TECHNICAL COOPERATION AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN AFRICA:
A STUDY OF NIGERIA'S TECHNICAL AID CORPS

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ABSTRACT

Regional integration has gained worldwide popularity as a mechanism for ensuring peaceful cooperation and economic prosperity. Across the various regions of the world, there are several attempts at instituting variety of integration projects. However, the nexus between technical cooperation and regional integration in Africa is yet to be adequately explored. This study is a contribution in that regard. Using the Nigerian Technical Aid Corp (NTAC) as a reference point, the study examines the possibility and limitations of engendering a virile supranational institution building framework through robust technical cooperation. It draws data from the experiences of the NTAC and examines the possibility of engendering a virile regional community building through technical cooperation. The data is juxtaposed against existing theoretical postulations on the evolution of supranational institutions. It finds that while technical cooperation is potentially useful tool of regional integration, it is faced with a number of constraints such as power struggles, asymmetrical dynamics and external manipulation. It recommends that for technical cooperation to serve its purpose of supporting regionalism in Africa, certain reforms would need to be instituted both within existing technical cooperation scheme and the regional institutional mechanisms.

Keywords: Regional integration, Supranational institutions, Technical cooperation, Technical aid corps, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

A US-based Ghanaian scribbler, George Aryittey, in a work titled: *Africa Unchained: Blueprint for African Development* (2006), dwelt on the roots of Africa's development crises. Ayittey's study is one of many literary prescriptions on panacea to the region's litany of failed attempts at achieving sustainable development. His own uniqueness lay in the focus on and approach to the leadership question. In Ayittey's view, anti-colonial militancy that characterized the decolonization struggles was unsuitable for post-colonial governance and economic management which, on the contrary, required calm and deft analysis of available economic opportunities and choices. In most African states, the critical distinction between the leadership styles that was required for decolonization and what was needed for post-colonial governance was patently non-existent. Thus, the militant and uncompromising attitude with which post-colonial economic management was approached derailed Africa's development trajectory right from its inception.

In the quest for sustainable development, the increasing wave of globalization has placed Africa at a cross-road between globalist and regionalist impulses (Mbaku and Saxena, 2004). The trend in Africa towards strengthening integration mechanism is reflection of the global pattern. All over the world, as a result of the perceived benefits of integration, and following the appreciable 'success' of the European experiment, other regions of the world have imbibed the idea of regionalist integration approach as a strategy for coping with globalization and pursuing the goals of sustainable development. In the Caribbean, for example, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) comprising of thirteen English-speaking former British colonies engaged in a number of cooperative ventures culminating in the Caribbean Free Trade Area (CARIFTA). In Asia, the Association of South East Asia Nations (ASEAN) represents the search for appropriate integration framework in that part of the world. Established in 1967 and comprising of states from diverse backgrounds, ASEAN has instituted various mechanisms for intra-regional cooperation in various sectors.

Similarly, the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) comprising of the USA, Canada and Mexico have made modest movement towards instituting the elements of supranationality. In South America, MERCOSUR has been the engine of integration among Latin American countries with Brazil, Argentina and Chile, playing the role of core states. The foregoing analysis suggests that the wind of integration has been blowing across the world and every region has been engaged in one form of integration scheme or another.

Regional integration is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. It is hollow and meaningless if it does not serve as a veritable tool of development. It is important to note that without credible communication, interaction and transaction taking place among people of the integrating units, integration becomes a random group of political elites without deep roots in the society. Infrastructure plays an important role in propelling interaction and regional transaction. A strong infrastructure spreads economic opportunities and social progress, permits a more even sharing of the fruits of development by drawing together people and talent, knowledge and experience (Calderisi, 2007). In the absence of an effective communication and infrastructural facilities, integration can hardly take root, much less, yield development dividends. Similar to arteries and blood vessels in human body, infrastructure (roads, ports, railways, water, power and telecommunications, etc.) determines the strength of the whole. Integration without sound infrastructural base, as it is the case in Africa, leaves a huge vacuum that can be filled through technical cooperation. Therefore, technical cooperation among African states in the areas of infrastructural development extends the scope of regional integration and lays the foundation for the success of existing regional institutions. The enterprising and innovative energy of the volunteer youths could be channeled towards regional integration and development through technical cooperation and intra-regional volunteering.

Technical cooperation in Africa is primarily outward inclined. In other words, technical cooperation forms part and parcel of overseas development assistance which originates principally from Western donors. The practice of granting technical assistance by African states in the spirit of African ownership has yet to gain prominence. Indeed, the only technical cooperation scheme in Black Africa is the Nigerian Technical Aid Corp (NTAC). As noted earlier, technical cooperation and regional integration reinforces one another. A strong network of technical cooperation fosters mutual understanding among the people of the integrating units upon which sound integration frameworks could be erected.

Technical cooperation mitigates the infrastructural barriers and could even aid in the provision of such infrastructures. By ensuring the deployment of experts, technical cooperation guarantees intercultural exchanges, movement of labour from areas of surplus to areas of deficits and promotes intra-regional trade and other transactions. It is generally believed that whenever technical cooperation is granted by a regional state, the spill-over effect in terms of development and intra-regional unity is more potent than if technical cooperation originates from outside the continent. Indeed, the idea of African ownership of development process which is the aim of NEPAD and other development initiatives is better demonstrated through technical cooperation that is granted by regional states. The central question to be explored in this paper is: can technical cooperation bring about regional integration? Or, put differently, how can technical cooperation enhance regional integration? In order to adequately engage these questions, there is need to examine the theoretical linkage between technical cooperation and regional integration.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Technical Cooperation and Regional Integration: Some Conceptual and Theoretical Insights on the Nexus

Technical cooperation has a broad meaning. Generally speaking, it is considered as a component of development assistance by which the donor state dispatches experts in certain fields to assist the recipient states to fill human resource requirements. Inter-state relation is replete with asymmetries in natural and human resource endowments. Technical cooperation has formed an important component of development assistance portfolio since the end of World War II when the United States actively supported the post-war recovery and reconstruction efforts in Europe. The forging of strong trans-Atlantic alliance and the evolution of a 'United Europe' owe largely to the network of technical cooperation agreements and schemes which permeated the regions.

While some states are abundantly endowed, others are less favored. The less favored states could request for technical aid from states that are relatively more endowed. Examples of technical aid schemes and international volunteer corps include the United States' Peace Corps, Japan's Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, Chinese Overseas Volunteers, etc. Although technical assistance and international volunteering are founded on altruistic motive, there are usually latent national interests embedded in the granting of technical cooperation. For instance, building of international goodwill and favourable image climate allow for the smooth pursuit of foreign policy goals which usually reflects the selfish national interest of the donor state.

Studies in integration are basically directed at addressing one fundamental question: within what environment, under what condition, and by what processes does a new transnational political unit peacefully emerge from two or more previously separate and distinct entities? This objective is very broad and loosely open-ended and lends the concept of integration to varying strands of explanations. To some writers, it is seen as a 'process' (Lindberg, 1963; Pentland, 1973; Nye, 1971; Hodges, 1979), while others see it as a 'condition' (Deutsch, 1964; Haas, 1971). Indeed, neither of these groups of writers captures completely what integration is all about, a situation akin to the proverbial blind men asked to identify an elephant (Puchala, 1970). For instance, assuming it is a 'process', what is the likely terminus or endpoint? Suppose it is a 'condition',

at what point is it attained? Is it, perhaps, a stable or transient condition? These are some of the questions that confound integrationists and confine integration theories to the realm of seemingly inscrutable ambiguity, a direct consequence of which is the emergence of different models or paradigms within the integration school.

To begin with, functionalist school of integration contends that in the study of the emergence of supranational institutions, attention should be devoted to the analysis of the performance of *non-political welfare functions*. The central thesis of classical functionalism is that nationalist appeals and attachment to sovereignty presents a serious challenge to international peace and stability. This view is premised on the assumption that while sovereignty divides people, functional cooperation (*a la* technical cooperation) unites them into a peaceful "community of interests" (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1989). Hence, it is necessary that nation-states collaborate in the performance of vital *technical but politically neutral functions* such as health, education, rural development, etc. Such tasks, according to a prominent functionalist, David Mitrany, are to be delegated to group of non-political technical exports working within the framework of international organization (Mitrany, 1966).

Going by functionalist model, integration could be attained without a frontal attack on sovereignty and a direct confrontation with forces of nationalism could be avoided. While functionalism may be applied to explaining the emergence of the EU (from the European coal and steel community), neither the OAU (now AU) nor ECOWAS and other sub-regional groupings across the continent can be situated within purview functionalist theory of integration. That functionalist model specifically identified the performance of politically neutral technical functions as forming the ideal starting point for sustainable integration schemes echoes the utility of technical cooperation as a sound foundation upon which integration could be built. How politically neutral are these areas? In so far as these sectors engender values, they tend to entail certain form of authoritative decision-making which renders them politically sensitive (not neutral). There is hardly any facet of human endeavor that is completely immune from politics.

In the second place, another school of integration theory is federalism which, unlike functionalism, emphasizes the central role of the political elite in the integration process. The federalist model supports the unification of hitherto separately distinct units into a supranational entity by means of tackling the problems of social and economic diversity through programmes and project executed as a result of common political commitment made by the parties involved (Hodges, 1979). Indeed, all forms of supranational institution building require the commitment of national political elite of the integrating units. Integration by federalism seems quicker especially when there is a congruence of ideals and coalescent elite behaviour that is anchored on a strong attachment to the principle of "unity in diversity".

The federalist model of integration is widely criticized because of its excessive emphasis on the role of politicians and political elites in the design and execution of integration schemes. Given that politics thrives under an environment of competition founded on expressed ideological and primordial sentiments, building a sense of community across states based on mutual trust and understanding on the basis of federalist assumptions is tenuous. However, even if assigning preeminent role to political actors in integration schemes can be problematic, their role in fostering the scheme cannot be utterly discountenanced.

Third, another model of integration is that which is based on the level of transactions between states. For the transactionist school, it is the level of interaction among actors that determine the prospect and sustainability of integration schemes. Using transaction as the primary index, proponents of this theory contend that an intensive flow of interaction between people of integrating units over time will ultimately propel a sense of mutual relevance between dominant political actors and this would eventually lead to the creation of larger community (Deustch, 1964). A supranational community, according to transactionist model, cannot exist unless its constituent units are interdependent and such interdependence is possible only when there is a reasonable network of mutual transactions. Hence, it is the notion of 'mutual relevance' that distinguishes a random group of individual states from an organized interdependent community.

Therefore, to the extent that most integration experiments across Africa have not addressed the critical issue of interaction and transaction among the peoples of the integrating units, they remain a random group of individual states. In order for regional integration to take deeper and firmer roots therefore, technical cooperation needs to be encouraged between regional states. This offers useful platform for intercultural interaction and exchanges that engenders networks of mutual understanding and mutual relevance. Through technical cooperation, a regime of regional interdependence could be fostered thereby laying sound basis for the emergence of durable and sustainable regional integration.

Finally, proponents of neo-functionalist model argue that integration is the process by which institutions of collective decision-making evolve among a community in which there is a gradual shift of loyalty from the national to the supranational authority. Hence, neo-functionalism shares some similarities with classical functionalism but differ on the question and role of 'politics'. Classical functionalism is anchored on the 'non-political' approach to solving common problems while neo-functionalism engages the political factors in the process of the merging of formerly independent states (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1989). Therefore, neo-functionalist model suggests that supranational community can emerge from cooperation in areas that are politically controversial rather than by avoiding them. One of the prominent writers on neo-functionalism, Ernst Haas, conceives of integration as a process whereby politically significant elites gradually redefine their interests in terms of supranational rather than the national interests and orientation. According to Hass, integration is, 'the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities towards a new and larger center, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over pre-existing national states.' (Haas, 1971:86)

Going by neo-functionalist proposition, even if technical cooperation has political undertones, it does not necessarily hinder regional integration. Rather, it enhances integration by creating ample ground upon which politically significant elites shift loyalty and expectation to larger political units. Therefore, regional integration could be strengthened through technical cooperation. Meanwhile, it is important t make some observations. First, technical cooperation in Africa is state-based and not region-based. In other words, technical cooperation is granted bilaterally when the recipient state places diplomatic request on the donor state. Whether technical cooperation that is based on bilateral link could metamorphose into regional institution building is questionable. Second, technical cooperation represents a small component of the transactions that take

place between states. Hence, even when it is effectively implemented, other components of regional integration such as trade, investment and labour migration are likely to carry greater weight in the overall integration scheme than technical cooperation. Finally, irrespective of the model of integration, when technical cooperation originates from a single state in the region as it is currently the case in Africa, it could hardly form the basis upon which sustainable and wide-spread regional integration network could be built.

Methodology

The focus of this research is to explore the connection between technical cooperation and regional integration in Africa. It takes regional integration as the dependent variable while the independent variable is technical cooperation. It is based on the functionalist and neo-functionalist assumption that supranational institution building process tends to be more effective and enduring when it is rooted in cooperative technically important spheres. In other words, integration framework is more likely succeed when it is built on the performance of welfare functions (like health, education, etc.). This creates a feeling of mutual relevance among the integrating units. The case study adopted in this study and the data used is drawn mainly from Nigeria's Technical Aid Corps (NTAC) and its potential impact (perceived or real) o the integration process in Africa. Using this as the context for the study, the study highlighted the various obstacles to technical cooperation on the one hand and its limited role as a catalyst to sustainable regional integration projects in Africa on the other hand.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Technical cooperation and regional integration are oriented towards development. As discussed earlier, both are expected to reinforce one another. Technical cooperation eases labor migration (though on a short-term basis), guarantees information dissemination, leverages human resources and knowledge sharing. By so doing, technical cooperation invariably oils the wheel of progress in the process of regional institution building. The example of how the European Union began from the realm of 'low politics' and later 'spill over' to the realm of 'high politics' is an instructive case.

However, the linkage between technical cooperation and regional integration is not as straightforward as the European case suggests. Indeed, as noted above, technical cooperation accounts for a small proportion of the overall transactions between states to be a key factor in regional supranational institution building. This is particularly apparent with the case of technical cooperation in Africa. One of the few functional technical cooperation schemes in sub-Saharan Africa is Nigeria's Technical Aid Corp (NTAC). The scheme was created in 1987 with the following objectives: to share Nigeria's know-how and expertise with other African, Caribbean and Pacific countries; to give assistance on the basis of the assessed and perceived needs of the recipient countries; to promote cooperation and understanding between Nigeria and the recipient country; and to facilitate meaningful contacts between the youths of Nigeria and those of the recipient countries (Daura, 2006).

An overview of the objectives reveals that the scope of NTAC is not confined to Africa and regional integration is not directly stated as its objective, even though, it is possible to infer by implication that the last two objectives could form the building blocks of regional integration. Nonetheless, regional integration is not an expressed objective of the scheme and could therefore not form a justifiable basis of its assessment. Nevertheless, one of the basic pillars of Nigeria's Africa-as-

center-piece policy is the strong commitment to regional institution building. It could therefore be inferred that even if it is not a clearly stated objective, providing the platform for regional integration through cooperation and mutual understanding could be one of the basis for engaging in technical cooperation.

In addition to the scope of the scheme in relation to regional integration, there are several constraints that afflict the scheme itself and render it a less potent vehicle of regional integration, even if impliedly. Some of the serious problems of the NTAC include poor funding. The monthly remuneration of about US$1000 per volunteer is not only out of tune with current economic realities, the cost of administrative supervision of technical aid volunteers in their respective places of deployment is equally enormous (Adebanwi, 2005). Given the fact that Nigeria is a developing country that has weak financial base with numerous competing projects, allocating huge financial resources to technical cooperation may adversely affect other vital sectors. The public may be less supportive of huge allocation to technical cooperation especially when it is perceived to be detrimental to the attainment of other pressing needs. This could be more acute given the fact that the dividends of programmes like technical cooperation are not usually clearly visible to the mass public. This makes it difficult to justify huge budgetary allocations to technical cooperation and related diplomatic endeavours.

The experiences of participants in the scheme are also worth noting. Upon arrival in host communities, some volunteers confront hostile local communities who act on the suspicion that foreigners have come to take their jobs. In addition to the problem of adjustment to local conditions that are starkly different from the one that volunteers are used to, coping with hostile host communities put unnecessary burden on the participants in the scheme. The experiences of some of the participants make the scheme unattractive to some skilled personnel that could have contributed to the quality of the scheme. Apart from the difficulties encountered during service, volunteers still face serious challenges after their return home.

The participants that have permanent employment before volunteering encounter problems such as lack of promotion while on TAC deployment (Adebanwi, 2005). There are no institutional mechanisms designed to cater for the needs of participants that have no jobs upon return from their places of deployment. Besides, the experiences gathered by the volunteers during their period of service are not monitored and harnessed towards national development. The absence of such post-service monitoring mechanisms does not allow for the Directorate to ensure that ex-volunteers continue to maintain contacts with friends and associates made during their service. In similar schemes sponsored by other countries, the ex-volunteers are organized either on the basis of country of deployment or on the basis of their respective states of origin. The activities of ex-volunteers are monitored through organized networks in order to periodically evaluate their post-service contributions to the development of their communities or employer organizations. In this regard, the formation of ex-volunteer associations in Nigeria on the basis of country of posting or on the basis of states of origin is long overdue.

In addition to these weaknesses, the major operational foci of Nigeria's technical cooperation have remained health and education. In an era of technological advancement, the technical cooperation scheme in its current state offers no tangible input for technological needs of the region. This is an area where the region performs appallingly poor. If technical cooperation is focused on technology sector, information could be shared thereby laying the foundation for the technological

take-off of the region. Similarly, the weak infrastructural base of the region is not catered for in the technical cooperation. The scope of existing technical cooperation scheme does not cover infrastructural development like road construction, modernization of airports and railways and other necessary areas that could impact positively on the economic development of the region. The exclusion of these vital areas from the operational remit of the technical cooperation scheme renders the programme a little less than hollow. These limit the utility of technical cooperation (specifically, NTAC) as a vehicle for regional integration and economic development.

Finally, African Union, ECOWAS and other sub-regional groupings have not felt the direct effect of technical cooperation as far as the urge to push ahead with integration targets are concerned. By not explicitly incorporating the existing regional institutional frameworks in the technical cooperation scheme, it raises questions of how the scheme could be expected to crystallize into regional supranational institution building.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having noted the constraints on technical cooperation as a vehicle for regional integration and by extension, attaining the goal of sustainable development, what are the available options for policy? In what ways can technical cooperation be made to serve or enhance the goal of regional integration and sustainable development? Before attempting to address these questions, some cautionary notes need to be made. Technical cooperation and regional integration are two variables that have serious conceptual and theoretical contestations as already noted. Therefore, that technical cooperation enhances or strengthens regional integration is not necessarily given. Put differently, the success or failure of regional integration schemes is a function of a whole range of factors that extend beyond technical cooperation. By implication, even if governments get the rudiments and *modus operandi* of technical cooperation right, a number of other intervening variables may still impede the successful delivery of regional supranationality.

As already noted in the previous section, there are certain aspects of Nigeria's technical cooperation scheme that calls for improvements. There is need to improve funding in order to guarantee effective delivery of the objectives of NTAC. This should be coupled with adequate mobilization of public support which would provide support to the budgetary allocation for the project. The experiences of the participants after returning from their various foreign postings would also need to be harnessed for national development rather than simply allow it to waste away. The same applies to the post-service conditions of participants which require sufficient attention. It should be done in such a way that participation in the scheme does not put the participant at a disadvantage. The focus of NTAC on health and education would need to expand to incorporate technology with a view to providing platform for the technological take-off of the region. There is also need for a deliberate design that would intertwine technical cooperation with existing regionalist projects across the regions. This has the potential of amplifying and strengthening the intersection between technical cooperation and regional integration in Africa.

In order to render technical cooperation more useful to regional integration schemes, three possible options are explorable: one, the Western (OECD) model of technical cooperation; two, Chinese model of technical cooperation and three, a hybrid of

Western and Chinese model. The Western (OECD) model of technical cooperation operates essentially by pooling together all available resources from donors that are members of OECD. Requests for technical assistance are granted from the pool. This allows for robust response to requests for technical assistance by member and non-member nations. For this model to be applicable in Africa, Nigeria's technical cooperation will have to come under the control and management of regional institutional frameworks like the African Union or African Development Bank (AfDB). Other interested states would be allowed and encouraged to contribute or donate technical resources (human or material) to the pool from where requests by member states could be catered for. This is likely to expand the scope of policy coordination and policy alignments by African states leading to higher level of regional integration.

On the flip side, the problem with the OECD model is that the technical cooperation scheme would lose its Nigerian origin and identity. The idea of projecting the national interest through technical cooperation would no longer be tenable as broader regional objectives supersede the national interests of states. This is likely to be appealing to recipient states and other states that lack the capacity to contribute resources because multilateral platform would enhance their control of the scheme and obliterate parochial national interests even if they make limited financial commitment. Major donor (which is predominantly, if not only, Nigeria) would hardly have their interest served by subjecting their aid infrastructure to the vicissitudes of multilateral negotiations, debates and politicking. Either in the short or long run, this is most likely going to be an unattractive policy option for Nigerian officials. In any case, it is unlikely that there would be many African states that would contribute to the scheme given the general economic backwardness that afflict the states. Indeed, existing regional organizations suffer from financial crises simply because most of the member states default on the payment of their assessed dues as a result of lack of capacity to pay. It should therefore be expected that not many countries are likely to make significant contributions to regional technical cooperation schemes.

The second model of technical assistance is the Chinese one (King, 2006 and 2007). For several decades China has engaged in the dispatch of medical doctors, engineers and other experts to various African states to assist in the development process. The Chinese officials get immersed in the local communities and render valuable services for several years. The friendship and goodwill that this gesture brings to China and its people is simply unquantifiable. Nigeria could study the Chinese model with a view to adapting some of its worthwhile features into Nigeria's technical aid scheme. This obviously will entail the enlargement of the scheme, expansion of the scope of operation and extension of the number of years. More importantly, since Nigeria's professed or imagined sphere of influence is the African continent, it is advisable that the scope of NTAC's operation be concentrated primarily on the region. For technical cooperation to serve as veritable tool of regional integration, it must be robust and penetrating. Extending the scheme to the Caribbean and Pacific overstretches the scarce resources thereby registering feeble imprints on the aid landscape on the continent.

The last option is the hybrid of the Western and Chinese models. This entails the incorporation of multilateralism and bilateralism in the implementation of technical cooperation in Africa. This has the potential of adopting two-pronged strategy of making technical cooperation service the national interest as well as serve as a vehicle for supranational institutional building. Essentially, this involves bringing part of the scheme under regional institutional framework while the second

component is administered on a bilateral basis. If available technical resources could be sufficient to meet the requirement of the two-pronged approach, it may be an ideal option. However, given that Nigeria is obviously not self sufficient in terms of human capital, meeting the requirement of multilateral and bilateral approaches to technical cooperation would be an uphill phenomenon. Therefore, even though the hybrid option appear most attractive, it seems impracticable under the current human and material condition of the country.

The foregoing analysis shows that the linkage between technical cooperation and regional integration is tenuous. There are many variables that affect the success or failure of regional institution building efforts among which technical cooperation is only a part. Be that as it may, the existing framework for technical cooperation in Africa is Nigeria's technical cooperation scheme which operates on bilateral basis. It is questionable whether such bilateral arrangement could translate to regional cooperation which is essentially multilateral. Even if it could, the scheme itself is fraught with several challenges which render it less potent as the driver of regional integration. In order to make technical cooperation serve the desire for supranational institution building, regional institutions (e.g. African Development Bank, AU, etc) would need to institute technical cooperation schemes that will harness the human resources from states that have surplus and deploy to states with deficits. This will expand the scope of international cooperation on a regional scale in a functional sense. From the practical standpoint, there is no country in Africa that is self sufficient in human resources much less having surplus to contribute to a regional pool. Therefore, regional framework for technical cooperation may face serious challenges in terms of sustainability. This underscores the idea that if regional model of technical cooperation is adopted, it is likely to make more noticeable impact on regional integration.

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