Last updated: December 2020

By Loksan Harley

Top 10: How to provide high-impact technical assistance in the field of migration

Overview

Hello!

A lot of my work as an independent migration expert over the years has revolved around helping governments – or "providing technical assistance" – including conducting research for governments and training policy-makers, as well as analysing and developing government policies and programmes. I've both provided technical assistance myself and assessed large-scale technical assistance programmes developed by international organisations. I've boiled a lot of lessons learned into just 10 lessons contained in this brief.

Feel free to get in touch at loksanharley.com or by LinkedIn if you have any questions! You can also subscribe to my mailing list if you want more free resources or are interested in receiving now-and-again updates about what I do.

Thanks and I hope you find this useful.

Working definitions

Technical assistance: support to governments, including through capacity development (training), policy and legislative development, research, etc.

Technical assistance provider: the person or organisation providing the technical assistance.

Beneficiary: the government or department or person receiving the technical assistance.

Lesson 1: The "enabling environment" is vital to ensuring impact

Technical assistance interventions that have the greatest impact are those for which certain "enabling conditions" are present:

Ownership, political will and "buy-in": it is only truly "demand-driven" technical assistance (i.e. assistance that responds to what the beneficiary perceived they required) which achieves beneficiary ownership, thereby ensuring the beneficiary themself drives the work. Technical assistance is also more likely to have an impact when accompanied by high-level political support driving a government department to act. One intervention that I documented in a West African country involved the design of a new visa system. This system was then made operational by the beneficiary itself thanks to persistent support from a minister. Conversely, other technical assistance I've witnessed has fallen flat due to disagreement between key stakeholders, which limited follow-up on the recommendations produced by the technical assistance.

Resources available for complementary and follow-up actions: technical assistance has impact when embedded into a broader set of interventions, or when framed by broader strategies. It is therefore key to work with government and their technical and financial partners to map out complementary policies and programmes.

Limited staff turnover: key staff changes may take place within beneficiary governments following the start of technical assistance. This can constrain ownership and political buy-in during implementation. It is therefore vital to ensure (through the initial situational analysis or baseline assessment) that the focal point on the beneficiary side is recognised by his or her peers as the type of person who can sustainably carry the technical assistance and drive change thereafter.

Top tips:

- ✓ When assessing a request for technical assistance and during implementation, analyse the key enabling conditions and sustainability issues (ownership, potential for follow-up, beneficiary focal point capacity).
- ✓ Develop clear theories of change for technical assistance projects, establishing indicators for, and linkages between, inputs, outputs and outcomes.
- ✓ Focus technical assistance on areas of work where complementary and follow-up actions are likely to be implemented, embedding assistance into broader support programmes and government action plans.

Lesson 2: Demand-driven requests enable more tailored interventions but determining "demand-driven-ness" is more of an art than a science

Making technical assistance demand-driven (i.e. tailored to the needs expressed by the beneficiary) can ensure that interventions meet real beneficiary needs, thereby maximising ownership of the process and of results. Technical assistance requests should come from beneficiaries themselves, although beneficiary countries' civil servants may require support in developing requests in the format required by the technical assistance provider. It is partially for this reason that true "demand-driven-ness" is a challenge, as adaptations can be made as the provider translates requests into interventions with clear outcomes, objectives and activities (that meet donor requirements).

An additional challenge to "demand-driven-ness" is that support may be requested by beneficiaries for reasons of obtaining prestige for particular personalities and government departments. Nevertheless, focusing technical assistance on initiatives already started by the beneficiary is critical to ensuring assistance responds to real needs.

Top tips:

- ✓ Conduct a detailed needs assessment early on, focused on needs outlined in national policy frameworks.
- ✓ Ensure the needs assessment process involves some form of "self-assessment" by the prospective beneficiary, supporting them to identify their own problems and solutions. Beneficiaries should bring the ideas and technical assistance providers should support their realisation.
- ✓ Ensure beneficiaries approve the final design of a technical assistance intervention and partake fully in implementation, focusing the technical assistance provider's efforts on the role as *facilitator* of beneficiary-driven initiatives.
- ✓ Focus assistance on *enabling* the beneficiaries, as opposed to dispatching external consultants to directly provide services. E.g. utilise external experts to train national trainers with the condition that they provide training to more beneficiaries (and institutionalise that training in national programmes and curricula).

Lesson 3: Technical assistance can achieve impact in a short space of time but sometimes longer interventions with more follow-up can be preferable

In my experience, technical assistance can achieve impact in the following ways:

Providing high-level expertise: beneficiary governments can benefit directly from the expertise of an external expert who is unincumbered by the internal political dynamics and "group think" of the beneficiary.

Building platforms for change: technical assistance can serve as a space in which the beneficiary department can advance an issue which may otherwise be hindered by internal challenges, or leverage the technical assistance to elevate a particular policy's profile.

Raising awareness: technical assistance can be a quick way to stimulate interest in a certain topic among the beneficiary government's different stakeholders, with technical assistance at times critical to furthering action in areas (like human trafficking) for which awareness is prerequisite to developing responses. The detachment that short-term external consultants have from internal politics can make them well placed to raise challenging issues.

Creating entry points for further engagement: technical assistance can serve as an entry point for further engagement by the technical assistance provider, donors and other stakeholders, as the providers can help identify complementary and follow-up actions.

Case study: One technical assistance intervention that I documented provided a Caribbean island with recommendations to strengthen its policy and legal frameworks in the field of trafficking. This led to the country successfully adopting a five-year action plan on trafficking, which enabled the government to obtain funding for a series of follow-up actions. The government's anti-trafficking committee subsequently obtained funding from the national legislature for its activities – a major step forwards in the country's fight against trafficking.

At times technical assistance can be perceived as a set of standalone activities with limited long-term impact, at times compounded by budgetary issues on the part of beneficiaries that limit follow-up actions. Technical assistance involving capacity-building (particularly one-off trainings), the development of national action plans, studies, and proposed legislative revisions are in particular need of defined and agreed accompanying complementary and follow-up actions.

Top tip:

- ✓ Implement longer interventions (e.g. from 80-100 instead of 60 consultant working days), with more resources dedicated to follow-up actions. This could involve allotting expert days or dispatching programme staff to conduct a follow-up mission, with integration of technical assistance into larger support programmes.

Lesson 4: Strong stakeholder coordination is required throughout the process to ensure efficient implementation and to promote synergies between complementary initiatives

During the design and implementation of assistance, the provider needs to work closely with beneficiary focal points, who should articulate their countries' needs and ensure all relevant national stakeholders are involved. Note, though, that beneficiary focal points may not always involve the right stakeholders and at times the technical assistance provider may need to be that neutral actor who brings together different "siloed" stakeholders across governments. Potential synergies and overlaps with other interventions and stakeholders should be assessed early on prior to developing the technical assistance intervention.

Case study: One technical assistance intervention I documented in a West African state in the field of labour migration involved working with the country's Labour Migration Unit to develop a labour migration policy, while a national migration policy was being developed by another department. Despite the two policy processes taking place separately, with limited coordination and communication, the technical assistance provider proactively worked to engage both departments to ensure coherence between the two policies.

Lesson 5: Multi-country interventions have the potential to provide more bang (impact) for the buck (budget) but implementation can be more complex

Implementing one technical assistance intervention in multiple countries may represent an opportunity to maximise impact per dollar, while encouraging regional cooperation and peer-to-peer exchange. This can work for interventions focused on capacity development (e.g. training), especially where a common language can be used (training can also be further scaled through e-learning).

On the other hand, implementation can be more complex, due to the greater number of interlocutors and administrative requirements on the beneficiary side. Regional organisations, in my humble experience working with several in Africa and Europe, may also be more political and bureaucratically cumbersome which can constrain the technical assistance process.

Top tips:

- ✓ Explore how regional organisations might be engaged in the implementation of national-level technical assistance interventions, while ensuring that national governments are still empowered to drive forward implementation of activities (without letting the engagement of regional organisations become a bottle-neck in the process).
- ✓ Review existing technical assistance interventions to see which can be scaled up across a region once impact has been demonstrated.

Lesson 6: Measuring the impact of technical assistance is challenging and requires resources

Developing bespoke monitoring frameworks and conducting baseline assessments and impact evaluations of technical assistance is a cumbersome process and not one I have witnessed being done particularly well.

At a minimum, it is critical that there are clear indicators of success established prior to technical assistance collaboratively between the technical assistance provider and beneficiary. The reality is that the bulk of the "impact" is contingent on actions taken by beneficiaries and can take time to manifest (e.g. development of legal and policy frameworks).

For most technical assistance project documents that I've reviewed, expected outcomes, outputs and activities are not defined and differentiated clearly. "Provide training to XX border officials" ***is not*** an outcome—but rather an activity. "Reducing irregular migration by XX" or "increasing volume of remittances received by XX%" are expected outcomes that provide more meaningful (albeit imperfect) indicators of the success of technical assistance.

When impact cannot be quantified, evaluation missions need to assess what sustainable changes have been brought about by the technical assistance intervention. If the intervention developed a national policy, impact may be demonstrated by actions taken by the government after the policy is adopted (too often such policies either do not get adopted or are adopted and forgotten about).

Top tips:

- ✓ Set clear and measurable ("S.M.A.R.T.") indicators at the beginning of technical assistance interventions.
- ✓ Put in place systematic follow-up to facilitate the necessary complementary actions and measure impact.

Lesson 7: Baseline assessments or situational analyses can be useful but can create confusion with stakeholders

Situational analyses or baselines assessments conducted prior to providing technical assistance can provide useful context in a short space of time. Further, mapping and engaging stakeholders early on can strengthen the design of the prospective intervention, in addition to establishing the indicators mentioned above. Moreover, they can help collect or centralise scarce and disparate data - particularly valuable in countries with low data collection capacities.

Their added value in facilitating the assessment of impact post-intervention is clearer for certain types of technical assistance, such as training, or for certain thematic areas, such as remittances, where impact is conceptually simpler to measure. But when the proposed technical assistance is data collection (e.g. conducting a study), the utility of this initial situational analysis can be unclear and could confuse stakeholders (i.e. if the same government officials are to be interviewed across two field missions by two technical assistance experts).

Lesson 8: Flexibility during implementation is required to ensure technical assistance is responsive to beneficiary needs and implementation challenges

For some technical assistance projects that I've witnessed or been involved in, additional needs and challenges can be identified by both the technical assistance provider and beneficiary during implementation. The provider and the design of technical assistance thus need to be responsive to emerging needs, such as being able to adapt implementation plans to include additional activities requested by beneficiaries (e.g. follow-up actions to implement the findings of a research report or the actions contained in a newly-developed national policy and action plan) - *if* momentum is building and can be leveraged to ensure concrete action subsequently. Additional key stakeholders may also be identified during the course of implementing technical assistance and implementation should be adapted to ensure the right beneficiaries are being supported.

Top tip:
✓ Allow flexibility for follow-up actions when opportunities arise to capitalise on progress and momentum.

Lesson 9: Manage and share the knowledge!

Technical assistance generally involves a lot of knowledge creation. Scoping reports, technical assistance reports, etc. which may shine a light on issues for which data is scarce. Some outputs may even constitute the first knowledge products on a given topic in the beneficiary country.

It is therefore essential to consider the role of knowledge management in technical assistance at an early stage. Determine what knowledge the technical assistance can create and what documents could be published, drawing from ongoing monitoring activities and feeding lessons learned back into the broader organisational learning of the beneficiaries, donor and the technical assistance provider itself.

It may be useful publish summaries of the outcomes and lessons learned of technical assistance interventions to enable the beneficiary and other actors to further build on the technical assistance (and why not let others know about the great work you've done!).

Top tip:
✓ Publish, publish, publish! At a minimum, you can publish on your organisation’s website or a blog set up for your project. If you are running a technical assistance programme, a website may be required as a platform to communicate with your range of stakeholders.

Lesson 10: Leverage local expertise and utilise external experts only when necessary

It may seem somewhat counter-intuitive for an international consultant like myself to be advocating this point, but it is clear from my experience that most parts of the world possess the necessary talent and expertise at home or within their diaspora communities to address their own institutional capacity needs.

On the one hand, this point implies the need to ensure that the beneficiary of technical assistance is active in the implementation of its own technical assistance intervention (see my earlier point about the assistance provider acting as the "*facilitator")*. It also implies an opportunity to either mobilise experts from the same country or region (or the diaspora), or to pair an international consultant with a national consultant (after all, there is some value in bringing in external experts who can draw from their experiences working on similar issues in other geographies). National consultants can be invaluable to ensuring that the assistance adapts to the local cultural and political dynamics.