

Partners in Population and Development: a South-to-South Initiative

By Sheenagh Day

South-to-South collaboration means many things to many people. It is a means of sharing know-how between individuals, agencies and communities of the South to improve on the success of efforts to address common problems. South-to-South is rooted in the norms of local cultures that share important common characteristics, many of which are determinants of the problems being addressed. This takes on particular resonance and significance within the context of the priority areas defined during the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), and outlined in the Cairo Program of Action (POA).

Since the conference, a broad consensus that efforts to implement quality sexual and reproductive health programmes in developing countries need to be scaled up, and that technical cooperation has an important role to play in this effort has come about. South-to-South collaboration is widely recognised as an effective and valuable approach for developing countries to learn from each other. The intergovernmental organisation Partners in Population and Development (Partners) was created precisely to improve and accelerate South-to-South linkages between countries in the area of reproductive health.

South-to-South exchanges take place between individuals and other individuals or groups, between national and regional government agencies, between non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and through a combination of these entities. Such collaborations are not an end in themselves, but are instead a means of strengthening and improving reproductive health programmes in the five priority areas. The group undertakes a range of activities for sharing technical expertise, many of them similar to traditional assistance from Northern institutions (i.e., study tours, regional conferences and training, and other capability-building activities). These may be long-term or short-term, they may operate through distance-learning, the Internet or computer-based channels, they may provide for the dissemination of print and audio-visual material, or they may involve shared research, joint projects or the creation of regional centres of excellence to serve as model centres.

Irrespective of the particular type of collaboration undertaken, some of the most successful examples of effective South-South exchange have certain characteristics:

- ▶ they are planned, not ad-hoc
- ▶ there is political, technical and operational commitment at several levels to ensure that lessons learned from South-to-South exchange can be integrated into the work of other organisations (if they choose to)
- ▶ partnerships are developed as long-term arrangements between governments or NGOs based on mutual commitment and understanding of needs and interests.

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An organisation of 16 developing countries¹, Partners has the mandate to expand the use of South-to-South cooperation to facilitate the implementation of the ICPD Program of Action. Collectively, these countries represent over half of the world's population. The group also works with non-member countries in all regions of the South.

The group has identified five priority areas that guide its activities for achieving its mission:

- integration of reproductive health and family planning services and the establishment of reproductive health structures
- promotion and integration of STD and HIV/AIDS prevention and care within reproductive health structures
- provision of family planning and reproductive health services aimed at the special needs of male and female adolescents;
- reduction of maternal mortality and morbidity
- gender and development

The group has a Secretariat based in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in charge of mobilising political, technical and financial resources, and improving the managerial capacities of institutions and individuals in developing countries to engage in South-to-South collaboration to help catalyse South-to-South exchange. It is now considered the foremost international effort dedicated to the cause of South-to-South cooperation in population and development. During the five-year review of the implementation of the ICPD Program of Action (ICPD+5), the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly held in June 1999 registered renewed commitment to Partners.²

A Board of Directors composed of the ministers of health, population and planning commissions, and other high-ranking government officials ensures that a high level political commitment to the work of Partners at local, national and international levels is sustained. The Board is also responsible for identifying and appointing the country coordinators who will help broaden the network by liaising with a wide spectrum of civil society institutions. Each country coordinator develops the country's annual South-to-South work-plan, initiating and supporting activities in each country, coordinating with donors and documenting information about projects, institutions and individuals engaged in South-to-South activities.

The Benefits

The particular experience of high-level collaboration lends itself to enhanced expertise in the following key areas to achieve social transformation:

- policy formulation

For example, through Partners, the member countries are able to integrate population

and development issues at the national planning level. They have also waged various advocacy campaigns to gain popular and political support for reproductive health and development programmes. Policy leverage—the formulation and passage of relevant legislation—is also made easier.

▸ **service delivery**

In terms of maternal and reproductive health, and family planning, a broad range of delivery mechanisms, including high-quality reproductive health services, community-based distribution programmes and social marketing, has been achieved.

▸ **institutional capacity-building**

Training and retraining have been conducted among the medical, research, field and administrative staff to increase the quality of reproductive health services, including family planning.

▸ **management skills**

The group has also been able to accelerate the introduction and maintenance of effective monitoring and reporting systems in local and national family planning, and reproductive health programmes.

▸ **information, education and communication (IEC) strategies**

By employing a mix of the information and communication channels and technologies available in each setting, including media, Partners has been able to promote family planning and reproductive health.

▸ **programme development and innovations**

A group such as Partners is challenged to develop innovative programmes to serve adolescents, men, migrants, refugees and other under-served population groups, especially the poorest and most vulnerable. Because such

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groups are legitimised by the direct involvement of government, the establishment of prevention and care programmes to deal with HIV infection, STDs and AIDS is also made easier.

More important, work in population and development, provided this has a gender perspective, ultimately contributes to the empowerment of women through their involvement in policy and decision-making processes at all levels, and through economic development and education programmes targeted at poor and disadvantaged women.

The Barriers

Although South-to-South cooperation has been repeatedly endorsed by various international forums, it is still not a widely adopted approach. Each member country of Partners, for example, has achieved considerable success in responding to the reproductive health needs of their respective populations. But further work is needed to make this expertise available to other developing countries facing similar challenges.

Several factors hinder or inhibit stronger South-to-South cooperation. On the one hand, organisations that could provide expertise and technical assistance to others do not always

know who might benefit from their assistance, and they may lack the systems, structures and skills needed to transfer that expertise. On the other hand, organisations or individuals may not be aware of other programmes or experiences relevant to their situation. They may not find others' experiences relevant or transferable to their own situation due to various factors (e.g., cultural, religious, ethnic, economic, policy or political environment, geographical, etc). Or, the inflow of new knowledge, skills or technology may depend on a third party, such as an international donor or national decision-maker.

The Lessons

For South-to-South collaboration to succeed, it must be based on mutual trust and commitment to jointly agreed goals. It must be strategically planned and implemented with political, technical and operational commitment at several levels. The venues for such collaboration serve as the intellectual space and platform for developing countries to address their developmental challenges and operationalise possible areas of collaboration.

The advantage of a group such as Partners is that this can draw on the professed commitment of member countries to move ahead in reproductive health and family planning through long-term partnerships and exchange. In addition, they have the relevant overview of their respective countries' needs and opportunities, and are best-placed to engage in policy-dialogue, easily gaining access to counterparts in other countries and accelerate the process of policy-change.

Such groups are therefore able to institutionalise systems that allow for sustained, effective and efficient interaction. They can draw from the member governments' political commitment to mobilise resources that will help

improve capacities beyond their own countries.

Recently, for example, member countries of Partners have declared their vision of greater self-reliance with regard to essential health commodities through an agreed framework for South-to-South collaboration that involves trade, research and development policies aimed at achieving an affordable and sustained supply of essential medicines, including contraceptives.

Partners and similar formations are in a unique position to address culturally highly sensitive issues through South-to-South collaboration, such as the involvement of religious leaders in reproductive health programmes or adolescents' sexual and reproductive rights, areas still considered taboos in many societies. Such areas do not lend themselves easily to direct involvement by agencies from the North.☺

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Footnotes:

¹Bangladesh, China, Colombia, Egypt, the Gambia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Thailand, Tunisia, Uganda and Zimbabwe

²"External funding and support, from donor countries as well as the private sector, should be provided to promote and sustain the full potential of South-to-South cooperation, including the South-to-South initiative "Partners in Population and Development," in order to bolster the sharing of relevant experiences, and the mobilisation of technical expertise and other resources among developing countries. Updated information on institutions and expertise available within developing countries in the area of population and development, including reproductive health, should be compiled and disseminated."