

The Cook Islands Water Partnership – Triangular Cooperation between the Cook Islands, China and New Zealand: Lessons Learned

In August 2012 the Cook Islands, China and New Zealand entered into a unique partnership to improve water quality and address sanitation issues in Rarotonga, the largest island of the Cook Islands, in the South Pacific.

The \$60 million project will see reticulated water mains laid across Rarotonga and is part of an on-going commitment by the Cook Islands Government to improve its water and sanitation infrastructure. The project will improve sanitation and health outcomes for the people of the Cook Islands and provide an improved tourist experience for visitors.

From New Zealand's side it is hoped that partnership will also provide New Zealand and China with an opportunity to learn from each other and cooperate in a practical and positive way that will benefit the Pacific. By partnering with China to deliver this project we hope to lay the foundations for further cooperation on development issues across the region.

We largely agree with the conclusions of the September 2012 Lisbon Brainstorming Meeting on Triangular Cooperation. We would like to stress and emphasise the following as key conditions for good triangular cooperation:

1. **There must be leadership from the developing country partner** – that is critical to success of the partnership. In the case of the Cook Islands, the government wanted to undertake a major piece of investment, and they knew that two partners with the necessary expertise were keen to assist them. It was essential for the government to ensure that the two partners worked together and not in parallel. The Cook Islands government drove the partnership and held the reins, even when one or other partner tried to navigate them in other directions. This required political will, and the Cook Islands Minister for Finance was a

key driver in ensuring everyone worked together. He had attended the Busan High Level Meeting on Aid Effectiveness and was committed to ensuring that they led an inclusive process.

2. **Mutual trust and respect are fundamental**, especially between countries that are operating from such a distance and have different languages and cultures. In the case of the water partnership it was difficult to have three-way conversations because the Cook Islands had only the Wellington High Commission to engage formally with China. They were therefore largely reliant on emails and telephone calls when leading this partnership. It was not easy to establish common technical language and parameters for the partnership in writing or by phone: it was the level of mutual trust that often enabled us to keep making progress. In the end we met together in Beijing where we were able to agree common language and a process for the partnership. In addition to the tyranny of distance we also have very different cultures and therefore had different perceptions of how the partnership would develop. It required all three partners to listen carefully to each other in order to properly understand the views of others. Without listening there is no learning. It helped enormously that New Zealand and the Cook Islands have a deep political relationship and were familiar with ways of working together; China and New Zealand also have a long-standing relationship based on mutual trust which enabled us to commit to this innovative partnership; and the Cook islands and China have worked together in the past and had already undertaken new partnership approaches based on China's commitment to helping partner countries build their self-development capacity, including on infrastructure, but also in the development of local personnel and technical forces using domestic resources.

3. **Partners need to remain focused on the outcomes** and not just the process of developing the triangular partnership. At times we became distracted by the partnership as an end in itself, which required others to remind us to focus on the outcomes. Once agreement on the partnership was reached we formalised the governance group which has now begun its governance and oversight role – i.e. a focus on outcomes and good process in implementation.

With regard to the types of partners described in the conclusion from the last meeting (facilitator, beneficiary and pivotal), it is not immediately possible to identify the value added to our partnership from using these. Yes, the Cook Islands was both facilitator and beneficiary, while China and New Zealand were pivotal partners. However, from our perspective, the Cook Islands was the lead partner, while China and New Zealand the support partners. What differentiated this from joint cooperation with, say, two OECD donors, is that the Cook Islands successfully led a process that brought together a long-standing 'South-South Cooperation' donor partner and a long-standing 'OECD bilateral' donor partner.

Overall, we would say the experience of developing the Cook Islands Water Partnership very much reflects the necessary elements for good triangular cooperation as described in the OECD papers. We are all still listening and learning from each other. And the important thing is that progress is definitely being made towards improving water reticulation in Rarotonga, Cook Islands.