Closing the Divide

Can the IAEA Make a Difference?

by Waldo Stumpf

Over the last two decades, the world has seen many fundamental changes in the way countries interact. It's seen today in how business is conducted, how fast travel and super-fast communications have opened up the world into almost one huge market and how news of break-through technological innovations appear almost weekly in the media.

Yet the world still lives with a vast divide between rich and poor and, from many perspectives, this divide appears to be increasing. The world's development programmes have thus been increasingly scrutinized for their effectiveness and efficiency. The aim is to ensure that the planned benefits reach the end-beneficiaries in a manner that adequately addresses the socio-economic needs of the recipient society.

Against this background, the IAEA's relatively small but nevertheless significant programme of technical cooperation has had to reform itself. It has gone from a largely "technology push" focus to adopting a new "needs driven" strategy.

As the world marks 50 years of the "Atoms for Peace" initiative, the questions must be asked whether the IAEA's Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) really can make a difference? Is this programme correctly positioned to be able to meet these very large global challenges? Must it reform itself further to remain meaningful and relevant? What are the determinants for its success within a highly demanding environment? These are the typical questions that have largely shaped the deliberations between the IAEA Technical Cooperation Department and its Standing Advisory Group, called SAGTAC, since the group of representatives from Member States was formed in the mid-1990s.

Critical Success Factors

In looking at the IAEA's programme in a global perspective, what are the critical factors for success in a changing and challenging world?

❶ ***Sound strategic planning within the recipient Member State.*** The TCP within any country must be a direct derivative of its national development priorities and must carry the full commitment and active support of the Government. It is for this reason that the process of establishing the country's strategic plan for technical cooperation with the Agency, also known as the Country Programme Framework or CPF, is deemed important. It indeed may be the most important part of the planning process to ensure proper focus on the needs of the country and to obtain the necessary commitment from all stakeholders. As with many other instances, here the process is probably more important than the final product of a CPF. Although the IAEA Secretariat will always play a supporting and facilitating role in this planning process, it is essential that the "ownership" of the process and its final product, be vested within the recipient Member State.

❷ ***It is necessary that the TCP shifts its focus from purely "project implementation" to a much broader "developmental" focus—where the socio-economic benefits flowing towards the end-beneficiaries in a recipient Member State become the measure of success.*** This has significant implications in terms of building strategic partnerships with other development organizations, promoting TCDC (Technical Cooperation amongst Developing Countries), attracting outside funding, and adopting a broader programme-based focus rather than a singular project focus within the overall approval process.

❸ ***Issues need to be addressed to ensure greater efficiency of the TCP.*** First and Foremost among these is probably a

gradual evolution of the current project approval process. It should evolve into one that devolves decision making on projects to the appropriate management levels whilst adopting a development programme-based approval process on the higher strategic decision making levels.

Second, a process is urgently required whereby the benefits that flow to the end-beneficiaries in any technical cooperation project with a Member State are quantified or assessed and measured against a form of cost-to-benefit analysis. This does not necessarily mean that only projects with a favourable cost-to-benefit ratio will be undertaken in future, but it does mean that full costs must be known in all cases and compared to the quantified (or assessed) benefits, thereby allowing this ratio to be managed to gain maximum efficiency.

Third, the sustainability of all technical cooperation projects must be ensured from the outset and governments of recipient Member States must be encouraged to move their National Nuclear Institutions, and other technical institutions involved in the programme, towards achieving greater self-reliance through adopting a business-like approach with their stakeholders. This will evolve into a greater customer focus, an increased cost consciousness, and a culture of quality and service delivery within the national institutions. (See box for an example from Malaysia.)

Technical Cooperation Can Make a Difference

It is SAGTAC's considered view that much has already been achieved in moving the IAEA's Technical Cooperation Programme towards its revised strategic objectives. Much, however, remains to be done. Although relatively modest in scope if compared to other UN development programmes, the IAEA programme nevertheless remains important in addressing the socio-economic needs of countries in those areas where nuclear technology can make a difference.

Once this is increasingly recognised amongst the world's development community, it will certainly help to mend the often negative opinion of the general public towards all things nuclear. In the process, more windows of opportunity may open to help countries narrow the rich-and-poor divide through the contributions of "atoms for peace."

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Malaysia's Marketplace

Malaysia is making steady strides in the nuclear marketplace, carving a niche keyed to its national development goals.

It's national nuclear institute is generating more and more revenue from a range of nuclear applications and services. The Malaysian Institute for Nuclear Technology Research (MINT) is now 30% sustainable in terms of operational costs via provision of services to both private and government agencies, says Dr. Daud Mohammad, Deputy Director General of MINT's Corporate Program.

MINT provides a range of technical services—in areas of industrial technology (mainly non-destructive testing); radiation processing (medical product sterilization, food irradiation, and cross-linking of wire and cables); radiation dosimetry services for personal and radiation equipment; and in provision of training in such areas as safety and health, industrial applications, and medical imaging. MINT's revenue has gone up accordingly, Dr. Daud says. So far in 2003, about RM 9 million has been earned (about US $2.4 million) compared to about RM 5 million in 1997.

As the trends suggest, nuclear technology has gained wide acceptance from the public and industry. MINT has placed great importance on building relations and rapport with customers and end-users, using the media, exhibitions, school lectures, partner alliances, advertising, and other outreach channels. "We have worked hard to enhance our image and acceptance," Dr. Daud says. "Customer and business networks as well as strategic alliances at the national and international levels are key ways for national nuclear institutes to become self-reliant and sustainable."

Dr. Daud Mohammad was among presenters at the IAEA Scientific Forum session 16 September 2003 on innovative approaches for nuclear institutions. Other presentations were made by J. Mengatti of Brazil and E. Akaho of Ghana. wald. Stumpf hosted the session.

—Staff Report from the IAEA Division of Public Information.