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Capacity Development for Policy Advocacy: Current Thinking and Approaches among Agencies

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Abstract: *Capacity building has gathered growing recognition from policymakers, grant-making bodies and international development agencies in recent years. It rests on the principle that investing in the human and social capital of marginalised individuals and groups enables them to develop the capacities needed to thrive, and to play an autonomous role in developing and renewing their communities. Both concept and practice have evolved in the development communities, ranging from the institution-building approach in the 1950s, to the human resource development approach in the 1970s and 1980s, to the capacity development/knowledge networks in the 2000s. Literature reviewed argued that capacity building remains a concept characterized by vagueness and generality. However, all recent definitions share three aspects, centred on the understanding that capacity-building efforts need to be considered from a systems perspective that recognizes the dynamics and connections among various actors and issues at the different levels, as part of a broader unit rather than as loosely connected factors. The paper suggests that for capacity-building efforts to be sustainable, interventions need to adopt a participatory approach and develop into empowering partnerships for which those involved feel a high degree of ownership. In this sense, capacity building must involve change and transformation of all actors involved. It should become a two-way process in which the capacity of actors on both sides of the intervention is strengthened not one sided.*

Keywords: *Capacity Development, Policy Advocacy, Current Thinking, Agencies*

I. Introduction

The concept of capacity building has become increasingly important in the arena of international cooperation over the last 20 years as governments, donors, and implementing agencies seek to realize more sustainable impacts from development assistance.

According to Cohen (1993), public sector capacity building 'seeks to strengthen targeted human resources (managerial, professional and technical), in particular institutions, and to provide those institutions with the means whereby these resources can be marshalled and sustained effectively to perform planning, policy formulation, and implementation tasks throughout government on any priority topic'.

Berg (1993) regards capacity building as characterised by three main activities: 'skill upgrading – both general and job-specific; procedural improvements; and organizational strengthening'. Skill enhancement refers to general education, on-the-job training and professional strengthening of skills such as policy analysis and information Technology. Procedural improvements refer to context changes or system reforms. Organisation strengthening covers the process of institutional development. He concludes that capacity building is '...broader than organizational development in that it includes all types of skill enhancement and also procedural reforms that extend beyond the boundaries of a single organization'.

North (1992), on the other hand, regards capacity building as synonymous with the term 'development' and argues that the concept of capacity building has in recent years taken on a new meaning: as an umbrella term to include institution building and human resource development, which are associated with 'a developing country's management of development policies and programmes'. Hilderbrand and Grindle (1994) argue that this suggestion 'makes operationalizing the concept in a meaningful way almost impossible'.

For Morgan (1998), the core of capacity building is wider and more holistic: there is a close relationship between human resource development and capacity development; there is an evolving relationship between training and capacity development; effective capacity development requires sustained attention over a longer period of time; capacity development attempts to move beyond administrative techniques and beyond projects; and capacity development attempts to accelerate interaction between organisations and their environment. In this sense, capacity development becomes a more complex concept than that of inputs, which is the concept most widely spread in the donor community. It refers to the approaches, strategies and methodologies used by national actors and/or outside interveners to help organisations and/or systems improve their performance (Morgan, 1998).

It is also relevant to note that, since no overall theory of capacity building exists, organisations that engage in this type of work base their approach on theories of change borrowed from the social sciences. Inevitably, this triggers the interchangeable use of terms like capacity building, capacity enhancement and capacity development. The first two seem currently to be preferred, perhaps because 'capacity building' came into use earlier and still carries connotations of earlier approaches to capacity building, such as training courses in the North and technology transfer (Whyte, 2004).

Emerging in the late 1980s, capacity building was a new approach to development that sought to focus resources and interventions more strategically to build, strengthen or improve the effectiveness of developing country capacities. Since then, there has been ongoing dialogue and debate within the international community on the concept of capacity building and the methodologies to apply to it.

Evolution of Capacity Building

The emergence of capacity building as a central focus can be found within the history of international development assistance itself. Over the past 60 years, thinking on international issues and international aid has evolved through five general phases, as described below. These should not be seen as discrete, sequential stages, but rather as shifts in perspective and emphasis over time, with each stage borrowing and adapting from the ones before.

1950s to 1960s — Institution Building

Institution building was based on a management philosophy whose underlying objective was to equip developing countries with the basic inventory of public sector institutions required to manage a program of public investment. More often than not, it meant importing or transplanting models from developed countries.
The focus was on the design and functioning of individual organizations, with little attention to contextual issues. Development assistance focused on training, technical assistance, financial support, program design and improvements in organizational structures and systems.

1960s to 1970s — Institutional Strengthening

This period represented a shift toward improving existing organizations, as opposed to "building" new ones. However, the focus remained substantially on individual organizations and transfer of western administrative techniques. Donor interventions were directed towards strengthening of specific organizational functions (e.g., redesign of administrative systems) or training to upgrade capacities of individuals. Institutional strengthening was also seen as a means of supporting other project objectives.

1970s — Development Management

Development management reflected an emphasis on management and implementation of development programs, as opposed to improvement of individual institutions. The primary focus was on delivery systems of public programs and the ability of governments to reach target groups. Development management was a reaction to previous top-down approaches and involved more strategic thinking and political content than its predecessors. This stage was also characterized by greater support for decentralization, involvement of local groups (NGOs, CBOs) and institutions, as well as integration of public programs with programs of integrated rural development.

1980s — Institutional Development

The shift towards 'institutional development' in the 1980s added new emphasis to debates on organizational and management questions. First, it was applied to the private sector and NGOs, as well as government. Second, the time horizon with respect to investments began to lengthen. Third, it was based on the assumption that organizational effectiveness was related not just to internal management, but to the external environment as well. Fourth, it marked a move beyond the framework of the individual organization. And finally, institutional development began to address the sustainability issue — not just 'what works' but 'what lasts'. Other features of this phase included a move away from blueprint approaches and more emphasis on broader sectoral perspectives.

1980s to 1990s — Capacity Development

The experience of structural adjustment in the 1980s made it clear that many developing countries did not have the management skills and organizational resources to adjust to dislocating shifts in the global economy. The emergence of Capacity Development during this period was, in part, a response to this. It was also closely tied to criticisms of technical assistance (limited impact), the growing emphasis on sustainability and the need for developing countries to be self-managing. Development thinking in the 1980s was further

characterized by increased emphasis on 'soft issues' (inter-organizational relationships, enabling environment, cultural influences) and multi-dimensional, cross-sectoral responses.

1990s to 2000s — Systems Perspectives

Thinking about capacity development in the late 1990s and in the current decade has continued to evolve with increased recognition of the importance of a systems perspective — making sense of the whole, the interdependence of elements within and strategic interventions to affect systems level changes. Programmatically for donors this has led to great emphasis on more comprehensive approaches, broad-based poverty reduction strategies and support for development networks. The capacity building literature also increasingly notes the importance of issues such as legitimacy, motivations, incentives, leadership, and building on local traditions and practices to capacity building and effective capacity utilization.

Despite broad consensus on some of the fundamentals of capacity building, the concept is still evolving and, at times, it remains imprecise. For some, it is still seen simply as a development objective. For others capacity building represents an approach to development. While defining capacity building as an objective is important, it is not enough. In fact, simply embracing capacity building as an objective risks shifting attention away from those behavioural and organizational changes required if capacity building is to be adopted as a way of 'doing business'.

What one is left with is a redefinition of objectives without any significant change in behaviour.

The context for capacity development in fragile situations

Capacity development tends to be even more difficult in fragile situations than in more stable situations. Sometimes it is because of conditions that exist more generally in developing countries but are more pronounced and distorted in states affected by conflict. Power and politics in fragile states have, for example, fewer checks and balances than in other countries and elites can take advantage of political disorder for their own purposes. In fragile situations, the shadow or informal state can take on a more pervasive and powerful role, to the point of challenging the authority of the state.

The nature of the challenges in fragile states can also be different from those in more stable situations. In some post-conflict states such as Borno the damage to physical infrastructure was devastating. Schools and hospitals were burned and many documents destroyed, such as birth records. Sixty-five per cent of the population lost their homes. The destruction in North East Nigeria because of the boko-haram crisis has similarly been massive. In addition to this physical damage, crisis damages the social fabric, often leaving citizens with a distrust of others, lingering fears and an overriding concern about survival.

The instability of peace agreements in many fragile situations results in regular crises that distract leadership from the day-to-day functions of running a government in favor of fighting fires and positioning for power. When these activities dominate, as is often the case, it is difficult to get leaders to pay attention to the longer-term perspective of capacity development. Sustaining attention for it is even more challenging.

A Systems Approach to Capacity Issues

The term 'systems approach' is increasingly referred to in discussions about capacity development. For some it refers mainly to inter-organizational systems, while for others it suggests a different way of thinking, acting and organizing, regardless of the level of the activity. This perspective, however defined, takes one away from linear notions of changes to a more dynamic view of development as a process influenced by a multitude of factors interacting simultaneously — factors which are not always easy to map out in advance. Systems theory is often associated with the notion of 'emergence' as variables come together in different combinations, at different points in time, leading to a particular outcome(s). For practitioners, the challenge is to understand the 'system' within which one is functioning and to support strategic interventions which promote positive development outcomes within that.

Thinking about capacity development from a 'systems perspective' leads planners and practitioners inevitably to reflect on how changes in one part of a system (including capacity issues therein) affect behaviour or capacity changes in the broader system.

For example, planners contemplating support for sector-wide reforms will want to consider how the rehabilitation programme of internally displaced persons can be structured to ensure that interventions deal not only with technical issues within the area, but also broader policy issues, relationships amongst key actors (within the area and beyond), and factors in the broader enabling environment. The individual unit, from this perspective, is less important than the system of which it is a part, with the emphasis being more on 'the whole' and relationships and interactions amongst the constituent parts. As Morgan has noted, according to a systems perspective "the behaviour of the parts depends more on how the parts are connected rather than on the nature of the parts." (Morgan, 2005).

Capacity Building and Sustainable Livelihoods

There is a great deal of overlap between the concepts of capacity building and sustainable livelihoods. Both are rooted in a systems perspective and a holistic approach to development. They both also focus on capacity as a key to sustainability, although more frequently referred to as 'assets' in the sustainable livelihoods literature. However, while capacity development focuses more on organizations, public institutions and policies, sustainable livelihoods analysis looks at communities and households. Sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) makes the link at the 'enabling environment' level. It notes that: "A community's livelihood assets are influenced by, and reflect, on the institutional structural milieu of which it is a part."(CHF, Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, Guidelines, March 2005)

Principles for capacity development

• **Don't rush**: capacity building is a long-term process. It avoids delivery pressures, quick fixes and the search for short-term results.

• **Respect the local value system and foster self-esteem**: the imposition of foreign values can undermine confidence. Capacity builds upon respect and self esteem.

• **Scan locally and globally**; reinvent locally: there are no blueprints. Capacity building draws upon voluntary learning, with genuine commitment and interest. Knowledge cannot be transferred; it needs to be acquired.

• **Challenge mindsets and power differentials**: capacity building is not power neutral, and challenging mindsets and vested interests is difficult. Frank dialogue and a collective culture of transparency are essential steps.

• **Think and act in terms of sustainable capacity outcomes**: capacity is at the core of development; any course of action needs to promote this end.

• **Establish positive incentives**: motives and incentives need to be aligned with the objective of capacity building, including through governance systems that respect fundamental rights.

• **Integrate external inputs into local needs**, priorities, processes and systems: external inputs need to correspond to real demand and be flexible enough to respond to local needs and agendas. Local systems should be reformed and strengthened, not bypassed.

• **Build on existing capacities rather than creating new ones**: this implies the primary use of local expertise, revitalising and strengthening of existing institutions.

• **Stay engaged under difficult circumstances**: the weaker the capacity, the greater the need.

• **Remain accountable to ultimate beneficiaries**: any responsible organisation/partnership is answerable to the people it affects, and should foster participation and transparency as the foremost instruments of accountability *(*Adapted from Lopes and Theisohn (2003).

Planning, monitoring and evaluation of capacity building efforts

Until recently, capacity-building organisations have been weak in monitoring the impact of their work. What types of capacity-building interventions are most effective and what is the causal link between capacity building and outcomes are two questions that still have to be addressed. Two points seem to cut across existing literature:

• Monitoring and evaluation need to be more than a control mechanism designed mainly to satisfy donor accountability requirements. They need to be designed and managed as to encourage learning, participation and commitment.

• Without a theory of cause-effect, learning proves difficult. All actors involved in capacity building need to map out and reach some agreement on what event triggers what result, etc.

This is closely linked to institutional and needs assessments prior to the capacity-building intervention and goes back to one of the points previously made – that for capacity building to be meaningful, it must be driven by demand.

Why current approaches to capacity development are failing

I believe that the fundamental problem underlying these current approaches to capacity development is that insufficient attention is being paid to the nature and importance of public service organisations. The focus of much development work has been on programmes, outputs and outcomes in such areas as education, health, social welfare and economic development.

However, the sustainability of any of these programmes over time, and beyond the period of external support, depends on how local organisations have developed. They must become the accumulators and transmitters of knowledge through building up experience and socialising new generations of staff and stakeholders. The sustainability of public policy and know-how depends almost entirely on the enduring competencies of the organisations involved.

All organisations are motivated by a mixture of formal and informal incentives. This has two consequences.

- Firstly, while there is a range of ways in which the external demands on organisations to reform themselves can be stimulated and sharpened, ultimately successful organisational development can only be led from within. Forty years of organisational development literature show this is true even in commercial organisations where formal incentives are strong. It is particularly so in public administration. Fukuyama (2007) says that major changes in government capability in areas that exhibit "low specificity and high transactions", such as civil service reform, can be effected only if they are endogenously led. Donors can play nothing more than a supporting role.
- Secondly no government agency is an island: sources of incapacity may lie not in the organization concerned but in the wider administrative environment, which in turn is likely to reflect the powerful influences of deeper societal institutions.

Neither training, nor process change, addresses these incentives and influences.

II. Conclusion

Capacity building is fundamentally about change and transformation – at individual, organisational, sector-wide and societal levels. To ensure sustainability of results, capacity-building efforts involved in using research-based evidence in policy processes need to take into account the following principles:

• Capacity building requires broad-based participation and a locally driven agenda
• Interventions should build on already existing local capacities
• Capacity-building organisations must be open to learning and adaptation
• Capacity building is a long-term investment
• Activities must be integrated at different levels to address complex problems

Capacity building is not just about building the capacity of researchers to do research. It is also about building researcher capacity to carry out policy-relevant research and to communicate the findings effectively to policy and decision makers. It is important to build communication and dissemination strategies during the design phase to increase the effectiveness of these activities.

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