

CAPACITY AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SYSTEMS THINKING

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Quotations (1)

*Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
Like harmony in music; there is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, makes them cling
together*

In one society

Wordsworth (DFID consultant) from his poem The
Prelude, 1850

Quotations (2)

Life doesn't come with one problem neatly separated from the rest. Specialization is helpful but you've got to see the web

Jeff Sachs quoted in **Time Magazine**, March 14, 2005

Piecemeal reform, by contrast, motivates specific actors to take small steps, one at a time, and then tests whether that small step made poor people better off, holds accountable the agency that implemented the small step, and considers the next small step.

William Easterly on Jeff Sach's book **The End of Poverty**, 2005

Quotations (3)

Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing the 'structures' that underlie complex situations, and for discerning high from low leverage change. Ultimately, it simplifies life by helping us to see the deeper patterns lying beneath the events and the details

Peter Senge 1990

Quotations (4)

These two ECDPM guys (as opposed to their legs or arms) are nuts.

systems judgment by LENPA participants
April 25, 2005

Study on Capacity, Change and Performance

- Under aegis of GOVNET of DAC/ OECD
- 18 case studies, lit review, workshops
- Final report later this year
- 7 point analytical framework - largely reductionist
- Some issues still unclear – could systems thinking help to explain them?

Purpose of presentation

- Present some ideas about systems thinking
- Put forward some tentative conclusions
- Seek insights from others

Outline of this presentation

- Limitations of some current analytical approaches
- What is systems thinking?
- What can it explain about capacity and capacity development?
- Where to now?

Part 1- Limitations of some current analytical approaches



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Limitations (1)

- Reductionist focus on parts explains little about system behaviour
- Hard systems thinking cannot deal with contested objectives
- Political economy cannot explain micro-organisational and inter-organisational behaviour



Limitations (2)

- OD weak on context and governance
- Difficult to provide credible explanation of capacity and capacity development, esp. in complex volatile settings



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Part 2 – What is systems thinking?



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Nature of human systems

- An entity that takes its identity and form from the ongoing interaction of its parts
- In the eye of the beholder
- Many different configurations and behavioural patterns
- All entities have sub-systems
- Always moving and changing
- Rules can be changed



Key concepts of systems thinking (1)

- A perspective, not a formula
- Emergence
- Emphasis on the behaviour of the whole not the parts
- Vertical, horizontal, circular and linear
- Multiple perspectives
- Reinforcing and limiting processes shape emergent patterns



Key concepts of systems thinking (2)

- Complex causality separated in time and space
- Unintended and unexpected consequences
- Emphasis on competition, co-evolution and cooperation
- Inherent tendency for both entropy and self-organisation
- Futility of trying to control behaviour of complex systems

Types of systems thinking

- Focus on goals and improved performance
 - Systems dynamics
 - Chaos and complexity theory
- Designed to explore purposes, maintain relationships and create shared intention
 - Soft systems methodology

Part 3 – What can systems thinking explain in terms of capacity and capacity development?



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Capacity

- An emergent property of the system
- Elements are complex mix of:
 - tangible assets, relationships, values, knowledge, staff, functions, ideas, culture
- Intangible elements
 - shared interests, values, social energy, pride, confidence, trust, commitment
- Capacity conferred from outside as well as developed inside

Capacity development (1)

- Understand limiting processes constraining change
- Link macro and micro
- Importance of process, learning, experimentation, evolution, discovery, self-awareness
- Balance prescription with systems dynamics

Capacity development (2)

- Intervention points to channel system performance
- Interconnections and interrelationships
- Systems add functions, resources, components and relationships
- Create conditions for self-organization
- Think creatively about disorder, chaos and uncertainty

Downsides

- Not easily integrated into older bureaucracies
- Lack of certainty not reassuring to some
- Integration into budgets and job descriptions unclear
- Little empirical evidence to date

Part 4 – Where to now?



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Next steps

- Continuing to explore systems thinking
- Series of three papers coming – networks, capacity framework, M and E
- Mini-workshops
- Final workshop
- Our website: www.capacity.org
- Our email: hb@ecdpm.org

Key questions (1)

- How can we reconcile limited interventions and their inevitable unintended consequences with the need for whole systems improvement?
- If capacity comes out of the mysterious process of emergence, is it manageable?
- How can we best combine current analytical techniques and systems thinking?

Key questions (2)

- Can we combine systems thinking with our current emphasis on planning, control and predictability?
- Do we have an analytical framework which helps us to apply systems thinking in an effective way?

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