South-South Learning in the Trifinio Region
Transforming borderlands into areas of peace and development

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The creation of the Trifinio Region, a sensitive biosphere reserve in northern Central America where the borders of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras meet is a unique example of South-South Cooperation (SSC). Based on their experiences and lessons learned from the joint management of the Plan Trifinio, the three Central American countries created a tri-national entity that redefined their borderlands as a consolidated area for integration and development. The three countries, which share similar development challenges, recognized that this was the most effective way of responding to the social and environmental challenges they were facing.

The advantages of a tri-national horizontal partnership

The Trifinio Region, created in 1998, has been a successful transnational partnership in a politically and socially complex environment with a population of more than 670,000. The three countries recognized the importance of a partnership that looked beyond their geographic differences and artificial boundaries. The partnership has two main objectives: access to water and citizen participation.

One of its achievements has been to reformulate the concept of border from a zone of tension (a no man’s land or armed border), into that of a shared development zone. Many countries in the region have wanted to transform their borderlands, which have traditionally been marginal areas, into areas of economic integration where the provision of global public goods could be managed jointly.

The Trifinio Region covers some 7,541 square kilometers: Guatemala has 44.7 percent of the area, El Salvador has 15.3 percent and Honduras has 40 percent. It includes 45 border municipalities around the cloud forest atop the Montecristo massif. The population of the Trifinio shares common characteristics defined by a unique environment and a common past.

The creation of the Trifinio Region in 1998 has become a model strategy for South-South learning and has created a framework for decision making by the three partner countries, reflecting a participatory, democratic, and coordinated process of horizontal cooperation and investment. The success of this new approach can be attributed to its focus on solving specific problems that are important to its people.

The plan is also considered a model of bottom-up regional integration, because consultations are held on all initiatives with local governments (a total of forty-five municipalities from the three countries) and with local civil society, who together make up an Advisory Committee. The committee’s role is to provide comments on any project to be developed in the Trifinio Region and which could be reproduced in other Latin American border areas.

The elements that define the relationship

While it is clear that environmental and socioeconomic homogeneity has been a key success factor, several other features have also supported a close partnership:

- Environmental and social homogeneity has been a key success factor.
- The creation of a tri-national entity that redefined the borderlands as a consolidated area for integration and development.
- The involvement of local governments and civil society in decision-making processes.
- The focus on solving specific problems that are important to its people.

Developing shared resources in the Trifinio Region.
A common desire for solutions to the lack of access to public services. Because of their distance from economic and political centers, the municipalities of Honduras are forced to look for development solutions in neighboring towns: for example, in Guatemala for basic health and educational infrastructure and in El Salvador for food. Undertaking joint solutions to shared problems also makes larger scale projects possible (economies of scale).

Economic complementarities in the area of trade, and the desire for a temporary solution to the economic problems caused by war. Tourism and migration have played an important role as temporary solutions to unemployment.

Safety and crime prevention, especially in the fight against drug trafficking and stolen vehicles.

The protection and sustainable use of watersheds, especially the rivers of Lempa and Motagua, through projects with economic and social benefits.

The main challenges

The operational framework of the Trifinio Plan calls for strengthening institutions that can support a tri-national entity, can implement the plan, and can ensure the integrity and consistency of the actions carried out in the common region.

The governments have given the Region financial, administrative, and technical autonomy: It can enter into contracts and other legal agreements; and is represented by the Plan Trifinio Tri-national Commission (CTPT), composed of the vice-presidents of the three countries. The CTPT was authorized by treaty as the entity in charge of carrying out the Plan Trifinio under a clearly defined legal framework. An Advisory Committee brings together municipal and departmental representatives and civil society organizations, which helps ensure accountability and the transparency of the process.

Trilateral coordination, however, still presents challenges. Political momentum among the three governments needs to be sustained. The partnership between central government agencies, local governments, and civil society also needs to mature in order to achieve broader ownership and community participation in the development of the Trifinio.

Results and lessons learned

The creation of a tri-national region has not infringed on national sovereignty. On the contrary, it has contributed to strengthening national leadership, provided a legal framework that allows for the execution of tri-national programs and projects, promoted trans-border cooperation and the management of shared natural resources, and responded to common development strategies and the environmental preservation of the Region. Thus the Trifinio experience has been closely aligned with national priorities and systems. On the other hand, the creation of a regional entity has helped to harmonize decision making, coordination, and the execution of the entire Plan among the three countries, promoted harmonization and coordination among development partners, and between all the governmental and nongovernmental actors in the area, through their inclusion in the Trifinio Region’s organizational structure.

Trifinio has faced several obstacles. It has been dependent on external financing or international cooperation, and has sometimes encountered difficulties in defining tri-national agendas and in covering a wide geographical area that is diverse and politically fragmented. However, the Region has succeeded in building a tri-national integration process in Central America which has been a pilot demonstration project for the management of (sub) regional public goods. It is also a stellar example of participatory planning and effective South-South cooperation in line with the Accra Agenda for Action, the Bogotá Statement, and other multilateral commitments.

Nevertheless, the partnership process and the autonomy of the Region could still be improved. This requires greater political will from the central governments, better coordination of joint actions between the municipalities and associations, and stronger human and institutional capacities for implementation.

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