

Engaging regionally: Five questions for donors

Enrique Mendizabal

Working at the regional level poses a series of challenges for donors. DFID's Regional Assistance Plan (RAP) in Latin America aims to influence regional policy by working with the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, two of the main IFI's in the region. Without a bilateral programme (except in Nicaragua) DFID faces organisational and contextual challenges which pose a series of fundamental questions. Their answers could potentially inform a process of regional strategy design; but also of global thinking about donors as part of a network of partners and allies with and through which they work to achieve their core objectives.

Five Key questions

First of all, what is a regional programme?

Are geographical divisions really appropriate when we are discussing international development? Is Africa 'a region' because its countries are all next to each other? Or is it because they share common characteristics that they do not share with any other countries or nations in the world? Is it not possible to find stronger commonalities between countries in different geographical regions? Similarly, what is a sub-regional focus? Can we always talk about the Andes or East African sub-regions as a focus of regional work for a donor when there are clear fundamental differences between the countries in each?

Regional focus might need to address more than geographical proximity. The Andes is an example of a region where no two countries can be said to share similar contexts. It would be impossible, for example, to attempt to address trade policies in the Andes with a single approach or policy; the positions and roles that governments, the private sector and civil society play could not be more different.

Also, does a regional programme demand a structure where every country team does everything in a coordinated fashion? What about developing national, sub-regional or thematic focuses that can then be aggregated or coordinated by the programme –or by means of a knowledge management strategy? Thematic focuses would allow expertise to develop closer to where there is a stronger demand for it while securing its regional relevance. A *heterarchical* structure such as this is common in highly decentralised and capacity rich networks.

Secondly, can a donor act regionally without a national or local programme?

Many in Latin America argue that it is impossible for DFID to continue to argue for change without having the 'field experience' in the region to back it up. It does not seem that it is possible to gain and maintain a reputation by simply 'hovering' over a region.

If this is true, could it be possible to gain that *foot on the ground* by acting through partners (other donors, multilaterals or CSOs)? In Latin America, DFID has invested in developing strong relations with other donors and civil society organisations that

could potentially increase their outreach regionally and provide them with local credibility. Local partnerships also help build ownership that may lead to the sustainability of the interventions. However, under what conditions can donors be part of networks of partnerships –and how much can they rely on them to represent them?

Third, are the resources required for national programmes the same as those required for regional influence?

DFID's programme in Latin America is highly labour intensive –and much of its success is based on personal interventions and networks that cost relatively little. Many of these interventions reflect a *strategic opportunism* that demands the development and management of close relationships between DFID and its counterparts in partner, as well as target, institutions. Funding mechanisms need to respond accordingly.

Furthermore, regional advisors need to know regional players, understand regional processes, and use research methods to draw regional lessons from national knowledge. They must command knowledge and strategies of regional relevance.

Fourth, how can regional donor programmes align with national actors whose interests are local and not regional?

This is particularly important because a key to the success of regional interventions is a negotiation between national actors' responsibilities, roles and benefits with regional objectives.

And, **fifth**, how can a donor monitor its impact regionally?

Is it enough to change the discourses of regional actors (like the IFIs or, maybe, of other donors)? Or is there a need to show impacts on the ground? In any case, how can we monitor and learn from a regional donor's contribution to change when its interventions are so far removed from the final impact? The answer to this last question (as well as to the others) is crucial in designing regional programmes. Lessons, after all, are their most valuable and tangible outputs. And if these are not learned and incorporated into practice, then they will be simply lost.

These questions require further exploration and are based on lessons learned from research on networks conducted at the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) group at ODI and the recent interim evaluation of DFID's RAP for Latin America. To various degrees their answers are relevant to other types of regional programmes and to the formation of regional alliances and networks to achieve regional outcomes.

For further information contact Enrique Mendizabal (e.mendizabal@odi.org.uk)
Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) www.odi.org.uk/rapid