

# BULLETIN

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## Slovak Development Cooperation: Lessons for Poland

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*As a new donor, the Slovak Republic has made significant progress in constructing its national system of development cooperation. Although several crucial problems still persist, especially regarding financing and effectiveness of aid, Slovakia already has some valuable experiences to share with other regional partners and may consider engaging in joint initiatives. The Polish government, which took up the presidency of the Visegrad Group in July 2012, may find in Slovakia a willing partner for exploring more opportunities for closer collaboration of V4 countries in development assistance.*

**The Slovak Aid System.** The Slovak Republic, like other Central European states, started developing its current system of international development cooperation in anticipation of EU accession in 2004. It was one of first new EU Member States to put in place a comprehensive legal, institutional and strategic framework for an aid system. The Official Development Assistance Act was passed in 2007 (in comparison, Poland did this in 2011), a separate agency, the Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation (SAIDC), was established in 2007, a Mid-Term Strategy for Official Development Assistance for the years 2009–2013 was launched in 2009, and annual National Programs of development cooperation have been in place since 2007.

In 2011, Official Development Assistance (ODA) amounted to almost €62 million, which was 0.09% of Slovakia's GNI. Typically for the region, the majority of Slovak aid is being distributed through multilateral channels (75% in 2011), of which the largest share is a contribution to the EU budget (around 92%). Bilateral aid (€15.4 m in 2011) goes mainly to neighbouring countries in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, but African countries received 27% of ODA in 2011. According to the Mid-Term Strategy, Slovakia has three programme countries (Afghanistan, Kenya and Serbia) and 16 priority countries. Major sectors supported by Slovakia are infrastructure, education, civil society, health care, and, increasingly, support for democracy and human rights.

**The Challenges Ahead.** After the initial progress in establishing a national framework of development cooperation, Slovakia now faces a new wave of challenges. A special evaluation report, produced in 2011 by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC OECD), identified a number of gaps in Slovakia's development system and made several recommendations, some of which are being implemented gradually. Slovakia strives to focus its assistance more strategically on a smaller number of countries and sectors. The list of partner countries has been reduced from 19 in the 2009 strategy to about 12 in the latest National Programme for 2012, but the new categorisation of geographic partners (within three frameworks—development assistance, technical assistance, and the involvement of business sphere) is far from clear. In order to narrow thematic focus, Slovakia now highlights its comparative advantage, as a country that has experienced positive transition and integration with the EU. In 2011 it launched aid projects to support reforms in Tunisia and Egypt, and a new programme within the MFA—the Centre for Experience Transfer in Integration and Reforms (CETIR)—was created to handle this area of technical assistance.

Slovakia is currently preparing its first Country Strategy Paper (CSP) for Afghanistan and plans to participate in EU joint programming for South Sudan—both actions being proof of more strategic thinking. It has put in place the National Strategy for Global Education for 2012–2016 in order to increase domestic support for development cooperation, and is introducing global development topics into the curriculum at all levels of education. The close cooperation between administration

and civil society in the area can also be assessed positively. Since signing the MoU in 2010, Slovakia's NGO Platform was granted the status of official partner of the MFA for review and evaluation of key documents and strategies on development, and Slovak NGOs can draw on a special budget for co-financing EU funded projects. At the same time, the OECD is critical of the fact that Slovakia's NGOs distribute more than half of the country's bilateral ODA, which it views as a form of "tied aid", which is an inefficient model of aid delivery.

Despite these improvements, there is still much more to do, especially in areas such as aid programming of (e.g., preparation of CSP for all priority partners), monitoring and evaluation systems, transparency, mechanisms of humanitarian aid, and policy coherence for development. DAC OECD also calls for better coordination of aid within the government, a focus on results in the management of assistance, and more visibility of aid activities. Even though the number of officials involved in development issues seems sufficient (seven people in the MFA plus 12 in SAIDC), high staff turnover in the MFA and the lack of a career path in development cooperation decrease the ministry's capacity and expertise in dealing with this specific area. Moreover, with structural and personnel problems with SAIDC, the added value of a separate development agency is being questioned, and the future of the agency in current form is uncertain.

**Lessons Learnt.** Experiences of Slovak development cooperation point to major challenges typical for many new EU Member States in this field. These include, among others, problems with securing adequate funding for development, integration of development cooperation within the wider framework of foreign policy, coordination of aid among different stakeholders, underdevelopment of bilateral channels of aid delivery, and inadequate reporting, monitoring and evaluation systems. Given the financial crisis and austerity measures introduced across Europe, the significant increase in aid spending required if Slovakia is to fulfil its commitment to an ODA/GDP ratio of 0.33% by 2015 seems unlikely. There is, however, an opportunity to sustain the current level of financing for development and to use this period of consolidation to reform and strengthen the aid system further.

Despite some shortcomings, Slovakia's record also offers valuable lessons for Poland. First, it shows that even a comprehensive legislative and institutional framework for development cooperation could not guarantee major gains when there is little public awareness and weak political will to recognise development cooperation as an important element of foreign policy. Second, while Poland is developing its own legal and strategic documents, it is important to secure links and synergies, missing in Slovakia's case, between acting on development assistance, mid-term strategy, country strategy papers and annual programmes. Third, some problems with the functioning of Slovakia's agency may strengthen the arguments of those who were opposed to ideas of establishing a similar institution in Poland. Fourth, the institutionalisation of dialogue between public administration and NGOs active in development cooperation may also seem to be an interesting option in Poland.

**Prospects for V4 Cooperation.** Eventually, Slovakia's engagements with multilateral projects make it attractive partner for other countries in the region, especially the Visegrad Group, in regards to intensifying consultation and coordination as well as joint initiatives in development assistance. For example, Slovakia is planning a regional forum of new EU Member States, whose aid systems have recently undergone special evaluation by the DAC OECD, in order to share their best practices and improve the process of mutual learning. More exchange visits and cooperation on development, between governments and civil society within V4 could add value in area where all countries see their comparative advantage similarly, i.e., in their experience of transition experience.

Moreover, Slovakia's well tested joint-development programs with Austria in Kenya could be a useful lesson in strengthening joint efforts among the Visegrad countries. The first V4 development projects, such as support for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moldova in 2011, a pilot project in Kenya in 2012, and the programme for Eastern Partnership, launched in 2012, already offer good starting points for more systematic cooperation of V4 countries in foreign aid. For example, Slovakia may be supportive of joint V4 initiatives in countries such as Belarus or Tunisia. Moreover, due to its long experience in multilateral trust funds (UNDP Trust Fund, Bratislava-Belgrade Fund) Slovakia could welcome the idea of a joint regional trust fund for development cooperation. Modification of the International Visegrad Fund to cover external development aid, or establishment of a new Visegrad Development Fund to support the sharing of V4 members' transition experiences, for instance, may be considered in this context. Poland's presidency of the V4, which started on July 1, is a good opportunity to discuss all these ideas with Slovakia and other partners.