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Capacity Change and Performance

Capacity development: between planned interventions and emergent processes

Implications for development cooperation

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In recent years, the international community has been emphasising the importance of capacity development for the achievement of the millennium development goals and sustainable development more generally. The Accra High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, for example, which took place in September 2008, produced the Accra Agenda for Action. This commits signatories to taking additional steps to develop a country's capacity to determine and implement its own development vision.[1]

Yet despite the greater importance attached to capacity development, insufficient attention has been given to fully understanding how capacity develops in different organisational and societal contexts. The same applies to ensuring that aid agencies provide appropriate support for country-led efforts. In fact, a recent World Bank report remarked that, despite the level of resources committed to capacity development, it has not evolved as a distinct area of development practice.[2]

The apparent mismatch between the rhetoric of the donor community in support of country-driven capacity development processes on the one hand, and their capability for doing so on the other, accounts in part for the very mixed record on the ground.

This Policy Management Brief, which draws on the findings of an ECDPM study on capacity, change and performance,[3] aims to contribute to a growing body of knowledge on capacity development. It does so by highlighting the study's main findings on how capacity develops as well as by taking account of evolving insights on this discussion. However, it provides no more than an introduction to a complex topic. Readers wishing to delve deeper are referred to a list of sources at the back of this publication.

This brief is written with two groups of development practitioners in mind:

First, managers of organisations and external advisors whose business it is to support capacity development processes on the ground and who are looking to improve approaches and methods.

Second, decision-makers working for aid agencies and partner governments who are responsible for negotiating and committing resources to capacity development work and who are ultimately accountable for results.

The brief is organised as follows:

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1. Thinking differently about capacity development

One of the most compelling conclusions of the ECDPM study on capacity, change and performance is the need for the development community to reflect critically about the way it approaches capacity development work.

The study findings underline a growing body of thought that questions the appropriateness of approaches to capacity development that are informed exclusively by a technocratic and linear planning logic. Such a logic is premised on a notion of people, organisations and systems as pieces of performance machinery whose capacity can be constructed and adjusted through a set of purposeful (and often externally financed and managed) interventions. This logic tends to underestimate the importance of politics, culture and historical context, and to rely on the application of "best-practice" solutions across contexts.

While such approaches work in certain situations, they have proved less effective in circumstances of complex institutional transformation and renewal. One only needs to think about the complexities involved in developing national health systems, re-establishing core functions of government in post-conflict situations or promulgating a process of devolution to recognise the inherent uncertainties involved.

Many of the cases[4] examined in the ECDPM study also illustrate how key aspects of organisational (or system) capacity do not necessarily result from a purposeful and planned intervention, but rather emerge from a complex and difficult-to-chart process of organisational learning and adaptation. In many instances, such processes are implicit rather than explicit and are not necessarily guided by any form of recognisable intervention.

The study on Capacity, Change and Performance suggests that, in order to improve the aid industry's record in capacity development, and better understand what works and why, it is useful to think of organisations and systems as human or social systems that evolve organically in unpredictable ways in response to a wide range of stimuli and through multiple interactions.[5]

From this perspective, the task of capacity development can be viewed as less analogous to machine building, and more akin to shaping and influencing processes driven by local contextual factors, including politics, and culturally defined norms, values and practices.

The report argues that Systems Thinking, and the concept of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) in particular, offers a perspective that can help us better to understand how capacity develops within organisations and large systems. In so doing, the concept of CAS suggests what external partners need to do differently to improve their support for endogenous capacity development processes.

2. Complex adaptive systems thinking and capacity development

So what exactly is CAS and how can it help us to understand capacity development?[6]

CAS takes the view that organisations and networks – whether simple or complex - are more analogous to living organisms than they are to machines.

They constantly adapt and change in the face of new circumstances in order to sustain themselves. This process of change is only partially open to explicit human direction and, importantly, cannot be predetermined.

From this perspective, capacity development as a form of change is an emergent property (see box) that arises from a continuous process of organisational adaptation. This process is characterised over time by moments of coherence, collapse and re-emergence. Capacity development may be seen as a process that is part and parcel of the life cycle of any organisation.

Box 1: Emergence

Emergence is a descriptive term that seeks to convey how big systems change and how capacity develops within them.

Emergence is an unplanned and uncontrollable process in which properties such as capacity emerge from the complex interactions among all actors in the system and produce characteristics not found in any of the elements of the system.

The process is not driven by purposeful intervention and therefore cannot be managed in a conventional sense. Nor can it can be marshalled and adopted as a technique. However, it can be understood and influenced.

The power and influence of emergence grows as complexity and uncertainty increase.

The value of CAS lies in its ability to explain how and why human systems unfold as they do. It recognises that capacity emerges from multiple processes that are more complex and unpredictable than is often assumed.

It is a way of mentally framing what we see in the world, and of thinking about how change can be influenced from the outside. This mental frame may be contrasted with more conventional frames of thinking such as detailed design, the charting of direct cause-and-effect relationships, and planned change, which are less able to explain the dynamics within systems.

By focusing on processes, interrelationships, emergence and self-organisation, CAS can help us to understand the more unpredictable and disorderly aspects of capacity development.

By changing the way we look at cause-and-effect relationships, emphasising possibilities and probabilities rather than predictable results, it also challenges many assumptions about the need for planning, detailed design and control.

In the process, it questions the way external partners set about influencing local change processes. Specific capacity development outcomes cannot simply be engineered by the delivery of external inputs. Interventions need to be flexible and able to adapt to future, usually unforeseeable, system behaviour. CAS also suggests that no single factor or constituent element – incentives, leadership, financial support, trained staff, knowledge, structure – can by itself lead to the development of capacity. It therefore implies a need to take account of a broader range of approaches when addressing capacity development.

At the same time, CAS does not have all the answers. Nor does its use suggest that other perspectives can be discarded. Rather, CAS offers another lens (or prism) for exploring and understanding the way in which capacity actually forms and evolves.

It is also important to stress that CAS does not represent an approach for intervening. Instead, the insights it offers into organisational behaviour and dynamics can help to question some of the assumptions upon which current practice is founded and can, as a result, shed light on possible ways of improving this practice.

Crucially, it highlights the fact that, even when one tries to support capacity development through a purposeful intervention, there will always be more powerful forces at work that impact on the way capacity emerges. These bigger forces therefore need to be mapped, brought into perspective and taken account of in planning, implementing and monitoring any intervention.

3. Implications for practice

What then are the implications for aid agencies that wish to improve their support for capacity development?

Table 1 presents a selection of variables related to the design and implementation of capacity development interventions viewed from two contrasting perspectives: a conventional (i.e. instrumental and technocratic) perspective on the one hand and a CAS and emergence perspective on the other. Twelve implications for practice follow from this comparison. These suggest there is a need to find a middle way that takes account of emergence thinking within more familiar programme management processes.

1. Retain a focus on ownership. **Ownership is critical to any capacity development process,** because change is fundamentally political. Ownership, however, cannot be taken for granted, and any change process is likely to be contested. While ownership may reflect formal authority, it can also be shaped by patterns of stakeholder motivation, volition and identity. It should be addressed as an underlying theme to be tested, negotiated, mediated, and supported throughout the process.

2. Approach capacity development more as **a process of experimentation and learning** than as the performance of predetermined activities. Especially at the outset, there is need to probe and test out different interventions to see which work and which don't. Starting with 'big bet' guesses about the ends and means of capacity development may turn out to be counterproductive and may even weaken capacity.

3. **Take a more evolutionary approach to design.** Recognise that good design means being clear about the desired direction of change, but **leaving space for adaptation** along the way. In highly contested areas where goals are unclear, more searching may be required before engaging in formal design. Use monitoring as a mechanism for collective learning and for adjusting priorities, techniques and activities.

4. Ensure that the design process **engages local stakeholders** in the determination of needs and strategies. The process should be one of joint exploration.

5. Invest more in **understanding context in terms of the political, social and cultural norms and practices** that shape the way a country or an organisation understands capacity, change and performance. This includes taking an historical perspective and looking beyond the formal to understand the way in which informal institutions can shape and influence patterns of behaviour, and the incentives for change.

6. **Analyse more comprehensively the nature of the change** that is being demanded as a basis for defining the appropriate form of support. Is it for example simple, complicated, complex or chaotic?[7] Consider the implications for how best to engage in different levels of complexity. And be more aware of the evolutionary nature of capacity development, because different types of capacity development will suit different stages of capacity growth.

7. **Conduct capacity diagnostics as an intrinsic part of a change** process that is supportive of evolutionary design. Capacity diagnostics should be less about analysing gaps and more about recognising strengths. It can be used to engage stakeholders in **a process of self-learning that capitalises on existing strengths and opportunities**.

Table 1: Between planned interventions and emergent approaches

This table views a selection of variables related to the design and implementation of capacity development interventions from two contrasting perspectives: a conventional (i.e. instrumental and technocratic) perspective on the one hand and a CAS and emergence perspective on the other. In practice, few interventions take place entirely at one or other end of the spectrum. The 12 implications for practice presented in section 4 suggest there is a need to accommodate both perspectives in the design of interventions.

	Technocratic and rational perspective: "Organisations viewed as machines"	**CAS & emergence perspective: "Organisation viewed as human systems"**
Ownership (and leadership)	• Recognises formal authority; legal and administrative. • Emphasises the importance of the local partner taking ownership of CD interventions supported or funded by external partners.	• Understands ownership as a function of identity, volition and motivation of different stakeholders. • CD is driven by local initiative and circumstance. It is a process of its own separate from external intervention.
Context analysis	• Focuses on formal aspects of context, e.g. legal, institutional and economic, that impact directly on targeted organisation(s).	• Organisations are understood as belonging to multiple, evolving systems. Relationships are unpredictable and include informal and intangible dimensions. An historical perspective is critical.
Capacity assessment	• Focus is primarily on aspects of organisation that respond to human intervention and that contribute directly to tangible results and outputs. • The whole is understood to be the sum of individual parts. • Based on normative, a priori assumptions about what capacity is and how it is composed. Emphasis placed on gap analysis.	• Greater emphasis is given to non-tangible aspects of capacity, i.e. relationships, values, etc., and aspects of capacity "conferred" from outside, such as legitimacy. • Accommodates multiple interpretations of capacity that are culturally and socially defined.
"Good" design	• Robust problem analysis, clear definition of inputs, actions, outputs and outcomes. Focus on what is feasible and concrete. Linear view of cause and effect. Logical framework approach.	• CD as an emergent process that is not formally designed. Emphasis on learning and iteration, without necessarily any formal design elements. Notion of evolving design.
CD intervention logic	• Intervention is purposeful. Emphasis on efficient and effective mobilisation of resources (human and financial) so as to perform agreed actions within a stipulated time limit. Varies from more direct (hands-on) to indirect (process facilitation) approaches, but with emphasis on achieving pre-determined results.	• Capacity development emerges from the on-going learning, actions and interactions of organisational actors. It does not necessarily depend on a purposeful intervention. • There are no simple cause-and-effect relationships. • Multiple processes can stimulate different aspects of capacity.
Elements of capacity that respond well to this approach	• Formal incentives, rewards and sanctions • Skills and technical know-how • Formal structures and systems • Assets, resources and financial flows • Demand-side stimulation	• Values, meaning and moral purpose • Informal structures and systems • Relationships (internal and external) • Legitimacy, confidence and identity
Risk management	• Robust design aims at risk mitigation, ensuring that the intervention is not undermined by extraneous factors. Focus on value for money and timely achievement of agreed results. Low tolerance of failure.	• Risk is an intrinsic part of change and CD. Outcomes are unknown and intentions can be influenced by unforeseen events. Risk of failure provides opportunity for learning and adaptation.
Monitoring and evaluation	• Seeks to compare results and outcomes with intention to determine relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, etc. • Often with an accountability focus, but can also focus on improving management and design.	• M&E focused more on learning by participants themselves. Learning viewed as basis for self-awareness and continuous improvement.

8. **Give greater attention and recognition to less visible aspects of capacity,** such as values, legitimacy, identity and self-confidence, as well as other, non-monetary forms of motivation that may nonetheless be critical to outcomes. Determine whether and how such aspects can be supported from the outside.

9. **Be more creative about options for support,** i.e. which resources and techniques to apply. Be less inclined to fall back on international technical assistance (TA) as the standard means of delivering capacity development support. Also look at a wider range of approaches to at least supplement the conventional approaches that dominate much of capacity development practice.

10. Be prepared to **accept a higher degree of risk and failure as a means of encouraging learning and innovation**. Acknowledge that it is often difficult to predict beforehand what is going to work. This needs to be accompanied by better mechanisms for learning. These may challenge current approaches to M&E that can constrain the ability and motivation to learn.

11. **Invest in relationship-building**. The implementation of capacity development support depends tremendously on the **relationships forged between local stakeholders and outsiders.** Working relationships should be collegial, based on a shared process of problem-solving and learning. This requires an investment in 'soft skills' to accompany the substantive skills that outside experts can bring to bear. It also requires a greater willingness on the part of TA personnel to understand the political, social and cultural context.

12. **Be more realistic about the scope of external intervention**. In the end, external partners are marginal actors, as compared to the influence exerted by underlying domestic processes and forces. However, if the approach suggested here is followed, well-timed and well-placed contributions can provide significant support for local processes, even if such contributions are only marginal.

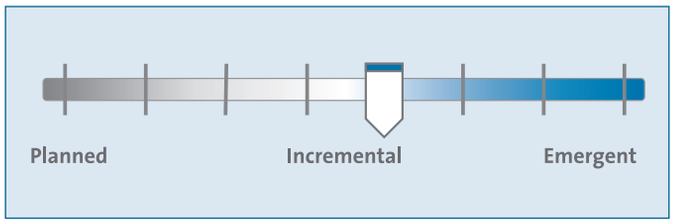
4. Pulling it together: selecting the right approach

The twelve implications for practice presented above suggest a basic need to move away from planned interventions towards more emergent ways of working. Whether and to what extent this can be done in practice will depend on local circumstances. An intervention may then either take on more of the character of a planned approach or may be closer to what is understood to be an emergent process.

For instance, where both goals and means are clear to all parties involved and where there is sufficient capacity to identify needs and to implement the proposed solution, a planned approach may be sufficient. But where the goals and means remain unclear or where the nature of change is complex and uncertain, an intervention may need to be more incremental or emergent. This is more likely to be the case if the focus is on tackling issues related to shaping mindsets and attitudes, developing core values and identity, or addressing relationships and patterns of authority that are hidden and informal.

Incremental approaches sit somewhere between planned and emergent approaches. They can offer a practical way of combining a degree of formal strategic intent and structured intervention, where this is appropriate (or unavoidable), with a more adaptive and flexible approach to design and implementation that takes account of emergence and complexity (see graph 1).

Graph 1: Between planning and emergence



Incrementalism is, therefore, much more than just a way of muddling through without any plan, theory or strategy. On the contrary, it is a deliberate and strategic choice that accommodates the characteristics of emergent and planned processes, and in so doing, reflects the twelve implications for practice presented in the previous section.

5. Conclusion

Recent research on capacity development, including the ECDPM study on Capacity, Change and Performance, confirms that capacity development is a far more complex and intractable challenge than is often thought. This applies particularly when capacity development is tantamount to change and involves the development and transformation of complex institutions.

The recent attention given to capacity development in international policy discussions means that a renewed effort is required in order better to understand what capacity is, how it develops and what outside partners can do to support it.

The evidence suggests that conventional approaches to capacity development premised on planned technocratic interventions fail to grasp the political, social and cultural dimensions of change that are intrinsic to sustainable outcomes. This accounts in part for the poor record of development cooperation in this field.

Complex adaptive systems (CAS) are an attractive alternative. While not offering all the answers, CAS does generate innovative insights which, if accepted, have implications for practice.

The challenge for donor agencies is to examine whether they are willing to accept the implications of adopting a different approach to their work.

The greater emphasis placed on flexibility and searching can give rise to unease about a possible loss of control, direction and task accomplishment, at a time when agencies are under increasing pressure to disburse and provide tangible evidence of impact. However, if donors are serious about improving support for capacity development, they must make a number of far-reaching changes to the way in which they operate.

The good news is that there is evidence that donors are beginning to adopt better practices that reflect some of the implications discussed in this brief. Whether this is just a question of tinkering at the edges or is actually the beginning of a more fundamental way of doing business remains to be seen.

Notes

1 *The Accra Agenda for Action can be downloaded at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/ACCRAEXT/Resources/4700790-1217425866038/AAA-4-SEPTEMBER-FINAL-16h00.pdf*

2 *See World Bank, 2005 Capacity Building in Africa - An OED Evaluation of World Bank Support, Washington, World Bank.*

3 *This brief is part of a series highlighting the final report's key findings and conclusions. The main report is available at: http://www.ecdpm.org/capacitystudy*

4 *The 16 case studies offer insights into the different ways organisations and systems go about developing their capacity. They are not stories about how external development partners have developed the capacity of partner organisations, but how organisations have steered their own change processes. That said, in a good number of cases, endogenous efforts have included drawing on the support of external development partners.*

5 *As Woodhill (2008) notes, no one has consciously designed the institutional frameworks of our societies. They have evolved, over long periods of time, by adapting and responding to all sorts of experiments, ideas, power plays and external shocks. See Woodhill, J. 2008. How Institutions Evolve – Shaping Behaviour, in The Broker, Issue 10, October 2008.*

6 *There is extensive literature on Systems Thinking, and this section does no more than highlight some key characteristics that are relevant to this discussion. Recently, it has been the object of growing interest from the development community. An interesting debate on Systems Thinking in the development context is hosted by The Broker at www.thebrokeronline.eu. See also ODI's working paper no. 235, Exploring the science of complexity: Ideas and implications for development and humanitarian efforts, as well as Morgan, P. 2005. The Idea and Practice of Systems Thinking and their Relevance for Capacity Development.*

7 *These distinctions form the basis of the Cynefin framework developed by David Snowden to help address complexity in knowledge management, business and decision-making contexts. See further www.cognitive-edge.com.*

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Summary at www.ecdpm.org/capacitystudy

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- IUCN in Asia, World Conservation Union
- Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA)
- L'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF)
- Swedish International Development Agency (Sida)
- SNV Netherlands Development Organisation
- St Mary's Hospital Lacor, Uganda
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

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Study on capacity, change and performance

In 2008, the ECDPM published the final report of a research programme on capacity, change and performance.

The research programme arose from a request from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) to build on earlier work by the UNDP on technical cooperation and capacity development. It was subsequently included in the work plan of the Network on Governance and Capacity Development (Govnet) of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

The research programme, which has generated fresh insights into capacity and how it develops, highlights endogenous perspectives, i.e. how capacity develops from within, rather than focusing on what outsiders do to induce it. The programme also embraces ideas on capacity development drawn from literature outside the context of development cooperation.

The final report contains a comprehensive analysis of the findings and conclusions of the research programme. The research programme included 16 case studies embracing a wide spectrum of capacity situations covering different sectors, objectives, geographic locations and organisational histories. These ranged from churches in Papua New Guinea to a tax office in Rwanda and nationwide networks in Brazil. The case studies are complemented by seven thematic papers and five workshop reports.

The final report has been written for people who are interested and involved in capacity development work. It offers just as many insights for the managers and staff of public-sector and civil-society organisations as it does for external agencies, including those providing capacity development services to local organisations and donors funding capacity development work.

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