Trade-Related Technical Assistance - What Works and What Doesn’t?

The Issue: Businesses, governments and donors recognize that trade-related technical assistance (TRTA) can significantly enhance the international competitiveness of developing and transition economies.

The development of public sector capacities is essential to the integration of developing and transition economies into the multilateral trading system. The current focus of donors on capacity building in the areas of trade policy formulation and trade negotiation is, therefore, understandable.

But this public sector focus in not sufficient.

The Proposition: TRTA should seek to develop capacities at three levels:

- the trade policy level,
- the level of the trade support network, and
- the enterprise level.

For TRTA to have a direct and continuing impact, the composition and means of delivery of TRTA must also be modified. Experience suggests that:

- The approach should embrace the entire national trade support network. Greater emphasis has to be given to strengthening private sector trade support organizations and local consultancy capability.
- TRTA must be pragmatic. Business has little time for theory. Technical cooperation among developing countries and replication of ‘success stories’ have to be further exploited.
- ‘Do-it-yourself’ approaches must replace the traditional reliance on international consulting. Greater use has to be made of information and communication technologies, in both the approach to, and the delivery of, TRTA.
- While competitiveness of the enterprise sector must remain the priority, greater emphasis has to be given to the ‘business for development’ dimension.
- Longer-term perspectives must replace short- and medium-term commitments. Coordinated donor approaches are needed.
- Greater accountability is needed within the donor-provider-recipient partnership. Cost-sharing is fundamental to the relationship. Deliverables and targets for the partnership have to be specified, monitored and benchmarked.

Focus of the Debate: We propose that the debate focus on the following:

1. What approaches to TRTA work, which do not, and why?
2. What are the key elements of a successful TRTA programme?
3. What new approaches should be introduced and where should the future TRTA focus be?