

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION: TIME TO GET SERIOUS

"Capacity issues have fitted awkwardly into the structured, bureaucratic processes of public aid agencies, specifically those to do with time frames, financial management, risk assessment, planning, programme design, control and prediction, and implementation and reporting. The current emphasis on achieving and demonstrating results has come to be the latest development objective which has posed a trade off with capacity-issues. (...) Most funding agencies have assumed that supporting capacity development required no special individual or organizational skills or dedicated internal units, as has been the case with gender, the environment or performance management. The assumption was that capacity issues were already mainstreamed, albeit informally. Yet, perversely, capacity development turns out to require expertise in areas such as political analysis, management theory and practice, and change management, which has always been in short supply in such agencies." [\[1\]](#)

In the past six months, I have seen around a hundred proposals and reports, and descriptions of a few dedicated projects, in which different international organisations state their intent to develop the 'capacity' of national organisations elsewhere, or claim to have done so.

One conclusion stands out: *Rarely is there a clear concept of 'capacity'*. The word is used as vaguely and ambiguously as 'partner', and seems more a tick-the-box insertion in the plans and reports, than something that is thought and worked through. That is all the more worrying, given that international organisations for decades have been raising funds for the 'capacity-development' of national and local organisations. And continue to do so.

Here are 12 attention points, and questions to ask, when developing an intervention with a capacity-development component, or assessing proposals and reports that include such:



Whose initiative is this? No one can develop somebody else's capacity against their will. Who 'asked' for capacity-support? Who determined the focus, or the priorities, who the entry point? If national organisations only 'go along' with an international initiative, because they want to maintain a good relationship and keep the funding flowing, the potential for sustained impact will be limited at best.



Past experience: This may not be the first such effort. Does this new capacity-initiative draw on and learn from the history of 'capacity-development' efforts with this organisation? How?



Precision: Is it clear whose capacities are to be strengthened, for what? Be precise.



Effectiveness: Does the 'capacity-development effort' go beyond 'training' and 'workshops'? By themselves, these are not effective to strengthen individual competencies and institutional capacities. Accompaniment and individual and organisational mentoring, combined with a culture of reflection and learning, are needed to effectively translate the learning into enhanced practice.



Individual competencies do not add up to institutional capacities: Is a distinction made between the development of the 'competencies' or 'skills' of certain individuals and specific teams, and the institutionalisation of such competencies (which, in international organisations, is referred to as 'mainstreaming')? Does the planned engagement include efforts towards institutionalising capacities? How?



Framework for organisational capacities: If the objective is to strengthen organisational capacities, is there a decent framework about what makes for effective organisations, to guide the engagement? Does it focus on function rather than form? Does it appreciate that organisations in non-Western societies have different societal histories, may function differently, and will evolve according to a different logic? Does it appreciate that, even in Western societies, most of what shapes organisational life happens below the surface and is not easily visible?



One function among others: If the purpose is to strengthen a particular function of an organisation with a multi-purpose mandate, is attention paid to how this functional capability fits within the whole? For example, if the purpose is to develop 'humanitarian' or 'emergency response' capacities of an organisation, i.e. the capacity to respond to crisis fast, effectively and with the required skills and minimum standards, how will that capacity be maintained if such crisis situations occur only very occasionally?



Collaborative capacities: Is attention paid to 'collaborative capacities', not just within but especially between organisations? Many problems are too complex to be tackled by one organisation alone, effective collaboration is required. Sometimes collaborative efforts become the major driver for individual organisational development



Maintaining capacity: Is attention paid to the strategic problem of maintaining 'capacity'? National organisations are not just interested in 'developing' capacities. A major concern is 'maintaining' capacities. Their funding can be too uncertain, their staff turnover too high (including the best staff being recruited by the international organisations that first invested in the development of their 'capacity'). So is attention paid to the financial sustainability of the national/local organisation, and what it has to offer to attract and retain qualified staff?



The 'capacity to build capacity': Capacity-development is a dedicated field, and area of expertise. Those who practice it need particular competencies that include, among other elements, a diversity of frameworks to draw on in the assessment and structuring of their support, the ability to

ask catalytical questions, strong interpersonal, inter-cultural, and communication skills (including deep listening). Does the proposing agency have those competencies? What evidence does it offer?



Focus on outcomes, not inputs: Is there a clear vision of what 'success' will look like? What do we expect to see if the desired capacity has been 'developed'? How will this be assessed, by whom?



Change in the collaboration: What will change in the relationship between the international and national organisation, if certain capacities of the latter have been 'strengthened'? If nothing changes, then what was the point?

[1] Baser, H. & P. Morgan 2008: *Capacity, Change and Performance*. Maastricht, European Centre for Development Policy Management p. 116-117

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First published in LinkedIn on 28 May 2017

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/capacity-development-international-cooperation-time-get-brabant?published=t>

