Cooperation Opportunities in a Knowledge-Intensive World

UNDP Seoul Policy Centre

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Contributing Paper

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Cooperation Opportunities in a Knowledge-Intensive World
Reflections for the UNDP Seoul Policy Centre and other knowledge actors
Niels Keijzer¹, June 2020

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Summary

1. This paper analyses recent global development trends and key evolutions in the development cooperation system. It specifically looks into approaches to knowledge sharing, technical assistance and capacity development. Based on this analysis, it presents ideas and possible areas for the UNDP Seoul Policy Centre for Knowledge Exchange through SDG Partnerships (hereafter USPC) engagement.

2. The global community and international development cooperation today are characterised by two paradoxes:
   a. First of all, no nation state can effectively address key challenges of today in isolation. Yet this reality has made states insecure, leading influential ones to act in ways that undermine regional and multilateral solutions.
   b. Secondly, systemic development cooperation challenges are increasingly tackled in a projectised manner. States’ increased insecurity is expressed in an increased emphasis on activities that seek to visibly and directly pursue the perceived interests of taxpayers.

3. The universal 2030 Agenda calls for moving from ‘donor-recipient’ relations towards shared learning. The reality of taking the agenda forward is incremental rather than fundamental, since the enlarged agenda adopted in 2015 does not mean that the challenges identified by the UN millennium declaration have now gone away. The dominant approach to promoting selective Sustainable Development Goals also means that trade-offs and contradictions within the broader 2030 Agenda are insufficiently acknowledged and addressed.

4. Scant approaches that would enable more systemic and effective planning responses are available, yet their uptake under the above conditions is far from guaranteed. The practice of introducing systems thinking in development cooperation in essence entails promoting genuine and symmetrical multi-stakeholder approaches.

5. The agenda for transnational cooperation has diversified at a much faster space than the toolbox that development partners have at their disposal. This is in part due to the nature of the system, dominant accountability processes as well as financial reporting criteria. Hence, the increased opportunities for knowledge sharing are by and large responded to by means of established technical assistance approaches. Since decades these dominant approaches to support capacity development have been subject to critique for being overly supply driven, as well as for disputed effectiveness and sustainability beyond direct project outputs.

6. Support to capacity development tends to highlight visible aspects of capacity (e.g. hardware, formal processes, structures) to the detriment of invisible aspects of capacity (e.g. networks, legitimacy, power relations). There is substantial evidence on how capacity develops and how change can be measured across key dimensions, but established ways of working impose considerable limits on translating this into effective cooperation.

7. Capacity development focused interventions predominantly highlight aspects of reproductive learning to fill assumed ‘gaps’ in capacity, as opposed to promoting communicative learning that would support more proactive capacity development. In a similar vein, interventions are often led by ideas of knowledge ‘transfer’ (from a
provider to a recipient) and less by the idea of knowledge sharing whereby this knowledge may or may not emerge through interactive processes.

8. A relational understanding of knowledge accentuates that technical solutions are not directly transferable to different contexts, but instead need to be ‘transposed’ and adapted. While development cooperation relations are typically asymmetrical in nature, which may require a continued focus on reproductive learning for knowledge development, effective cooperation for sustainable development particularly requires a stronger focus on communicative and transformative learning. This shift is represented in emerging approaches to triangular cooperation, yet the cooperation over distance and existing cooperation systems raises various conceptual and operational challenges to realising this.

9. The paper closes with an analysis of USPC’s engagement in triangular cooperation, which is analysed in relation to the aforementioned aspects of capacity development approach and types of learning. Three ideas are identified and are presented for further consideration by the USPC:
   a. First of all, although developing countries remain interested in learning from Korea’s past and present development trajectory, their own points of departure and development trajectories have diversified considerably in recent years. As a consequence, they are perhaps less interested in the substantive policy choices that Korea has made (‘what’), and more in the processes through which it was able to define and realise these (‘how’). Although a predetermined cooperation agenda is to some degree justifiable, such substantive points should serve as starting points for knowledge sharing.
   b. A second implication is that Korean government partners (and where appropriate beyond government) should become active participants in triangular cooperation and make their own learning needs explicit in this regard. USPC should look into appropriate ways of monitoring and reporting on these communicative learning dimensions of the cooperation that it engages in.
   c. Third, USPC could look into possibilities for better integrating its triangular cooperation with its global engagement. Given other countries’ active expressions of commitment to multilateralism, the centre could use UNDP’s Global Policy Network to show how the countries involved are working together to advance the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs.
**Introduction**

This paper was commissioned by the USPC to generate ideas to inform the Centre’s future engagement in international cooperation in line with its mandate. The Centre is currently in the process of renewing itself to enhance its consistency and profile (USPC 2019), for which this paper offers some complementary analysis and ideas. It draws on a structured review of the literature, as well as from the author’s direct observations of development policy debates in his capacity as an international development think tank researcher.

The paper is structured in three main sections:

1. a look into the nature of today’s world and the state of international development cooperation;
2. a specific analysis of approaches to knowledge sharing, technical assistance and capacity development;
3. and a closer look at the USPC’s engagement in the field of triangular cooperation, defined here as “Southern-driven partnerships between two or more developing countries, supported by a developed country(ies) or multilateral organization(s), to implement development cooperation programmes and projects” (UNDP 2014: 2).

The paper closes with a brief conclusion and makes three recommendations for the Centre’s consideration.

**From a knowable world to an unpredictable world**

This section first analyses global development challenges as well as the state of play of the international development cooperation system. It subsequently analyses to what extent established patterns of cooperation are fit for purpose and observes a paradoxical trend whereby systemic development challenges are increasingly tackled in a projectised manner. It then looks into potential alternative modes of engagement by analysing the literature on systems thinking and the potential it holds for guiding action in an unpredictable world.

*Today’s challenges versus today’s international development system*

Our lifetimes are enacted in the Anthropocene, the period during which human activity is the dominant influence on the earth’s climate and environment. Following the end of the cold war, a predominantly positive vision of globalisation became widespread: new market opportunities were opening up after the collapse of a binary world order, while concerns were raised as to whether this would result in a monoculture world (Appadurai, 2014). In the last twenty years, there is no doubt that human activity remains the dominant influence in the world, yet humanity itself has become more erratic and unpredictable. Moreover, although humanity lives far beyond the boundaries set by the planet, it fails to provide a basic foundation for the lives of billions (Fischer & Riechers, 2019).

A recent ‘scan of scans’ summarised and compared 22 studies comparing so-called megatrends in the world today. The authors spot three biases in these analyses as produced

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2 The centre’s core mandate is to broker new partnerships between the Republic of Korea and developing countries by means of UNDP’s global reach and substantial networks. The UNSPC additionally engages with two distinct communities: (1) networking and joint learning by South-South Cooperation providers as well as other development partners and (2) capacity development in developing countries.
by consultancies, academics and civil society, a Eurocentric understanding of migration, technological optimism in relation to solving environmental crises, and the assumption that job creation is the silver bullet to dealing with the ‘youth bulge’ in different parts of the world (Artuso & Gujjit, 2020: 54). Bearing these in mind, the studies generally signal the following thirteen trends, clustered into four areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Clusters of megatrends</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rapid technological development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Technological Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Hyper-connectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Changing Work</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Artuso & Gujjit, 2020: 12

In principle, the international community stands ready to respond to many of these challenges through furthering the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which it adopted almost five years ago. Compared to the Millennium Development Goals it replaced, the 2030 Agenda emphasises a shift from a focus on common problems (which each country faces individually) to addressing collective problems (which countries can only effectively confront together). Yet today’s international community appears far from ready to tackling this agenda collectively; (1) due to the nature of the challenges, no nation-state may effectively address them in isolation, yet (2) this has had the paradoxical effect of making nation-states insecure, leading influential ones to act in ways that undermine regional and multilateral solutions (USPC, 2020). Take the case of the European Union: by February 2020, it had for the first time in its history saw a member state leave, yet the remaining member states appear preoccupied with negotiating the next 7-year budget, which net-providing member states argued should remain capped at 1% of the Union’s collective Gross National Income (GNI). Adequate financial resources are key to ensuring functioning international organisations, yet not sufficient to ensure effective responses to the challenges set out in table 1.

Are today’s development actors fit for the 2030 Agenda purpose?

The above global trends present fundamental challenges to established approaches for policymaking across the globe, in view of a global development agenda that is presented as both global in reach and universal in nature. A specific area concerned is that of development policy, which became a formal area of global public policy in the late 1960s with the aim to help newly independent developing countries ‘catch up’ with industrialised countries. While development policy discussions in earlier decades already emphasised that it was about cooperation rather than aid, this was mainly semantic preference. In essence, development cooperation was north-south and asymmetrical in nature: the external partner was decisive by either providing or financing the inputs for cooperation and retained the right of initiative.

The universal nature of the 2030 Agenda accentuates the need to move away from such ‘donor-recipient’ approaches towards a ‘mutual learning’ approach. While this reflects the overall direction of travel and the main change from the MDG agenda, the reality of taking the

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3 This distinction was introduced in 2013 by Lawrence Haddad, at that time director of the UK Institute for Development Studies: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/aug/16/development-research-future-impact

4 Although at the same time the agenda is to be ‘transposed’ to each country and region depending on needs and priorities.
agenda forward is characterized by incremental rather than fundamental change. The principle of ‘leaving no one behind’, the emphasis on transposing the agenda’s targets based on local needs and priorities, as well as differentiated targets (e.g. in ODA to Least-Developed Countries) shows that a diversified approach is needed. Reflecting the gradual rather than drastic reform that is required, annual ODA statistics published by the OECD and ongoing development policy debates continue to emphasise the need for resource transfers. Orbie (2020) points out that although the 2030 Agenda is represented as a fundamental shift in global development policy, it is in essence similar to previous development policy frameworks: poverty, hunger and health challenges can be addressed without altering the existing balance of power, with the benefit of new technologies that accrue from economic growth; as per this understanding there is fundamentally no trade-off between the pursuit of economic growth and the promotion of sustainable development.

While today’s global development agenda is highly demanding and calls for more ambitious and integrated forms of cooperation, the capacity of official actors to engage accordingly is observed to be weakening. Nationalism and unilateralism are on the rise in many influential states, which results in a ‘thinning multilateralism’ (USPC, 2020). The nationalism and unilateralism contribute to low political self-confidence among ruling parties, which perceive their public activities to be under increased scrutiny from increasingly polarised (social) media and citizen engagement. This adds to the tendency of many development cooperation providers to increasingly operate independently through distinct projects, with a reduced appetite for promoting ownership and joined-up approaches (Keijzer et al, 2018). In 2018, 19.4% of bilateral aid was reported by donors as tied, this figure was up from 15.4% in 2017 and 14.3% in 2012. This in part reflects a decision by DAC members to tighten rules for reporting tied aid, yet more alarmingly the figures show an expansion of aid tying practices from established sectors (e.g. scholarships) to productive sectors (e.g. infrastructure) which could have detrimental market-distorting effects (Chadwick, 2020).

Similar to the continuity in the underlying theory of change, established approaches to development cooperation prove resilient. Notwithstanding the emergence of important ‘disruptive’ changes such as disintermediation, today’s development cooperation is characterised by a continuing consolidation of existing implementing agencies with a global reach. Cooperation practice also displays a lowered appetite to experiment with new aid modalities, and cooperation providers instead continue to rely on projects which generally concentrate initiative and control with the provider (see table 2). This is also reflected in the absence of a central and credible platform for engaging on development effectiveness (USPC, 2020).

The 2030 Agenda is more innovation- and adjustment-centered compared to MDGs, and hence represents a more knowledge-intensive global development agenda. This, however, has not been adequately translated into new forms and approaches yet. The following table compares different types of aid used in 2009, just after the peak of the Paris Declaration, with ODA statistics for 2018.

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5 This approach in fact ‘fixes’ a weakness of the MDGs, where countries with wildly differing baselines set out to achieve the same targets, resulting in some regions achieving the goals and others ‘falling behind’ (see Vandemoortele 2014).


Some of the approaches and authors discussed here were referred to in a presentation by Alan Atkisson delivered during the joint PARIS21-UNSD Conference “New approaches to capacity development for better data: How to scale up innovation?” (13-14 January 2020). The presentation is available here: https://paris21.org/news-center/events/PARIS21-UNSD-Conference-on-New-Approaches-to-Capacity-Development-for-Better-Data

This abbreviation was developed by the US military in the early 1990s: https://www.vuca-world.org/

The table shows a decline in the use of budget support, and a considerable increase in earmarked funding of pooled programmes – considerably higher than the increase in core funding. Furthermore, it shows increased ODA expenditure within OECD countries, including on development awareness, administrative costs and refugees. Other trends include considerable increases in technical assistance and in ODA managed through projects.

**Systems thinking versus projectised realities**

International organisations as well as bilateral development cooperation systems were generally created several decades ago and have become more path-dependent and self-interested over time. Yet today they are faced with the challenge of engaging in a so-called ‘VUCA’ world, one that is volatile, unstable, complex and ambiguous. Effective international organisations are challenged to successfully determine and address leverage points in the systems in which they engage themselves (see table 3).

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### Table 2: Types of aid: comparing 2009/2010 and 2017/2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average 2009/2010</th>
<th>Average 2017/2018</th>
<th>Relative change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Budget support</td>
<td>4,547.05</td>
<td>3,426.93</td>
<td>-24.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core support to NGOs, other private bodies, PPPs and research institutes</td>
<td>3,037.47</td>
<td>3,755.64</td>
<td>23.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions to specific-purpose programmes and funds managed by implementing partners</td>
<td>7,444.84</td>
<td>18,245.99</td>
<td>145.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basket funds/pooled funding</td>
<td>824.63</td>
<td>960.13</td>
<td>16.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projecttype interventions</td>
<td>48,172.48</td>
<td>63,070.50</td>
<td>30.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts and other technical assistance</td>
<td>4,442.05</td>
<td>5,614.94</td>
<td>26.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarships and student costs in donor countries</td>
<td>3,470.89</td>
<td>3,338.28</td>
<td>-3.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt relief</td>
<td>3,876.50</td>
<td>574.55</td>
<td>-85.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative costs not included elsewhere</td>
<td>5,525.79</td>
<td>7,738.20</td>
<td>40.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other in-donor expenditures</td>
<td>3,588.57</td>
<td>12,792.56</td>
<td>256.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development awareness</td>
<td>366.58</td>
<td>352.39</td>
<td>-3.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugees/asylum seekers in donor countries</td>
<td>3,221.99</td>
<td>11,747.65</td>
<td>264.61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own elaboration using OECD ODA statistics (gross disbursement in USD million, current prices)

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### Table 3: leverage points to intervene in a system

1. Power to transcend paradigms
2. Mindset or paradigm that the system — its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters — arises from
3. Goal of the system
4. Power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure

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**Footnotes:***

8 Some of the approaches and authors discussed here were referred to in a presentation by Alan Atkisson delivered during the joint PARIS21-UNSD Conference “New approaches to capacity development for better data: How to scale up innovation?” (13-14 January 2020). The presentation is available here: https://paris21.org/news-center/events/PARIS21-UNSD-Conference-on-New-Approaches-to-Capacity-Development-for-Better-Data

9 This abbreviation was developed by the US military in the early 1990s: https://www.vuca-world.org/
The term leverage point is defined as a “point of power” (Meadows, 1999: 2), and can be identified based on an assessment of the state of a system, its inflows and outflows. Fischer and Richers (2019) note that the contribution by Meadows isn’t so much found in the list of options per se, but rather in the different kinds of leverage points that these represent. Shallow changes are associated to material/incentives and processes, whereas deep changes refer to changes in design and intent (mind-sets). Studying change in a given system requires shared learning about possible sequencing and interconnections between deep and shallow changes that different actors consider necessary.

In a development cooperation context, this also necessitates a conscious focus on the relational aspects of cooperation and a dedicated focus towards promoting ownership. This in turn requires full acknowledgement of the limited and supporting role of external actors and the need to both enable and follow local initiative and leadership (Keijzer et al., 2018).

Meadows’ approach is similar to Peter Checkland’s Soft System Methodology, an approach used in the analysis of situations where there are diverging understandings about the definition of the problem. Conceiving of 'soft systems' (a notional system that does not exist in a tangible form) provides a means to facilitating debate among concerned stakeholders. At the heart of Soft Systems Methodology is a comparison between the world as it is, and models of potential alternatives to this situation. It is action-oriented in that it seeks to identify changes to the problems observed, and starts with literally creating a picture of the system of focus, including structures, persons, processes among other parameters. Once this picture is constructed, alternative systems are constructed that serve as a basis for evaluating purposeful actions to realise the desired changes (Williams, 2005; Engel, 1997).

Systems thinking and change management are no strangers to international cooperation, yet when it comes to the actual tools available to promote these (see table 1) the means available to further such aims are relatively change-resistant themselves. In addition to institutional causes and the incentive-based problems alluded to above, one other important factor is that commitment to international cooperation is still predominantly measured and monitored in the form of inputs. Just as economic growth continues to be the dominant measure of a country’s development trajectory, absolute and relative levels of Official Development Assistance remain the dominant measure of a country’s commitment to international development. In relation to these process-objectsives, dominant development cooperation refers to technical assistance with capacity development as the main objective. The next part of this paper will further look at both these themes before analysing the literature on the meanings of knowledge, how it is acquired and to what extent it can be shared.

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10 The proposed Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (TOSSD) does not change this situation, given that it continues to focus on measuring commitments/inputs rather than the results of these.
Development cooperation for knowledge-sharing

This second section starts with a critical assessment of the literature on technical assistance as well as associated mainstream understandings of capacity development. It then continues with a look at theories of knowledge and learning, linked to relevant technical assistance approaches. It finishes with a closer look at approaches to trilateral cooperation in view of the potential these hold for USPC.

**Technical assistance and capacity development**

Technical assistance is one of the most established forms and perhaps also most contentious forms of cooperation.\(^{11}\) It has been defined as "knowledge-based assistance to governments intended to shape policies and institutions, support implementation and build organisational capacity" (Cox & Norrington-Davies 2019: 6). When the United Nations was created in the years following the end of World War II, the United Nations was mandated to provide assistance to member countries, for which the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was created as a dedicated agency. Other multilateral and bilateral development cooperation providers soon introduced similar technical assistance programmes (Wilson 2007). Though commonly associated to the long-term expatriate advisor 'embedded' in a host country’s organization, technical assistance comes in various forms and shapes (see table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: Common forms of technical assistance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Embedding technical experts into government ministries</td>
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<tr>
<td>2: Embedding technical experts within aid projects to support design and implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Providing policy advice, often linked to development finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Providing advice to influence government legislation and regulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Sharing of experience through South-South Cooperation and/or civil society networks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: Scholarships and training courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: On-the-job training, mentoring and coaching by embedded experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8: Twinning or peer-to-peer partnerships between equivalent institutions in the two countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9: TA programmes or facilities: flexible funding, able to engage technical experts on demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10: Funding for intermediary organisations with autonomy from the donor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11: Financial and technical support for horizontal or cross-cutting civil service reforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12: Triangular cooperation: typically enabling low-income countries to learn from middle-income / emerging countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13: Direct South-South cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14: Support for research and analysis production by various organisations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Cox and Norrington-Davies 2019: 6, 7

With the notable exception of the second type of technical assistance, most if not all of the types distinguished here would emphasise learning and capacity building/development in the objectives they pursue. Cox and Norrington-Davies (2019: 3) note that unlike the term capacity building, the term capacity development assumes agency on the part of recipient actor, which

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\(^{11}\) The literature differentiates between technical cooperation and technical assistance (the latter as one type of the former), yet in everyday practice the terms – like capacity building and capacity development – are used interchangeably.
is why the latter term is preferable.\textsuperscript{12} The fundamentals of capacity development have been traced back to the very beginnings of organized development cooperation in the 1950s (Hagelsteen & Becker, 2019). The shortcomings of established forms of capacity development support are reasonably well-known, and were subject to dedicated reform discussions in the OECD, yet there has not been much change on the ground. The past decade thus saw a reduction in the volume of publications making the case and exploring possibilities to reform external support for capacity development reform (Zapf et al., 2019).\textsuperscript{13} Yet technical assistance continues to be subject to critique from a ‘value for money’ perspective, as well as for its effectiveness being compromised by supply-driven approaches (Ismail, 2019). There are indications of promising new approaches, yet the underinvestment in scrutiny and evaluation (see also Zapf et al., 2019) means their effectiveness remains to be confirmed by independent research and evaluation (Cox & Norrington-Davies, 2019).

Elaborate frameworks have been developed that distinguish various interconnected dimensions and aspects of capacity and theorise how its development may be supported by external partners, including by UNDP (Wignaraja, 2009), this author (Keijzer et al, 2011) as well as more recently by the Paris 21 network (2020). A detailed review of these documents is beyond the scope of this paper, yet a common feature of these and other publications is that they distinguish between ‘observable’ aspects of capacity (e.g. office space, personnel, structures, hardware) as well as more relational/invisible aspects of capacity (e.g. trust, legitimacy, networking). A general assumption is that planning documents and interventions tend to focus on observable aspects, given that these are more straightforward to quantify and measure, and keep those less visible aspects implicit. Many capacity development interventions thus remain reductionist in focus, e.g. providing training in relation to a specific aspect that was found ‘absent’ or ‘weak’ during the design phase. The interventions emphasise the ‘transfer’ of knowledge from those who have, to those that do not, as opposed to taking a more holistic approach addressing the capacity of all involved (Hagelsteen & Becker, 2019; Zapf et al, 2019).

Effective capacity development support interventions are those that are based on an informed understanding of the hard and soft aspects of capacity, and ensure strong ownership of all involved both in design, implementation and evaluation of the support concerned.\textsuperscript{14} As a consequence, a minimal amount of capacity is required for all actors involved to effectively plan and deliver support along those lines. Hagelsteen & Becker (2019) conclude that the complex, uncertain, dynamic, and ambiguous nature of reality paired with systemic requirements and cognitive biases all generate a strong need for control that clash with acting on these lessons learned. In view of this reality, the authors suggest that it appears that linear thinking often serves as a coping strategy since it suggests control over the situation by means of planning. A key challenge they observe in this regard is ‘misguided accountability’, i.e. a focus on donors as opposed to on local partners, resulting in a setting whereby local solutions and ideas are frequently overlooked, while external inputs are prioritised.

Wignaraja (2009: 5) notes that the UNDP considers capacity development as “the process through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time”. As per this understanding, capacity development involves a process of transformation, must be “generated and sustained over time from within” and involves “changing mindsets and attitudes” (ibid.). Academic research and independent evaluation has observed considerable

\textsuperscript{12} Other key terms have also been used to delineate this area of support, such as institutions building and institutions strengthening.

\textsuperscript{13} A few recent sources were identified by the author and are analysed in this section.

\textsuperscript{14} For a detailed assessment on challenges and opportunities to promoting ownership in development cooperation today, refer to Keijzer et al (2018).
discrepancies between what we know about effective capacity development (e.g. promoting ownership, participation) and the ways in which we go about providing such support (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2019; Hagelsteen & Becker, 2019). By predominantly focusing on visible aspects of capacity, it appears that external support has often at best contributed to ‘islands of excellence’ as opposed to broad-based capacity change – neglecting aspects of power relations and political economy (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2019).

Yet the challenge of promoting effective capacity development is about much more than taking due account of political economy factors, and is in no small part linked to the specific approaches and skills needed. The transformational process for capacity development as defined by UNDP is typically associated to entail a strong focus learning and knowledge sharing. In everyday development practice these terms are all too often merely referred to (or ‘invoked’) rather than defined and operationalised. The next section further analyses these concepts so as to inform further discussion on how capacity development support should be best understood and promoted today.

**Concepts of knowledge and learning**

The transfer of knowledge has been associated to development cooperation from the very onset, both as a key objective in its own right and an essential means to ‘doing’ development. Janus et al (2015) suggest that, since ODA as a source of development finance is declining in influence, development cooperation providers increase focus on their roles in sharing knowledge. Similar to the semantic preference for capacity development over capacity building, today’s discussions emphasise knowledge sharing rather than knowledge transfer. Yet the understanding of what knowledge is, how and by whom it is developed and to what extent and how it can be shared typically stays implicit in these discussions.15

A first insight from the literature is that knowledge is not an ‘object’ (or commodity) that can be owned and accumulated. It instead emerges out of processes of social interaction and should be looked at in terms of social relationships (Engel, 1997: 131). As per this relational understanding, knowledge refers to “ways in which individual members of a society or social group categorize, code, process and impute meaning to their experiences” (Arce and Long cited by Engel, 1997: 131). Box 1 identifies four key dimensions of knowledge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1: Four dimensions of knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge as <strong>cognition</strong>: a human faculty to perceive or conceive;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge as <strong>practical</strong>, integrated into the daily practices of an individual or group;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge as an individual’s <strong>property</strong>, enabling him or her to make inferences from experience, observation and/or reasoning;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge as <strong>socially constructed</strong>, embedded in the social dynamics of an organization, a community or a group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Engel, 1997: 132

This understanding of knowledge, how it develops and can be shared contrasts with traditional ‘gap filling’ motivated forms of technical cooperation. Typically, such approaches depart from the assumption that there is a ‘knowledge gap’ that an external actor can fill. This misrepresentation of knowledge development, which Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire famously referred to as the ‘banking approach’ where teachers pour knowledge into prior empty students (see Burawoy, M. & Von Holdt, 2012), is definitely not limited to the context of

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15 Beyond the scope of this paper is a separate discussion on ‘knowledge management’, a term that originates from the private sector and was prompted by the desire to retain knowledge after the departure of workers.
development cooperation. Developing country governments may for instance respond to local defiance of policies by providing training for the purpose of ‘sensitising’ the target group about their required behaviour and response. What however appears specific for the context of international development cooperation is the tendency for providers such as the World Bank to ‘package’ knowledge products with development finance, as well as more recently the strong expansion of cooperation providers, which puts pressure on so-called knowledge intermediaries (Janus et al., 2015).

In contrast, a relational understanding of knowledge moreover accentuates that technical solutions are not directly transferable to different contexts, but instead need to be ‘transposed’ and adapted. It also underlines that process greatly matters and points to the relational and legitimacy aspects of capacity that may ensure ownership. These insights should not be misinterpreted as implying that direct democracy is needed for knowledge sharing to occur. Research on low-income countries’ health financing policies show that there are various pathways to ownership, to the extent that a top-down approach may still result in strong ownership under the right conditions (Kiendrébéogo & Meessen, 2019). Hence, the above understanding of knowledge requires a stronger focus on learning processes, as well as a reciprocal approach whereby the external partner is a full participant.

From a pedagogical perspective some basic competencies are required before such joint learning processes can be effective, beyond ensuring a conducive and secure environment. Learning occurs in cases where there is consensus on the nature of the problem, and where different solutions or ideas for a possible response may be shared. In other cases, there may not be a clearly defined problem, or any consensus on the problem, but at least a starting point or common direction is somewhat established by those involved. Finally, there may be cases where problems are independently identified, and where the external partner may not come with a clear entry point or an agenda. In line with these situations, the following distinctions between two different types of learning may be kept in mind:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reproductive learning</th>
<th>Communicative learning</th>
<th>Transformative learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objectivist: the world around us is our main source of knowledge. Often needed before other types of learning can occur. Involves the process of learning and applying basic concepts, procedures, technical skills, etc. Various approaches, including distance education and self-study.</td>
<td>Subjectivist: learning requires constructing the world in our minds. No clear knowledge or known solutions to identified problems are available. A social constructivist approach emphasising human interaction and dialogue. Focus on dynamic processes, tends to happen “on the job”.</td>
<td>Transformative: individuals develop more inclusive and accurate understandings of the world and themselves. Although it can benefit from external facilitation, this type is in essence triggered and learner-initiated. Driven by realisation that ways of knowing and understanding are incomplete or incompatible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Three types of learning

Source: own elaboration based on Van der Veen 2000: 17-19

Whereas reproductive learning is more commonly associated to training and to ‘visible’ (hardware) aspects of capacity, the other two types of learning may be associated to ‘problem-

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16 The literature on organizational learning uses a similar distinction between single, double and triple loop learning. For a further discussion of these, the reader is referred to Romme and Witteloostuijn (1999).
oriented learning’ and the ‘invisible’ (software) aspects of capacity. Transformative approaches in particular may start off in one particular direction but later on evolve into other areas and aspects, as is captured in the learning cycle developed by the pedagoge David Kolb:

**Figure 1: The learning cycle**

![Learning Cycle Diagram]

- Testing implications of concepts in new situations
- Concrete experience
- Formation of concepts and generalisations
- Observations and reflections

*Source: own elaboration adapted from Kolb and Fry (1975)*

For example, in view of USPC’s mandate and the range of activities it deploys, the centre would be expected to emphasise communicative learning in its engagements, accompanied with a focus on reproductive learning depending on the types of partners involved. When referring to the different types of technical assistance distinguished in the literature (see table 4), the methodologies used range between training and twinning. In this regard, the centre’s approach for bringing together different comparable partners is similar to the European Commission’s application of the twinning instruments to candidate states as well as geographically proximate states that the EU considers part of its ‘neighbourhood’. EU twinning is characterised by a long-term engagement and comprehensive approach, and has been defined as follows:

“**Twining is an EU institution-building instrument that links civil servants from EU member states and non-EU countries, who work together on a specific reform agenda in line with existing bilateral agreements. Twining participants commit themselves to a set of policy objectives, or mandatory results, which reflect the priorities of EU cooperation with third countries**” (Panchuk and Bossuyt, 2018: 3).

An analysis of EU twinning projects with Ukraine showed that about half of the 32 Twinning projects between 2007 and 2016 contributed to lasting changes in line with EU norms. These 16 successful projects either contributed to legal convergence (new laws/amendments) or institutional convergence (implementation of laws or practices), with almost half of the projects furthering both types of convergence (Panchuk and Bossuyt, 2018: 4). In addition to the stated objectives noted above, communicative learning can be advanced through a focus on reproductive learning on mutually agreed areas and the twinning of experienced EU member state experts and Ukrainian institutions. These projects help establish transgovernmental ties between civil service levels, which in addition to increased networking foster new interpersonal communication and professional ties, including follow-up visits and new project opportunities (Ibid.: 7).
**Triangular cooperation**

Concepts and practices relating to knowledge sharing tend to depart from the idea of a single donor and beneficiary actor, not unlike the teacher and pupil relationship. This is not surprising, as the original motivation behind development cooperation in the early 1970s was to promote economic convergence of newly independent states. Yet in today’s world, featuring a multi-directional development agenda as well as a diversified set of external partners—including non-OECD members engaging in south-south cooperation, there is an increasing interest in triangular cooperation and the potential it holds. This form of cooperation has been defined by UNDP as “Southern-driven partnerships between two or more developing countries, supported by a developed country(ies) or multilateral organization(s), to implement development cooperation programmes and projects” (UNDP 2014: 2). The difference between trilateral cooperation and south-south cooperation is not easy to pinpoint, largely because of the broad and inclusive nature of most definitions of the latter term.

Perhaps the key component of this normative definition, which sets triangular cooperation apart from other forms of development cooperation, is that the initiative and cooperation primarily lies with developing country actors—whilst facilitated by an external partner. Some definitions of triangular cooperation, such as a position paper by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ, 2013), consider that OECD donors may also engage in facilitating triangular cooperation. Such alternate understandings—which in practice entail a blurring between trilateral and triangular cooperation—are not incompatible with the essence of triangular cooperation, which is that the initiative originates from and is driven by two or more partners from different developing countries.

The overarching demand-driven philosophy of triangular cooperation resonates with existing literature on capacity development, which underlines that sufficient capacity of all involved is required for effective cooperation in support of capacity development. It however also raises various operational challenges and practical dilemmas: how do developing country actors ‘discover’ each other and their respective learning needs? How does an external partner find out about this, and how do all involved determine the most effective form and nature of the support to be given (e.g. the nature of the inputs to be provided)? While recognising their own interests, comparative advantage as well as limitations of the external partner concerned, how can the overly supply-driven manner of triangular cooperation be avoided so that it is not detrimental to effectiveness and sustainability? These questions and others will be explored in relation to USPC’s past approaches and portfolio.

**The UNDP Seoul Policy Centre’s engagement**

The Republic of Korea’s transformation from post-conflict state to one of the most prosperous nations in the world took place under specific as well as largely favourable conditions. However, the government also made crucial strategic use of international cooperation in support of long-term development and change. Key to the government’s development cooperation management approach was determining the uses and beneficiaries of

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17 Triangular cooperation is occasionally mixed up with trilateral cooperation, which can be understood as a form of cooperation involving “a traditional donor, an emerging country and a recipient developing country” (Grimm 2011: 2). One key difference with triangular cooperation (a full comparison goes beyond this paper’s scope) is that trilateral cooperation requires the presence of one OECD partner, which is not the case for triangular cooperation.
development cooperation in relation to economic policy, as well as the counter-cyclical use of ODA flows at times when other financing options were unavailable (Calleja & Prizzon, 2019: 8-9; see also Park, 2019).

The Korean government carefully managed its transition from an ODA beneficiary to international provider. The country was already financing UNDP’s Seoul office while receiving development cooperation (Calleja & Prizzon, 2019). Following its four-decade involvement in supporting Korea’s transformation from a post-conflict state to High Income Country and OECD/DAC member, USPC was established in its current form in 2010 to assist in Korea’s international cooperation engagement. Co-financed by Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UNDP, the centre’s core mandate is to broker new partnerships between Korea and developing countries by means of UNDP’s global reach and substantial networks.

**USPC is a key node in UNDP’s Global Policy Network (GPN).** The Centre’s engagement and operations seek to contribute to the GPN’s vision to be leading actor in the provisions of development advice. The Network does so by providing an interface between UNDP country offices and programme countries worldwide and the world of knowledge, resources and networks (USPC 2019).

In addition to the representational responsibilities that it shares with the other UNDP Global Policy Centres, USPC engages with two distinct communities: (1) networking and joint learning by South-South Cooperation providers as well as other development partners and (2) capacity development in developing countries. While the first community is mainly targeted by the Centre’s global initiatives, USPC’s approach to knowledge sharing revolves around its Sustainable Development Goal Partnerships that entail different approaches to triangular cooperation in relation to three key areas (USPC, 2019). The SDG Partnerships incorporate lessons learned from four years of experience in facilitating Development Solutions Partnerships, which emphasised developing country benefits and focused on four distinct themes: (a) anti-corruption monitoring and evaluation, (b) open data & public construction management, (c) gender-based violence and (d) environment. For the 2020 SDG Partnerships involving more than 18 partner countries are envisaged and may engage on several SDGs based on partner demand, providing there is a good link to the Centre’s own expertise in governance, resilience and development cooperation (USPC, 2019). Figure 2 presents the specific approach to triangular cooperation as promoted by USPC under the SDG Partnerships.

As of 2020, many countries have made considerable gains in their development trajectory yet remain in a ‘middle-income trap’, or instead are considered ‘fragile’ and lack sufficient legitimacy for and control over public policy choices. While facing similar challenges (e.g. effective public service provision), they will also face new challenges that were discussed at the beginning of this paper. These new challenges typically transcend their sovereign borders and can only be addressed in cooperation with other states, they include shared water resource management, security and public health. As per this state of play, countries today are perhaps less interested in the substantive policy choices that Korea has made (‘what’), but more in the processes through which it was able to define and realise them (‘how’).
An implication of this new reality, is that although it is to some extent understandable and realistic for USPC to offer a predetermined cooperation agenda, countries learning needs have diversified. When moving the emphasis from reproductive learning (the ‘what’) to communicative learning (the ‘how’), USPC’s engagement in trilateral cooperation should take the three thematic areas (see figure 2) as starting points for knowledge sharing, as opposed to representing a substantive agenda that should be transferred to participants.

In addition to giving that space, a second implication is that Korean government partners (and where appropriate beyond government) become active participants in triangular cooperation and make their own learning needs explicit in this regard. USPC’s reporting on trilateral cooperation should go beyond what is achieved in terms of planned outputs (workshops, peer-to-peer exchanges) to also learning about the unintended effects of these exchanges, including for Korean participants. While not all of this reporting is suitable for a broader audience and may include topics deemed sensitive by some participants, the focus on knowledge sharing would encourage a degree of external accountability. Hence, especially knowledge sharing practitioners and government partners could benefit from the findings of this paper. Concretely, as per the experiential learning cycle introduced above, USPC could consider reporting on how trilateral cooperation with some of its partners evolve over time, both in terms of the agenda it addresses to the approaches that are used to enable knowledge sharing. On the latter aspect, a trilateral cooperation partnership could move from a workshop type of reflection process, to an ‘on-site’ bilateral engagement, to a peer-to-peer type of review process.

A final area to consider is a better linking USPC’s trilateral cooperation (currently focused on SDG Partnerships) with its global engagement. Today more and more countries in other regions are taking new initiatives to actively express their commitment to multilateralism and advancing global agendas, which in differing degrees are reflected in their bilateral engagements and domestic decisions. Whereas its global engagement has focused on SSC
providers, USPC’s engagement could be enriched by increasingly systematising its development solutions as generated through its trilateral cooperation partnerships. It could use UNDP’s Global Policy Network to show how the countries involved are working together to advance specific SDGs and how this engagement furthers global sustainable development. A dedicated side event at the High-level Political Forum could for instance offer potential in this regard.

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper sought to generate ideas to inform USPC’s future engagement in international cooperation in line with its mandate, with a key focus on its engagement in the area of knowledge sharing and capacity development. In view of the various trends that are respectively driving or inhibiting global sustainable development, the paper’s starting point is the observation of a paradoxical trend whereby systemic development challenges are increasingly tackled in a projectised manner. The main cause for this is the uncertain and unpredictable nature of global development generating political instability, which the political systems of influential countries respond to with more inward-looking and reactive policy trends. In development cooperation, this is shown by an increased emphasis on activities that visibly and directly pursue assumed taxpayer interests. Scant approaches that would enable more systemic and effective responses are available, yet their uptake under the above conditions is far from guaranteed.

The agenda for transnational cooperation has diversified at a much faster pace than the toolbox that development partners have at their disposal. This is in part due to the nature of the system, dominant accountability processes as well as financial reporting criteria. Hence, the increased opportunities for knowledge sharing for sustainable development are responded to through technical assistance with a focus on capacity development. For decades, the dominant approaches in support of capacity development have been subject to critique as to their effectiveness and sustainability beyond direct project outputs, as well as their provision in a supply-driven manner.

Support to capacity development tends to highlight visible aspects of capacity (e.g. hardware, formal processes, structures) to the detriment of ‘invisible’ aspects of capacity (e.g. networks, legitimacy, power relations). As a result, most interventions highlight aspects of reproductive learning to fill assumed ‘gaps’ in capacity, as opposed to promoting communicative learning that would support more proactive capacity development. In a similar vein, interventions are often led by ideas of knowledge ‘transfer’ (from a provider to a recipient) and less by the idea of knowledge sharing whereby this knowledge may or may not emerge through interactive processes.

The paper closes with an analysis of USPC’s engagement in triangular cooperation, which is analysed in relation to the aforementioned aspects of capacity development approach and types of learning. Three ideas are identified and are presented for further consideration by the USPC:

1. First of all, although developing countries remain interested in learning from Korea’s past and present development trajectory, their own points of departure and development trajectories have diversified considerably in recent years. As a consequence, they are perhaps less interested in the substantive policy choices that Korea has made (‘what’), and more in the processes through which it was able to define and realise these (‘how’). Although a predetermined cooperation agenda is to
some degree justifiable, such substantive points should serve as starting points for knowledge sharing.

2. A second implication is that Korean government partners (and where appropriate beyond government) should become active participants in triangular cooperation and make their own learning needs explicit in this regard. USPC should look into appropriate ways of monitoring and reporting on these communicative learning dimensions of the cooperation that it engages in.

3. Third, USPC could look into possibilities for better integrating its triangular cooperation with its global engagement. Given other countries’ active expressions of commitments to multilateralism today, the centre could use UNDP’s Global Policy Network to show how the countries involved are working together to advance the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs.
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