



# **Workshop on Systems Thinking and Capacity Development**

## **Some Concepts and Operational Considerations**

**Report**

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**Maastricht**

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# 1 Introduction

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS) asked ECDPM to organise a one-day workshop on June 30, 2005 to discuss the application of systems thinking in the context of capacity development.

This followed a previous workshop organised by ECDPM in March 2005 on the topic in the context of the wider study on Capacity, Change and Performance. That workshop considered a draft paper by Peter Morgan that introduced the different strands of systems thinking and considered ways in which such thinking might contribute to conceptual and operational aspects of capacity development. The LENPA conference in Washington in April 2005 offered a further opportunity to present the draft paper to a wider audience.

## 2 The Workshop

The purpose of the June workshop was to share preliminary ideas on the operational potential of systems thinking for capacity development work and to explore the ways in which systems thinking might complement existing approaches / perspectives.

The workshop was not expected to formulate firm conclusions and recommendations as thinking on this topic in development cooperation is still in its infancy. We are only now at an early stage of understanding the various kinds of systems approaches, the degree to which they are relevant for capacity issues, their operational implications and the feasibility of their adoption in donor agencies.

The workshop began with an introductory presentation on systems thinking and capacity development by Peter Morgan. This was followed with remarks by ECDPM director, Paul Engel and by DGIS representatives, Maarten Brouwer and Pim de Keizer.

Discussions then revolved around a review of three case studies that have been prepared in the context of the study on Capacity, Change and Performance:

- SISDUK, Indonesia
- ENACT, Jamaica
- Lacor, Uganda

The intention had been to steer this review of cases around a number of issues and leading questions, but this proved difficult to master. In the end it proved easier to draw conclusions and distil key elements of learning by means of an open exchange of views and opinions.

To round off the discussion, broad conclusions pertaining to the application of systems thinking to capacity development work were considered.

## 3 This Report

This report provides a short summary of issues discussed and conclusions drawn. Additional information is contained in the annexes.

## 4 Introduction to Systems Thinking (Based on Presentation by Peter Morgan)

Systems thinking offers a different perspective on capacity and capacity development issues but does not substitute for others. Whilst useful, it cannot explain everything. Important elements of systems thinking include notions of cause and effect, emergence, sustainability and resilience, and formal and informal incentives.

From a systems thinking perspective, **cause and effect** relationships are viewed as multiple, delayed in time and place and non linear. This brings into question conventional ideas of results chains and questions the appropriateness of pre-selecting targets when engaging in complex change processes, where many factors remain unknown. **Emergence** understood as the process whereby elements (of capacity) combine and interact over time to create a greater whole is a key feature of system behaviour. The concept raises the issue of timing. What factors go into the emergence of capacity and performance at a particular time? Are there different kind of things that emerge? Do they emerge differently? What can external actors do to encourage emergence? Systems thinking draws attention to the issue of **sustainability and resilience**. What factors account for the fact that some systems lose energy (entropy) whilst others persevere, sometimes in difficult circumstances? Can these properties be mastered and factored in an intervention strategy or are they products of local system dynamics that are in themselves emergent? This also leads to a discussion of the factors that drive system behaviour. Systems thinking recognises the importance of both **formal and informal incentives**, encouraging a look beyond formal structures to take into account the effects of informal structures and behaviour.

Other features of systems thinking that were highlighted in the introductory presentation are listed in annex 1.

## 5 Summary of Issues Discussed and Conclusions Drawn

Discussions confirmed that systems thinking seems to offer complementary rather than alternative perspectives on capacity development that can help enrich discussion on the subject<sup>1</sup>. In particular, it helps broaden understanding of complex development challenges, helping to explain bottlenecks and why good ideas don't always work.

While most people would not necessarily recognise it, many have internalised aspects of systems thinking in their day-to-day thinking and operations. However, systems thinking can be threatening as it challenges many conventional assumptions and ways of working in relation to development cooperation, bringing into question the ability of external agents to influence local change processes.

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<sup>1</sup> It is not however a clearly defined body of thinking.

## 5.1 An Explanatory Analytic Tool

Systems thinking can help to understand the **contexts** within which capacity development interventions take place. These contexts are usually far more complex than normally imagined and the relationships between societal processes at macro, meso and micro levels are often poorly understood. Likewise, the factors that can facilitate or frustrate **change processes** in general and capacity development in particular are often difficult to identify and often reside at multiple levels. Systems thinking can usefully complement political economy approaches eg: drivers of change, as well as institutional economics and particularly the role of **incentives and motivators**.

There seems to be potential for systems thinking to support country analytic work in general, as well as **capacity assessment and diagnostic exercises** undertaken in the context of programme formulation and/ design. In this respect, systems thinking might have something to enhance capacity assessment, by emphasising system dynamics and the interrelationships of the parts. This may be an advance on more static, one snap-shot assessment approaches.

Equally, systems thinking offers a useful perspective for **ex-post explanation and evaluation** of capacity development processes, helping to explain local dynamics, why things happened the way they did, and highlighting the forces and interests (often political) that influence outcomes.

In this regard, it can help explain **why sometimes externally driven initiatives founder** after donor withdrawal or become captured by local interests and processes. Equally, it can help to explain why certain local development initiatives perform and survive in spite of hostile environments. It provides, for instance, insights on factors that contribute to **organisational resilience and legitimacy**.

## 5.2 Offering insights on Change Management Strategies

Systems thinking offers insights and perspectives on **how external agencies can facilitate change and capacity development processes**. It therefore holds potential for improving the quality of donor assistance in this area.

Systems thinking encourages a more holistic view of development challenges. Areas targeted for intervention are looked at as part of a **complex web of interconnected and interacting systems and sub-systems**, rather than in a narrower sense. This equally forces attention on the bigger picture in terms of **wider processes of change**, rather than concentrating on discrete outputs at the project level.

The notion of “**emergence**” suggests that capacity development outcomes cannot be simply engineered through the delivery of inputs, but results from a complex and less controllable interplay of variables, influenced in time and space. Outcomes remain to a large extent uncertain and unpredictable. Any intervention remains to a considerable extent hostage to system behaviours over which an external agent has only limited control.

At the same time, an appreciation of the behaviour of a system enables a better understanding of **strategic positioning and fit** – and the need to identify appropriate entry points for influencing change, as well as the importance of getting the timing

right. It can also help in determining the appropriateness of change management strategies at different levels.

It further underlines the **limitations of template approaches** and the importance of growing into a situation. Systems thinking underlines the value of retaining a clear vision of where one is going but of adopting flexible strategies that are adaptive to changes in system behaviour and emerging opportunities and threats.

System thinking helps to bring into the picture factors such as “**soft**” **capabilities** as well as properties such as **legitimacy** and **value systems** that can contribute to system performance. These can serve as important incentives yet are often difficult to detect and influence from the outside. These features have much to do with the way in which a particular system is rooted in the local context.

### 5.3 A Different Perspective on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Systems thinking recognises the **crucial role of learning** to the evolution and adjustment of any system. It highlights the importance of creating space in order to allow participants of any system to learn and self-organise.

It helps distinguish the **different roles that monitoring and reporting** can play. In particular, it helps distinguish between the need for external reporting to satisfy donor accountability requirements, and the need for internal learning as an intrinsic part of any capacity development strategy.

The holistic perspective inherent in systems thinking also encourages a **focus on aggregate outcomes** rather than on the results of individual activities. This helps thinking about issues of longer term relevance rather than on immediate results. In so doing, it helps to answer the broader question: “are we doing the right things?”, rather than the narrower question; “are we doing things right?”

## 6 Some Implications for Development Cooperation:

Systems thinking raises a number of questions regarding the ways in which support is provided.

**Understanding the local context (and fallibility of templates)** – While systems thinking offers a useful perspective for understanding the local context, it draws attention to the need to have in place personnel with appropriate skills to apply and interpret such thinking. Yet, rapid staff turn-over often undermines efforts to build local knowledge.

**Context** is clearly important. However, the relationship between our cases which worked well and those which didn’t and their context is not at all clear.

**Change strategies** - Which factors are determinant? Which ones can be ignored? Which ones can be directly targeted for change? This requires knowledge and judgement, e.g., IUCN dealt specifically with some Pakistani issues such as defining

a different work culture from the public service but decidedly and deliberately set out to avoid contextual conditions.

**Time-horizon** – a longer time horizon (5-10 years) needs to be factored into development cooperation programmes, that recognises the emergent character of CD processes.

**Time and timing** - When is something ready to be done or not? We don't think about this enough. A lot of timing questions are determined by donor reporting procedures.

**Flexibility** – carefully thought through strategies based on a proper understanding of the local context and appropriate entry points need to be combined with flexibility that allows for adaptation of approaches and responsiveness to emerging needs and situations.

**Defining Results** – While a results framework is a necessary management tool to monitor and guide programme implementation, efforts should be made to avoid rigidity which ends up in management by results rather than management for results. A focus on broader outcomes is inherently more useful than a focus on micro-level outputs.

**Targeting/controlling/planning** - One school of thought suggests the process of adaptation can be constrained by targeting on narrow objectives. How do we determine when targeting undermines systems growth as opposed to channelling and supporting its growth?

**Accepting risk** – Systems thinking points to the risks associated with development cooperation ventures and highlights the limited span of control that an external partner enjoys over change processes. Accepting risk encourages more strategic and entrepreneurial approaches to tackling development challenges and creates openings to learn from failures.

**SWAPs** - Systems thinking may be useful to encourage participants to broaden their understanding of SWAP processes and to focus on the inclusive concept of the SWAP (looking at macro-meso-micro links and multi-actor perspectives). In practice, SWAPs have been applied in a more minimalist fashion focusing on the role of central government agencies and enhancement of selected core functions. In so doing they have in effect become sector “narrow” approaches. (Similar challenges apply to MDG/PRSP processes, which easily become instrumentalised, focusing on results rather than looking at the process of change.)

**Performance** – Systems thinking also raises policy questions regarding the appropriate balance to be struck in achieving sector “performance” between instituting across-the-board macro-level policy and structural change and leaving space for local innovation and protection of islands of excellence, that can contribute to broader system performance.

**Making Systems Thinking Operational** in Development Cooperation – While systems thinking is useful in challenging conventional assumptions and ways of working, it needs to be translated into workable tools and methods that are seen by practitioners to help them do their jobs more effectively. This remains an on-going challenge.

- Difficult, challenging for staff
- Not part of mainstream discourse in development cooperation

- Much intuitive understanding of systems thinking but ability to translate this into workable methods and tools is limited
- How to do diagnostics, measurement, monitoring?

**External interventions** - incremental, experimental, improvised strategy (e.g. ENACT) vs. application of donor formula (e.g. Tanzania case). Both are very different approaches, yet there is evidence that both have worked in these cases.

**Capacity assessment** - Many capacity assessment frameworks are reductionist, assessing the parts and not the system as a whole (autopsy assessment of the parts once the body has stopped moving). It is difficult to usefully combine a systems approach with reductionist elements.

**Monitoring and evaluation** - There is a similar problem with monitoring and evaluation capacity: we tend to monitor the performance and process of one of the elements which tells us something about the element but not about capacity itself.

## 7 Conclusions

A systems approach can help **reveal the shortcomings of narrow interventions**. It can be used as an instrument to measure whether a particular intervention is sufficiently comprehensive in its intent. This could serve as a valuable assessment tool. Such an instrument could be used to review / assess the implementation of SWAps. This could be helpful in terms of trying to design ways to improve overall sector performance through a **more inclusive approach**, that recognises the role of other actors besides the national government.

A monitoring and evaluation **instrument** should be designed that looks beyond the monitoring of pre-determined outputs to instead **track the unfolding of system capacity**. This would be designed to take account of and acknowledge the "emergent" character of capacity development / change processes.

It would be useful to think more carefully about the relationship and potential synergies between the drivers of change approach and systems thinking. When does an emerging process have impact on how big must a system be, such as a system of political patronage, to become a source of influence or a driver / constrainer of change?

One of the more practical challenges of capacity development work is analysing and recognising the **incentives and motivations that drive existing systems** and sub-systems. What kinds of tools can be developed to recognise such incentives / stimuli ?



## **Annexes**

## Annex 1: Aspects and Implications of Systems Thinking

- **Human Systems** are characterised by choices made by individual people and, as such, are different from systems in the natural world.
- **Cause and Effect** is multiple, delayed in time and place and non linear. This point questions conventional results chains and especially the appropriateness of pre-selected targets.
- **Self-Organisation:** Most systems have no central plan, but organisations do manage themselves in order to evolve and adapt. What factors lead to the emergence of self-organisation?
- **Capabilities:** Systems thinking helps to understand softer capabilities to do with improvisation and the ability to learn and adapt to change. While less obvious than the more formal technical and managerial capabilities that are often the focus of attention in CD work, they can have a significant bearing on the ability of a system to perform / survive.
- **Strategy:** Systems thinking raises the issue of the degree to which strategies of growth can follow a detailed measurable course as opposed to one which is flexible and adaptive.
- **Interconnectedness:** emphasis on relationships, using the social energy latent in a situation and embeddedness of one system in another, e.g., a unit within an organisation within a network of organisations.
- **Feedback** is critical for **learning** and self-awareness but is culturally determined
- **Emergence** is the combination of elements interacting over time to create a greater whole. The concept raises the issue of timing. What factors go into the emergence of capacity and performance at a particular time? Are there different kind of things that emerge? Do they emerge differently? What can external elements do to encourage emergence?
- **Sustainability/resilience:** The issue of losing energy (entropy) versus perseverance. How to ensure perseverance versus loss of energy? Why do some systems suffer while others persevere in difficult circumstances (e.g. Lacor)?
- **Unit of analysis:** A mental construct with boundaries and context but with implications for what we measure and what we focus on.
- **Formal/informal:** Systems thinking pushes participants to go beyond looking at formal structures and to take into account the effects of informal structures and behaviour.
- **Dynamics of systems:** Participants need to understand how and why systems change and develop over time.

## Annex 2: Case Studies

### Case 1: SISDUK, Indonesia

**Overview** - This case study examines how Takalar district in the Indonesian province of South Sulawesi took up the challenge of tackling rural poverty through the use of participatory development and community empowerment methodologies (SISDUK – Sistem Dukungan). The study looks at the capacity that was required of various local stakeholders, traces the processes through which the district, in partnership with the Japanese International Cooperation Agency, JICA, undertook to develop the necessary capacity, and discusses the challenges encountered in sustaining interest in and the capacity for participatory development.

#### Perspectives of Systems Thinking

##### Reveals the many systems at play

- The interplay, roles and relationships of complex systems at multiple levels
- Dynamics and system characteristics – both formal and informal
- Examples of systems include; Indonesia as a country; the public service; Takalar district as a geographical entity; the local government system; specific sectors and functional areas; administrative villages and “natural” communities etc.
- Decentralisation as creating new space, setting new boundaries and lines of accountability and interaction between systems/sub-systems.

##### SISDUK as a transplanted system

SISDUK was a well-intentioned, well-designed approach, but in itself a system superimposed on to other systems...

- Needed the cooperation of other systems and the space to function
- Had to create its own legitimacy to be accepted
- Required changes in other systems
- Rooted in Japanese culture and based on an assumption of the value of participation – Is this assumption transferable, and if so under what conditions?
- Timing in relation to wider change processes in Indonesia (shift to democracy and decentralisation/ devolution) – was this fortuitous or planned?

##### An intervention strategy that was sensitive to system issues

- Recognised natural communities
- Focused on process issues – changing roles and relationships and building capabilities...
- Outcomes understood in terms of capacity and empowerment, less so on physical results
- Emphasised learning; attitudes and skills...and provided space for learning
- There was no specific upfront design...instead learning and adaptation along the way

But...

- The intervention possibly underestimated the larger picture including the complexity and the incentives, especially at the local level (‘a small intervention in a large sea...’).
- May have overestimated the transferability of the Japanese model.
- Rapid JICA withdrawal after evolutionary process was inconsistent with the general approach.

- Possibility that the intervention focused disproportionately on the SISDUK methodology and insufficiently on local institutional realities?

#### **Raises questions about Measurement**

- At what level and over what time scale should measurement take place?
- How should success be measured? What balance to strike between intended and un-intended outcomes?
- What should be the unit of analysis – the specific project or the system to which SISDUK was transplanted? What about the larger process of local governance strengthening?
- Provides example of a project that deliberately focused on process outcomes as opposed to physical results;
- Highlights the importance of taking account of changing context within which an intervention takes place.

#### **Whither SISDUK ?**

There are various explanations as to why the character of SISDUK changed after the end of JICA support. Systems thinking might shed light on the following explanations.

- That SISDUK was subverted by the larger system including introduction of new incentives.
- That SISDUK faced a system overload as result of going to scale (from 4 to 70 villages).
- That SISDUK effectively adapted itself to the local reality.
- That the system lost its core policy champions, (change of leadership, high staff turnover) that were key to sustaining the integrity / character of the approach.

## Case 2: ENACT, Jamaica

**Overview** - This case looks at the Environmental Action (ENACT) Programme, a collaboration between Jamaica's National Conservation Resources Agency and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). ENACT's mandate was to work with Jamaican public, private and non-profit organisations to improve their capabilities to identify and solve national environmental problems. Programme design began in 1990 but field activities only got under way in 1994. It took until 1999 to put in place all the pieces to make ENACT a high-performing support unit.

### Perspectives of Systems Thinking

#### ENACT as a sub-system

- Features of the system.
  - ENACT was an informal system such as a community of practice rather than a formal one: People/organisations were opting in voluntarily.
  - ...used an emergent strategy (rather than a template formulated beforehand) and responded to the particularities of the Jamaican context,
  - ...grew organically,
  - ...was value driven and offered space for people to realise their environmental ambitions (=motivation for them to stay, rather than financial incentives),
  - ...benefited from space which allowed it to do what is wanted. It was set up as a project implementation unit (PIU), which buffered it from political pressures, and had outside support which deflected criticism,
  - ...had local champions – people who had broader vision on the issue and an idea of what could be done about it. Strong local leadership.
- But system thinking reveals some possible drawbacks such as the dependency of ENACT on external support and protection and its inability to embed itself locally in institutional environment. The issue of ENACT's own positioning in the long term (shift from PIU to permanent structure inside/outside government) was not adequately addressed
- Tensions arose with changes in donor thinking...in particular, the shift to RBM, the loss of interest in environment issues, concern with low profile/impact, diffuse results....and time which was running out.

#### ENACT's intervention strategy

- Example of strategy of responsive entrepreneurship, which can influence other systems. It was deliberately buffered from politics, but general political support for the sector was reflected in legislation.
- Strategy used was emergent, intuitive as much as purposeful. This led to gradual gaining of legitimacy for ENACT.
- Responding to pockets of opportunity within larger systems, rather than creating new systems. The focus was on process outcomes.
- The implication is that PIUs can be valuable in some situations such as supporting, broader system change through multi-level, multi-actor interventions contributing bottom-up. The process was incremental and involved working across boundaries.

#### CIDA's role: What is the role of outsiders in encouraging change?

Issues raised included:

- CIDA provided buffering from external pressures
- ... a general framework, but not an intervention strategy.
- Role of external TA: protective space, direction and mobilisation of resources

- Was there some sort of pre-selected strategy by both governments or was this delegated to the individual TA? Where was the focus of crafting the strategy?
- How much of the intervention was a well-crafted strategy or to do with the role of the particular individual (TA) in place?
- How can funders think through an exit strategy to disengage from a programme such as ENACT?
- Because of the nature of the support provided, it is difficult to know what impact CIDA assistance had.

### Case 3: Lacor, Uganda

**Overview** - Lacor Hospital in Gulu District, northern Uganda, formerly an isolated missionary hospital, is now fully integrated into the Ugandan health system. The case study describes how the hospital has grown into a centre of excellence, setting an example for the rest of the health system and helping to build health care capacity for the whole country. It is an extraordinary example of (bottom-up) capacity development, adaptation and performance in a region characterised by civil war, extreme poverty and outbreaks of virulent epidemics.

#### Perspectives of Systems Thinking

- The Lacor case is about demonstrating excellence within a larger system (the Ugandan health system)...and offering insights into why this is so;
- It underlines an emergent process facilitated by space and local demand;
  - Organic growth, endogenous process which could not have been engineered – this raises issues about the deeper capabilities
  - Idealistic approach, committed leadership (in a small system)
  - Autonomy – until wider system changes in the 1990s and integration in this system, Lacor had a large degree of autonomy
  - Absence of formal structures so Lacor hospital developed its own (e.g. nurse training)
- How do legitimacy and resilience develop? – The case suggests the significance of multiple and overlapping systems from which Lacor could draw social capital. Examples include the Catholic Church, local tribal affiliations and the community at large, local administration, community of non-state health providers.
- While legitimacy and resilience may be emergent properties that cannot be formally created, the case shows that an active involvement and exchange with these multiple systems has helped the organisation to survive (e.g., Lacor is an active partner of the non-state health providers community; the national health system; international research community; etc.)
- Lacor also shows the vulnerability of a sub-system in the face of changing contexts and larger system intrusion.
- Lacor provides an insight into the benefit of supporting 'islands of excellence' and their contribution to the wider system (e.g., training of doctors who will serve within the Ugandan health system at a later stage)
- In the Lacor case, the incentives/ interests associated with the larger public health system are at odds with those of the smaller sub-system (Lacor) risking to undermine factors that have sustained performance. (Incentive change – change in pay levels for public hospitals – draws away people from Lacor hospital).
- Lacor shows how implicitly formulated strategies, based on a thorough understanding of the local context and systems, can be combined with flexibility and adaptation.
- It indicates how good internal behaviour, management and performance can be translated into donor behaviour which is facilitating and supportive (non-dominant and not directing); and how internal and donor behaviour can mutually reinforce each other.
- The Lacor experience raises questions regarding replication, going to scale. Large scale systems change versus space for local innovation. What strategy is best?
- In the context of SWAPs, the Lacor case highlights the challenge of combining broad systems change (and its limitations) with creating conditions for local innovation and diversity.

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