

Dreaming Big, Implementing Not-So-Big: Development Coordination in Jordan's Ministry of Labour

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Introduction

Canada is playing a leading role in assisting with Jordan's Employment – Technical and Vocational Education and Training strategy (E-TVET). Developed over the past few years under the umbrella of the National Agenda, this progressive and ambitious reform strategy aims to increase Jordan's competitiveness by creating a knowledge-based economy that matches the labour market demands of the twenty-first century. Since Jordan presently has one of the lowest labour market participation rates in the region (40%), and an increasingly youthful population (nearly 38% of the population is younger than age 15), E-TVET is all the more crucial to the future of Jordan.

While E-TVET was developed by a variety of stakeholders, the Ministry of Labour was put in charge of leading the reform. To fulfill its leadership role, the Ministry needed to enhance its administrative and management capacities writ large – the first step was to set up a Development Coordination Unit to oversee and coordinate all activities. Thus, as a part of its longstanding commitment to Jordan, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) decided to sponsor an Advisor to the Ministry of Labour through the Deployment for Democratic Development (DDD), CIDA's flagship rapid-response program, jointly administered by the Institute of Public Administration of Canada and Rights & Democracy. Canadian expert, Brenda Cooke, was deployed to provide technical support to the local Executive Director of the Development Coordination Unit in setting up and operationalizing the unit. This involved developing a Reform Program Implementation Model, including an organizational design for the unit, and providing inter alia policy guidance, advice on financial management and reporting arrangements, and on-the-fly training on a host of human resource

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management issues. Having previously worked in Jordan, India, Yemen and Sri Lanka on educational reform projects, following an impressive career as a public servant and the president of two colleges in Canada, Ms. Cooke brought more than thirty years of international and Canadian experience to this initiative. She resided in Jordan as the Ministry of Labour’s in-house consultant from May to August 2008.

At the end of the project, Ms. Cooke reported highly positive results – 80% of planned objectives had been achieved. These successful results are all the more remarkable in light of the bumps that the project encountered along the way, as Ms. Cooke explained in her final report and elaborated during an interview.

<p>PROJECT PROFILE Title: Supporting the Establishment and Operationalization of a Development Coordination Unit at Jordan’s Ministry of Labour Client: H.E. Mr. Majed Habashneh, Secretary General, Ministry of Labour Consultant(s): Brenda Cooke, Education Consultant Duration: March-August 2008 Budget: \$ 74,369.58 Key Outputs: The existing Terms of Reference and Mandate of the DCU reviewed, revised and approved by stakeholders. An Implementation Model for the Reform Program is developed. A set of job descriptions developed for all positions in the DCU. All key positions filled according to established hiring processes. Existing staff on the Initiative assigned clear roles within the DCU where appropriate.</p>
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Soon after her arrival, it became clear that Ministry of Labour stakeholders were expecting to implement a project of much grander scale and ten times the budget. Envisioned as a Sector-Wide Approach (SWAp), E-TVET was initially conceived as a strategy through which development agencies across the board would collaborate to support sector-wide reform among all the stakeholder groups based on Jordan’s long-term vision for its development in the employment, technical and vocational education and training sector. While taking such a holistic and harmonized approach is no doubt commendable in theory, SWAps can be challenging to implement. But through Ms. Cooke’s provision of a modest amount of technical assistance under DDD, the project was salvaged – yielding some valuable lessons learned.

Managing Stakeholders’ Expectations

How much should E-TVET try to accomplish? And how broadly do development partners wish to spread their assistance? When Ms. Cooke arrived on the scene in Jordan, one of her biggest challenges was to deal with the overly ambitious expectations that had been built up among stakeholders. Over the previous two years, during its planning and inception phase, the E-TVET reform had inspired all stakeholder groups to “dream big” and identify activities in which they could participate. A plethora of stakeholders including the colleges,

the Vocational Training Corporation, the school system vocational program, unions and chambers were encouraged to identify ways they could be part of the reform plan. Concurrently, a host of development partners – CIDA, the World Bank, the European Union, Japan International Cooperation Agency, and United States Agency for International Development among others – were identifying areas that would contribute to E-TVET's success in which they wished to become involved. In the end, the SWAp envisioned was costed at US\$163 million.

As the project moved toward implementation, however, it became evident that the available funds were significantly more modest. At project start-up, the project had two main development partners – CIDA and the World Bank – who were able to contribute jointly US\$16 million. The European Union, which played a leading role in the original plan-building, is expecting to contribute to E-TVET about 35 million Euros starting late in 2009 through a budget-support mechanism which will give a lump sum of money to the Ministry of Labour to allocate according to Ministry priorities.

As Ms. Cooke reflects, “It was difficult to take over from the previous two-year process of developing broad project plans and stakeholder buy-in. In moving from the ‘visioning’ stage to the ‘implementation’ stage, the scope of the project had to be scaled down to a realistic size, commensurate with the development partners’ committed funds.” At the same time, it was challenging to “maintain the momentum and commitment of all stakeholder groups” who had been allowed to dream in colour. Developing the work plan took time and patience because there was a myriad of competing models that various development partners had already developed and championed. Despite such complexities, SWAps remain an appealing route for development partners looking to support projects with far-reaching objectives and potential benefits. In best case scenarios, according to one World Bank paper, SWAps “strengthen government ownership and coordination of projects, facilitate budgeting of sufficient funds to cover operating costs, integrate capital investment budgets in overall country budgets, and support policies and efforts to build domestic capacity” (p. 2).

Popular among World Bank projects since the mid 1990s, SWAps include such success stories as Bangladesh Health, Ghana Health, Pakistan Social Action, Ethiopia Education, Zambia Agriculture, Mozambique Agriculture and Tanzania Health. But the flipside of such sector-wide programming is that the “cost and time taken to prepare these operations, and their supervision costs, are significantly above the average for the rest of the portfolio” (p. 4)²

The challenges of implementing E-TVET were compounded because it was anything but a typical SWAp. The ideal SWAp is organized by a clear sequence of events: first, development partners come forward with funds; second,

² “Fiduciary Arrangements for Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAps)” (World Bank, Operations Policy and Country Services, April 2002).

priorities and a holistic project plan are developed by the country; and finally, the development community plays a supportive role in helping to oversee and coordinate the system-wide reform. But in the case of E-TVET, planning began from the bottom up: various stakeholders identified activities they wished to champion, fuelled by the commitment of one or two prominent development partners. The result was a plan whose scope far outstretched what could be realistically implemented within the funds available. Thus whenever creating a sector reform strategy, regardless of whether it is stakeholder or donor-driven, Ms. Cooke cautions, it is probably good advice to “avoid being too ambitious.” Her advice is substantiated by a working paper on SWAps by Danish International Development Agency, in which the authors warn against being “too elaborate at the outset,” emphasizing that the “essential components” of sound sector-wide programming are a “statement of sector policy that all partners can support, and an agreed co-ordination and dialogue framework through which the sector development programme can be developed and subsequently managed” (p. 24). Fairly early on in the process, it is advisable that a “comprehensive, costed and prioritized programme” be established to “discipline government and donors alike,” as an evolving guideline for the partnership (p. 25).³

Once the plan is created, whether by stakeholders or development partners, it is crucial to cost it out, revise accordingly and produce a final plan of realistic scope to which development partners are willing to commit. Although E-TVET followed a more haphazard route in terms of funding, fortunately, it had a solid statement of sector policy that proved instrumental in helping Ms. Cooke to keep the project on track. CIDA is also to credit, she notes, for making a “contribution to the project in a way that has sufficient flexibility to meet unexpected needs and to fill gaps as they are identified.”

Implementing a Change in Approach

Ms. Cooke took a highly participatory approach to setting up and operationalizing the Development Coordination Unit. Since the unit was to be housed right within the Ministry of Labour, her task was to work with Ministry employees on a day-to-day basis and bring them on board through the development of administrative and staffing procedures, as well as individual and institutional work plans and an operational manual. In order for all this to go smoothly, it had to become apparent to the Ministry staff that the scale down of E-TVET was necessary, rather than appearing to be imposed from the outside.

Explaining the change in terms of a transition from “visioning” to “implementation” helped to make people comfortable with the scaled-down approach. By “respecting and finding a place for the previous work,” Ms. Cooke

³ “The Sector-Wide Approach: Organizing Principle for Bilateral Development Cooperation” (DANIDA, Sector-Wide Approach Support Group, 2004).

managed to keep “the focus away from the personal and on the task at hand.” It helped to get people involved in the real and practical work of implementing the project – developing procurement plans and writing terms of reference for consultancies, for instance. On a day-to-day basis and while running workshops, she was guided by “metacognitive” approaches to implementing change, which involves naming, describing, and explaining change and discussing people’s reaction” in order to create an accepting and inclusive environment. The Stakeholders’ Workshop in Aqaba was a turning point in this respect. The workshop was highly participatory, with stakeholders able to work within and across stakeholder groups to identify problems and priorities, which were taken forward to the E-TVET Council for consideration.

The Development Coordination Unit is now fully operational: all positions have been successfully staffed and Mr. Ghazi Daboubi, a seasoned human resource professional formerly at the Central Bank of Jordan, has been hired as Executive Director. The reform program is up and running, and exercises in capacity building are underway. An implementation plan for the project has been developed and three large-scale interventions have been identified and are currently out to tender.

At the conclusion of her assignment for Deployment for Democratic Development, the Minister of Labour asked CIDA to supply a co-operant to stay on for two more years, providing ongoing advice and support to the Ministry and the Development Coordination Unit in the implementation of the project. Commending Jordan’s “high regard for Canadian expertise in the E-TVET field,” Ms. Cooke applied for and was selected for the assignment. One of her first tasks was to draft a Terms of Reference for a large assignment within the E-TVET plan – the restructuring of the Vocational Training Corporation (VTC), which owns and manages 45 training centres/institutes that are not at present being efficiently utilized. This contract allowed her to make use of lessons learned from her recent assignment and to move the project from plan to implementation.

At the recommendation of the Minister of Labour, Ms. Cooke developed the Terms of Reference for the VTC restructuring assignment using a “design/ implement” approach. What is envisioned is a team of long-term technical experts working as “the support team” alongside designated incumbents – “the counterpart team” – who are responsible for the key areas of reform: governance, organizational development, finance, human resources, management, training, and industry liaison. The support team will work collaboratively with the counterpart team to create a new employer-driven business model, governance model and training service delivery model based on a modular approach that includes ladder sets of competencies with various exit points and levels of certification. This project is more likely to remain on a realistic scale, since its pieces will be implemented as funding is identified. By twinning technical experts with their local counterparts, the methodology aims to produce a reform tailored to local expectations and needs.

Reflecting on her final thoughts about E-TVET, Ms. Cooke says, “It’s a fine line to walk between developing a plan that the stakeholders want and one that the development partners want to fund.” The task is to work with both groups in tandem to ensure that grand plans aren’t developed upon the needs identified by stakeholders alone, irrespective of development partner backing.

By the time Ms. Cooke departed Jordan, the E-TVET project environment had been significantly improved. It is impressive that so much could be accomplished through DDD’s provision of a skilled advisor for a relatively short-term assignment, which is precisely the niche that DDD was designed to fulfill. This initiative can be seen as a true success story about what a modicum of the right assistance at the right time can accomplish. By assisting the local partner to identify and surmount obstacles that had arisen in the course of their own development goals, Ms. Cooke provided just the infusion of technical support required to move from plan to implementation.

Lessons Learned

- Tight deadlines can be productive in moving from plan to implementation. When you’ve had a long planning period (in fact, too long), it’s not a bad idea to have a relatively short period to move to implementation. It gets people focused fast.
- Keep your eye on the bottom line. Once you know exactly what the resource level of the project is going to be, at least at start-up, you have to narrow down your project scope to match.
- But don’t lose sight of the big plan. You have to keep the big plan in mind so that it can be activated once other development partners come on board – and you need a forum for that discussion to happen.
- Take an inclusive approach to dealing with change. When project plans need to be modified or scaled down, take the time to discuss employees and stakeholders’ responses to the change and the reasons for these changes are necessary. Find ways to settle and obtain recognition of work already done.