a narrative believed and articulated by most of those involved. Higher-level decision-makers – politicians and ambassadors, UNDP programme management staff, the CSSOs, and, most importantly, the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) 'twins' and supervisors – all mentioned 'cultural affinity' as a main strength and unique characteristic of the IGAD initiative. The language used by the CSSOs themselves and by twins to describe the affinity concept included references to 'understanding the environment better' 'feeling at home', 'assimilating quickly', and 'our African brothers and sisters'.

2 During the protracted civil wars, many South Sudanese took refuge in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda and continue to have close ties to these countries, often with family members still living there. All three countries also provided instrumental support to the long struggle of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army's (SPLM/A) with the North, creating a strong sense of brotherhood. Moreover, all the participating countries were involved in brokering the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the North, which has created a feeling of responsibility and companionship among these three countries. Several CSSOs also emphasized the emotional connectedness they feel with South Sudan. For

example, a number of CSSOs from Uganda stated they had spent their childhood as refugees from fighting in Northern Uganda 'in the bush' in what is today South Sudan, including attending primary school there. Others said they had been involved with and volunteered in refugee camps hosting South Sudanese in their own countries. Finally, the concept of independence as a national achievement is celebrated amongst all the participating countries including Ethiopia, which prides itself on never having been a colony. Many GRSS twins felt a connection to the surrounding countries for the very same reasons; and many CSSOs presented an explicit narrative around the idea of South Sudan as 'the new nation'. Hence, the ties connecting the participants of the IGAD initiative were based not only on regional affinity but sometimes also on shared life experiences and a shared discourse around helping each other overcome the vestiges of a post-colonial heritage.

Professional fit

The other assumption of the IGAD initiative, which also forms part of the cultural affinity assumption, can be termed the 'professional fit' argument. By bringing in civil servants from neighbouring countries, the initiative draws on the experience and skills of CSSOs with actual and contextually appropriate civil service experience from the region. This can be assumed to enable a better appreciation of the challenges involved in transforming a militarized, post-conflict civil service into a public service machinery in line with Weberian ideals. Both Kenya and Uganda have had to expand their public administrations in a context of colonial legacies and latent escalating post-conflict grievances. All three contributing countries face a lack of adequate resources for satisfactory service delivery. These contexts and experiences have shaped the professional attitudes, competencies and problem-solving capacities of the CSSOs, and the transfer of these skills could be defined as 'experience-based capacity development'. Our research confirmed the prevalence of a good professional fit. While some GRSS representatives stressed that the aspirations of South Sudan should not be limited to the developmental stages of the neighbouring countries, in general the professional backgrounds and approaches of the CSSOs were deemed more appropriate than those of traditional Western experts.

The good story

The cultural and geographical similitude and the sense of shared destiny has had a significant positive impact on the way twin relations have developed and work modalities evolved. This has allowed CSSOs and their twins to engage in 'organic', culturally appropriate, egalitarian and informal learning relationships. One of the unique qualities of the IGAD initiative is the idea of twinning between peers rather than an asymmetrical relation between an expert and an apprentice. This study found that CSSOs were not seen as consultants but more as equal peers. Importantly, where trust had developed, it seemed to entail a willingness on the side of the twins to reveal their own weaknesses, to make



mistakes and to learn from these. Tellingly, many of the twins also referred to the CSSOs as twins, indicating that they were peers rather than parts of a hierarchical mentor–student relationship. All this arguably has led to a reasonably effective transfer of skills and knowledge in a very challenging environment. It also seems to have paved the way for a level of individual and GRSS ownership seldom seen in externally-driven capacity development projects. Our research found evidence that the deployment of CSSOs had improved the functioning of host institutions as regards managing policy processes, implementing standard operating procedures, drafting skills and record-keeping, work ethos and performance orientation, and the capacity to engage with external partners including the donor community. These achievements have been confirmed by those involved – CSSOs, twins and supervisors – in a recent mid-term assessment.²

Challenges and limitations

While cultural affinity definitely generated positive outcomes, the study also identified several difficulties and challenges. Across all sectors, many CSSOs experienced initial reactions entrenched in concerns over whether the CSSOs would ‘steal our jobs’. Such views were evidently based on misunderstandings and a lack of clarity over the role of the CSSOs and were usually overcome rather quickly. However, building trustful relations would often take up to three to six months. Given the relatively large Ugandan, Kenyan and Ethiopian communities working in South Sudan as business entrepreneurs, motorbike taxi drivers and NGO workers, these fears should be seen within the context of the wider debate over the pervasiveness of foreign labour in South Sudan. Language barriers were also reported to be a substantial challenge, particularly in the Northern states where many GRSS civil servants speak only Arabic, which was an obstacle to effective twin relations.

Although most CSSOs quickly settled into the new context and found creative strategies for operating in the South Sudanese environment, several struggled to adapt: to the rough living conditions, the absence of managerial direction, and the lack of necessary tools and resources for performing their jobs. Several CSSOs had considered leaving halfway through their assigned term, while others suffered from health problems and psychological distress due to the difficult circumstances of their deployment.

The relative size of the initiative, with 199 civil servants deployed across South Sudan, entailed significant challenges with regard to securing the well-being of the CSSOs, particularly those deployed outside of Juba. As UNDP was strongly involved in the project design and increasingly in the implementation of the initiative, CSSOs compared their terms with the more favour-

able conditions offered to international staff working for UNDP and other international organizations. The inadequate focus on the general well-being of the CSSOs could be interpreted as a darker side of the cultural affinity idea – the assumption that, being Africans, these CSSOs could endure harsher conditions for less pay than their international civil servant and consultant peers.

Disadvantages of cultural affinity – or a more pragmatic and contextualized support?

The IGAD initiative seeks to professionalize the civil service, by slowly transforming the government into a meritocracy. The South Sudanese civil service still bears evidence of its function as a post-conflict mechanism for seeking rents, stabilizing and co-opting potentially rebellious individuals and groups, rewarding past military efforts with civilian posts, and remunerating family and clan. Checks and balances have been introduced, but the civil service remains largely composed of SPLM/A cadres, and is criticized for poor governance, widespread corruption and a neo-patrimonial mode of governance with oil wealth being distributed from political patrons to client supporters.

In many ministries, the management and support staff greatly outnumber the substantive staff. For example, one of the smaller ministries visited in Juba had a total of 68 posts, of which 48 were staffed. Of these, 30 were support staff, and ten were management staff, which left eight staff members to deal with actual substantive tasks.

This bureaucratic reality puts the principles of cultural affinity to the test. Does the effect of cultural affinity then enable CSSOs to have a positive impact on the process of transforming neo-patrimonial structures into functioning bureaucracies? Some of the challenges – such as inflated and top-heavy civil service bureaucracies shaped by patrimonial relationships, nepotism and corruption – are not foreign to the sending countries. While the CSSOs have generally been trained as Weberian bureaucrats, most have probably also witnessed non-compliance and rent-seeking in their domestic civil services. Can we then expect CSSOs to hold their South Sudanese counterparts to higher standards than those present in their own significantly more advanced civil services?

Conclusions

The use of regional capacity, based on the cultural affinity argument, represents a shift in the approach to capacity development and the development agenda in general. The innovative uniqueness of the IGAD initiative lies in the provision of a high number of skilled professionals from neighbouring countries that are historically, culturally and emotionally connected to South Sudan. The benefits of the cultural affinity of regional capacity are numerous. CSSOs have been remarkably good at adapting to the professional chal-

2 UNDP (UN Development Programme). 2013. *RSS/IGAD Regional Initiative for Capacity Enhancement: Mid-term Assessment, June 2011–August 2012*. Juba: UNDP.

allenges on the ground; twinning relations have benefitted notably from the cultural affinity; knowledge transfer has been eased by a good professional fit; and CSSOs have generally demonstrated a remarkable level of persistence and dedication in highly challenging professional and living environments. The study found that by and large, regional civil servants had more realistic expectations and were better able to adapt to realities on the ground than “conventional” Western experts. As a deputy ambassador from one of the seconding countries explained: ‘We come from the village, and when we walk to our fields we expect to find snakes, animals and maybe nails on the ground... we were expecting the challenges we encountered.’

Yet, while some of the CSSOs were prepared for what they encountered, others were not. In this regard, it seemed like the idea of cultural affinity led to an unfortunate generalization of the needs and capabilities of CSSOs.

Hence the cultural affinity argument would benefit from greater reflection – both of its real advantages and its shortcomings. The cultural affinity argument should never undermine the focus on the individual experience and associated challenges. Importantly, the attitudes and expectations of those deployed must be in tune with what they are likely to encounter. This may entail paying more attention to pre-deployment briefings that can provide more comprehensive and realistic ideas of where CSSOs are being deployed, so as to avoid inflated or misguided expectations. In addition, CSSOs should be equipped with process tools that make them better able to deal with the uncertain

and challenging contexts they encounter. The IGAD initiative is a new and very large programme, and its first phase will shortly come to an end. The Project Management Unit has demonstrated that it is keen to learn from the early mistakes and it is taking steps to address some of the shortcomings of the initiative. In this endeavour, greater attention must be paid to the individual well-being of CSSOs as well as to improving the possibilities for CSSOs to share experiences and provide mutual support.

In conclusion, the cultural affinity approach seems to have offered a range of advantages. On the other hand, the approach is not without its own challenges, and greater attention and resources will need to be invested in overcoming these.

Recommendations

- More research is needed on the role of cultural affinity in regional capacity-development support.
- More research is needed on the effect of cultural affinity on various levels of international development cooperation.
- More research is needed on how the concept of cultural affinity shapes expectations and forms of development engagement.
- The IGAD initiative should be considered as a possible pilot project for regional capacity-development programmes elsewhere.
- The challenge of CSSOs’ well-being should be considered carefully by the ‘owners’ of the IGAD initiative and included in the programme design and implementation of future initiatives.

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