

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

A discussion paper for the 2011 IVCO conference



Working towards a shared understanding in the international volunteering and cooperation sector.

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forum

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Foreword

This is the ninth in a series of discussion papers produced by the International FORUM on Development Service (FORUM), which follows on from our research work on trends in international volunteering and co-operation in recent years.

This paper aims to consider some of the thinking regarding capacity development in the international volunteering and cooperation sector, what we can learn from this, and identify some challenges for the future.

The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of FORUM or its members/Associate members or of the organisations for whom the authors works. The responsibility for these views rests with the authors alone.

Dimity Fifer,



Chair of FORUM

About FORUM

The International FORUM on Development Service (known as “FORUM”) is the most significant global network of International Volunteer Co-operation Organisations. FORUM aims to share information, develop good practice and enhance co-operation and support between its members/Associate members. Together, FORUM members/Associate members explore innovative practice and research key contemporary issues, focusing on organisational learning and improved practice. This information is shared in person, at conferences and via the website.

Executive summary

The purpose of this discussion paper is to present a cross-section of the current thinking regarding capacity development in the international volunteering and cooperation sector. Capacity development is an integral part of all international development issues today, and this is nowhere more true than in the volunteering and cooperation industry, which has always put an emphasis on exchange and mutuality, using twinning as a key means of helping partner country organisations achieve development objectives. Reaching consensus and making shared progress on the topic of capacity development is essential, particularly given the international development industry's current focus on issues of results and accountability.

In this paper, we will present different definitions of the concept of capacity development, highlighting key themes and demonstrating the importance of the issue in current international development strategy. We will then examine some of the risks associated with capacity building efforts, and work towards a set of guiding principles based on lessons learned so far. It is beyond the scope of this paper to arrive at absolute conclusions, or to offer a complete toolkit for use in designing capacity development initiatives. Rather, the aim of the paper is to present a reading of the current thinking regarding capacity development, and to serve as a base for discussion and debate. It is hoped that the various organisations currently active in international volunteering and cooperation will be able to reach a shared view on key aspects of the topic, and move together towards more effective capacity development efforts in the future.

What do we mean by “Capacity Development”

Capacity Development is defined in various ways by different actors in the international volunteering, and larger development sphere. Traditionally, the term was understood as referring to strengthening the capabilities of governments and other institutions in developing countries – to the older concept of “institution building”:

Capacity building¹ – as it has most commonly been referred to – therefore involved human resource development and organisational engineering, or ‘institution building’, with particular reference to the public sector.
(UNPAN, p1)

In recent years, most development actors, including international volunteering and cooperation organisations, have widened their understanding of capacity development. Here are some more current examples:

United Nations Development Program (UNDP) defines capacity as “the ability of individuals, institutions and societies to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve objectives in a sustainable manner.” Capacity development

¹ It would appear that in the international development context, the terms “capacity building” and “capacity development” are used more or less interchangeably. In this paper we will be referring to “capacity development”, though some sources, like the one above, may use the other term

(CD) is thereby the process through which the abilities to do so are obtained, strengthened, adapted and maintained over time. (UNDP, 2007, p3)

Capacity development is the process through which individuals, organisations, and societies obtain, strengthen, and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time... In Fredskorpset (FK Norway), when we use the term capacity development, we refer specifically to development of capacity on the institutional level (as opposed to individual competence).

(Fredskorpset, p5)

Capacity Development refers to the approaches, strategies and methodologies used by developing countries and-or external stakeholders, to improve performance at the individual, organizational, network/sector or broader system level.

(CIDA, 2000, p7)

The process by which individuals, groups and organisations, institutions and countries develop, enhance and organise their systems, resources and knowledge; all reflected in their abilities, individually and collectively, to perform functions, solve problems and achieve objectives.(OECD²)

AVI [Australian Volunteers International] defines ‘capacity’ as the aggregated mix of capabilities and competencies held by individuals, organisations, and institutions that allows them to perform particular functions in pursuit of specified development objectives. Capacity development is, in turn, the process through which these capabilities are obtained, maintained and improved over time

(AVI, 2009, p1)

The concept of CD [capacity development] is broader than that of TA [technical assistance], in that it seeks to capture the concept of enhancing local capacities through an external input. External does not in this context necessarily mean international; it could be from the immediate locality, national or international, from an individual or an organization. (UNV, 2002, p12)

At first glance, these definitions are all fairly similar. All define “capacity” in more or less the same way – the ability to achieve intended objectives. “Capacity development” is therefore how people and organisations improve this ability. However, there are some important nuances. The UNDP and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) examples are the broadest, covering all individuals, groups, institutions and countries working towards achieving any and all objectives. This could include, for example, an Non Government Organisation (NGO) in Ethiopia rolling out training in the safe use of pesticides among small-scale farmers, or an electrician in Scotland improving his bookkeeping skills. The definitions from Fredskorpset (FK Norway), Australian Volunteers International (AVI) and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) all limit the scope of capacity development to the international development context - that is,

² OECD, *Glossary of Statistical Terms*: <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=7230>)

to improving capacities to better achieve development outcomes in developing countries. While capacity development is doubtless important in all aspects of human activity, for the purposes of this paper we will limit our scope to the international development context, and focus on the capacities that can help developing countries achieve development objectives and lift populations out of poverty in a sustainable manner. To do otherwise would involve a scope so broad as to preclude the drawing of useful conclusions.

Having limited the scope to the issue of international development, the next question to ask is: Whose capacity? Developed by whom? Many development actors have stated that capacity development is multi-directional, that individuals and organisations in rich countries should view capacity development as an internal goal, as well as a “downward” development objective, and that developed country aid actors should be just as ready to have their capacities developed by recipient country actors, as the other way around. The DfIDs³ of this world can learn just as much from the local Cambodian Civil Society Organisation (CSO) as vice versa.

This is doubtless true. It cannot be denied that individual staff members and volunteers from developed country-based organisations learn an enormous amount from their partner country counterparts, and this can certainly be viewed as a kind of capacity development. However, conceptually we start to blur the lines between capacity development for international development purposes, and professional development in any industry setting. For the purposes of this paper we will limit our understanding of the term “capacity development” as pertaining to harnessing external input to build competencies that aim to contribute to achieving development progress in the developing country context. Therefore the answer to the question above, ‘Whose capacity?’, will be understood as “The capacity of organisations and governments in developing countries”. This is not to say that the impetus, or expert input that helps to achieve capacity development needs to come from rich countries or international organisations. Rather, we would borrow from the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) example above: “External does not in this context necessarily mean international; it could be from the immediate locality, national or international, from an individual or an organization” (UNV, 2002, p12). Therefore to answer the second question, ‘Developed by whom?’, we offer: “Input, expertise and resources will come from within the target organisation, from counterparts at sister organisations, from local and national governments, from independent experts, and from donor country-based organisations and agencies.”

Different categories of capacity development

A key aspect of all of the above examples is the concept of viewing the issue of capacity development through multiple lenses. These can be defined as:

- **Individual** – Developing capacities at the personal level, to better achieve personal professional objectives, and to contribute to larger collective development objectives. Depending on the person’s work function, capacity development activities could include for example professional development plans, literacy and numeracy training, technical education, and/or the

³ UK Department for International Development

provision of necessary tools and equipment.

- **Organisational** – Developing the capacities of organisations to achieve development objectives, and to contribute to larger, societal objectives. Capacity development activities in this context could include organisation-wide training in accounting and financial transparency, program management, fundraising and donor relations, and/or the provision of software and equipment.
- **Community/Societal/National** – Developing the capacities of whole communities and even countries to achieve sustainable development progress. This is closest the more traditional concept of “institution building”, and could include large scale training in needed competencies for police, public servants, and government officials, as well as programs for establishing and maintaining infrastructure such as roads, bridges and rail networks, and even military equipment.

These different facets of capacity development are all crucial. Development organisations must identify the context in which they can make the most positive impact, and concentrate activities accordingly. Many capacity development initiatives focus on the individual level. There can be an unspoken assumption that if the capacities of individual staff in a developing country are built, then this automatically increases the capacities of the organisation for which the individual works, and the country context in which the organisation sits. However, many organisations find that focusing on capacity development at the individual level can be problematic. On one hand, individual capacity development is attractive, as it is relatively easy to monitor, delivers tangible results, and provides inspiring anecdotes that can be presented in annual reports and fundraising literature. On the other hand, in many developing country contexts, organisations risk staff members with improved competencies being hired away, taking important skills with them.

For the majority of international NGOs, UN agencies and volunteering and cooperation organisations, a greater focus on the organisational lens brings better results. Setting capacity development targets together with partner organisations and then identifying the activities and outputs necessary to achieve those objectives should be at the core of any capacity development initiative. Naturally, individual workers and functions will be targeted in these activities, however the overriding preoccupation should always be: Are we building organisational competencies? Are we helping establish and reinforce processes and organisational knowledge that will outlive the tenure of these specific staff members?

For large donor governments and major international organisations such as the World Bank, the point of greatest leverage may be at the national level – large-scale projects aiming to help entire sections of the public sector improve and modernise skills can have considerable benefit if managed well, and sometimes targeting systemic problems is necessary. It should be noted, however, that large-scale capacity development initiatives are just as susceptible to the common pitfalls identified in the “Risks and Challenges” section of this paper, sometimes more so.

How important is capacity development in the international development context?

Almost without exception, actors in international development - from donor governments, to international organisations, to civil society organisations in developed and developing countries – identify capacity development as a crucial element in achieving development progress, and as an important goal in its own right. Capacity building is identified as a key target of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (emphasis is the writer's own):

At this High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, we followed up on the Declaration adopted at the High-Level Forum on Harmonisation in Rome (February 2003) and the core principles put forward at the Marrakech Roundtable on Managing for Development Results (February 2004) because we believe they will increase the impact aid has in reducing poverty and inequality, increasing growth, **building capacity** and accelerating achievement of the MDGs. (OECD, 2005, page v, point 2)

In 2004, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) adopted capacity development as a thematic priority. By doing so, ADB acknowledged that strengthened country capacity is not only a means to achieve public sector performance but a goal in its own right. (ADB, 2007, page i)

[The Assembly] Recognizes that capacity development and ownership of national development strategies are essential for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, and calls upon United Nations organizations to provide further support to the efforts of developing countries to establish and/or maintain effective national institutions and to support the implementation and, as necessary, the devising of national strategies for capacity-building.

Para 26, General Assembly Resolution 59/250, December 2004

Calls upon United Nations organizations to further strengthen the capacity of developing countries to better utilize the various aid modalities, including system-wide approaches and budget support.

Para 30, General Assembly Resolution 59/250, December 2004⁴

To ensure that the United Nations funds and programs and the specialized agencies support efforts of developing countries through the common country assessment and United Nations Development Assistance Framework, enhancing their support for capacity-building.

Para 22(f), World Summit Outcome Document, September 2005⁵

The concept of capacity development... is now a primary process by which to pursue sustainable outcomes in developing communities (AVI, Volunteer Pack, p1)

All sides acknowledge that, without sufficient country capacity, development

⁴ As quoted in UNDG, *Enhancing the UN's contribution to National Capacity Development, A UNDG POSITION STATEMENT*, 2006, p2

⁵ Ibid p2

efforts in many of the poorest countries are unlikely to succeed, even if they are supported with substantially enhanced funding. (OECD, 2006, p11)

The examples above are just a few instances to demonstrate how the concept of capacity development has become a strategic priority in the larger international development sector. In some instances, it is considered as both a means to an end (for example, as a means towards reducing corruption) and as an end in its own right. Different actors may differ on nuances in their definitions, but all identify capacity development as a crucial element of any effective international development programme.

Clearly, almost without exception, aid and development organisations have declared the importance of capacity development, but have only touched lightly on *why* the concept is so important. There is an implication that the importance of capacity development is self-evident. The logic is that a large reason for the poverty suffered by many developing countries is a lack of key capacities locally. Images are conjured of the “bad old days” of donor countries giving, building or teaching something, and then leaving, without ensuring the sustainability of the intended improvement. Capacity development is the key means the international development industry has employed to rectify this problem, and has become something of a developmental goal in its own right.

For the purposes of this paper, we can conclude that capacity development is indeed an essential part of international development, for all actors including international volunteering and cooperation organisations. Improving the capacities of developing country organisations and governments to set and achieve development objectives should be a key aspect of any development initiative, and doing so effectively is one of the most potent weapons available for combating poverty.

What are the challenges?

Capacity development has been one of the least responsive targets of donor assistance, lagging behind progress in infrastructure development or improving health and child mortality. For example, in 2004 the *Global Monitoring Report*, which reviews advancement towards the achievement of the MDGs, noted that improvements in public sector management and institutions – key indicators of public sector capacity – have lagged behind all other MDG benchmarks (OECD, 2006, p11)

Having agreed on a working definition for capacity development, and having established its importance in the international development industry, let us now examine some of the key risks and challenges associated with capacity development efforts. As the above quote illustrates, effective capacity development is extremely difficult to achieve, notwithstanding the importance with which it is viewed by actors throughout the development sector. From examining the writing of various development actors, the key issues that emerge are: the success of capacity development initiatives is dependent on the “enabling environment”; efforts can be too donor-driven; efforts can be too focused on individuals; and it can be difficult to demonstrate the results of capacity development initiatives.

Capacity development is highly dependent on the “enabling environment”

Organizational performance may be shaped as much by forces in the enabling environment (e.g. laws, regulations, attitudes, values) as by factors internal to the organization, (skills, systems, leadership, relationships etc.) (CIDA, 2000, p3)

Poorly conceived policies, high levels of corruption, or lack of legitimacy can make for a highly ‘disabling’ environment with significant consequences for development initiatives. On the other hand, sound policies, high levels of commitment, effective coordination, and a stable economic environment can be important contributors to an enabling environment which can greatly increase prospects for success. (CIDA, 2000, p3)

Capacity development interventions that fail to address needs for institutional and related policy reforms are unlikely to have much impact on organizational performance per se. (ADB, 2007, p6)

Because capacity development can be dependent on improvements in not just the target organisation, but also the larger environment in which that organisation sits, it is essential that development actors do not attempt capacity development activities in a vacuum. A negative enabling environment (a “disabling” environment, as CIDA describes it above) can be both the cause and the result of what has been described as a “lack of political will”⁶ regarding reform and capacity building in developing countries. In extreme cases, dysfunctional governments and corrupt institutions can nullify the potential benefits of capacity development programmes, even leading to a worsening in outcomes. For example, training in accounting and financial management in a highly corrupt regime can simply give corrupt officials more elaborate ways to cover their tracks.

While a positive enabling environment can maximise the effects of a well-designed capacity development project, organisations all too often find that their environment contains significant challenges. In order to mitigate the potentially negative impact of the enabling environment, the most potent weapon is a thorough understanding of the larger context in which the capacity development efforts are taking place. Smaller organisations can make the best use of their capacity development initiatives by aligning them, or at least coordinating them, with larger institutional efforts, such as those driven by national governments with the support of international agencies. We will revisit the issue of the enabling environment in the following section, *Guiding principles*.

Capacity development efforts can be too donor-driven

Some of the models of capacity building within some types of organisations are based on Western models - the tools should be adapted to the local context.

The relationship between the donor and the recipient organisation is not often

⁶ See, for example, OECD, 2006, p8

one of equals. A partnership in which both donor and recipient are aware of expectations and what can realistically be delivered is crucial. (VSO, 2011)

Sometimes the problem is the way in which the instruments are used – supply-driven by development partners rather than driven by sufficient domestic demand. Finally, it is sometimes the broader circumstances that are not conducive for CD [capacity development] – the instruments at donors’ disposal are simply not relevant to the situation at hand. (EC, 2005, p4)

Until recently, capacity development was viewed mainly as a technical process, involving the simple transfer of knowledge or organisational models from North to South. Not enough thought was given to the broader political and social context within which capacity development efforts take place. This led to an overemphasis on what were seen as “right answers”, as opposed to approaches that best fit the country circumstances and the needs of the particular situation. For related reasons, there was insufficient appreciation of the importance of country ownership of capacity development initiatives. (OECD, 2006, p7)

Demand-driven development has become an important part of the global approach to international development over the past decade. Ensuring that developing country actors are in the driver’s seat is a key means of improving both the appropriateness and the overall success of development initiatives. This fact is well recognised by all concerned with the business of capacity development. For effective and lasting improvements in developing country capacities, partner organisations and governments need to take the lead in every stage of the capacity development process, from scoping and setting objectives through to measuring results. Donor country and international organisations should be considered as valuable resources to be employed as local development actors see fit. This topic is also covered in the following section, *Guiding principles*.

Capacity development efforts can be too focused on individuals

Inappropriate technical cooperation, far from building sustainability, may undermine it. An example is provided by the exodus of skilled personnel from the organisations in which they have been trained (‘brain drain’), often under TC programs. (UNPAN, p7)

Capacity building within organisations at times often focuses on investing in individual people, such as training of trainers, managers and leaders. Less often, capacity building is aimed at investing in organisations and infrastructure. This makes an organisation vulnerable e.g. when trained personnel choose to leave the organisation. There is frequently a demand for trainers and training systems, but rarely are the capacities of local partners assessed beforehand in order to judge whether the partner will be in a position to train people itself after a project is completed. To achieve sustainable impact, the local organisation needs to have well developed training skills. (VSO email, 2011)

The issue of brain drain is crucial in any discussion of capacity development. It can be addressed in different ways, some organisations may require commitments to commit to remain with the organisation for a certain period of time before individual staff members are considered for further development. This can be helpful in the short-term, but does not address the underlying issues that come with focusing on individuals, rather than the organisation as a whole. As was stated in the first section of this paper, organisations would do better to focus on initiatives that will outlast the presence of any specific staff members or volunteers.

Demonstrating results is difficult

A familiar challenge in many aspects of development work is the difficulty of measuring and demonstrating results. In the six years since the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness*, in which issues of accountability and results were brought to the fore, there has been only patchy improvement on this score. Two key problems that persist are the difficulty of establishing causality, and the difficulty of extracting neutral and informative reports, when all parties taking part in such evaluations have an incentive for positive results to emerge. Third party, rather than internal, assessments have been found to bring a greater degree of objectivity, however sometimes external assessors can struggle to grasp pertinent aspects of the context in which organisations work.

We will not dwell further on this topic, as it has been unpacked in greater detail elsewhere⁷, except to state that demonstrating results from capacity development initiatives will remain a challenge, and that each organisation must endeavour to establish performance indicators and monitoring systems that are suited to their individual context.

Guiding principles

A very useful resource for development practitioners would be a comprehensive “best practice in capacity development” guide, with subsections aimed at various sectors of the international development industry (donors, developing country governments, international organisations, large and small NGOs, and so on). Such a guide is beyond the scope of this paper; however in this section we present a set of guiding principles that may prove to be a useful starting point.

Much has already been written on this topic, and several key concepts emerge from the literature. Chief among these are:

Developing country partners (whether governments, NGOs or other groups) must be in control of every stage of any capacity development initiative

- “CD [capacity development] must be owned by those who develop their

⁷ See, for example, CIDA, *Results-Based Management and Multilateral Programming at CIDA, 1999*, or

Maxwell, *Doing aid centre-right: marrying a results-based agenda with the realities of aid*, <http://www.simonmaxwell.eu/blog/doing-aid-centre-right-marrying-a-results-based-agenda-with-the-realities-of-aid.html>

- capacity—otherwise it simply does not happen.” (EC, 2009, p6)
- “The overarching implication is that the developing country is ‘in the driver’s seat’” (CIDA, 2005, p5)

Donor country actors should provide input and support as directed by developing country partners.

- “Capacity development implies a shift for donors leading to a significantly diminished role in problem identification, design and implementation of interventions and greater emphasis on facilitation, strategic inputs and supporting processes aimed at strengthening developing country capacity” (CIDA, 2000, p5)
- “Aid agencies can contribute to capacity development, but cannot drive the process” (EC, 2005, p6)

Close analysis of the local country context is crucial, as is careful end-to-end planning. The best initiatives are those that find the best fit for local conditions

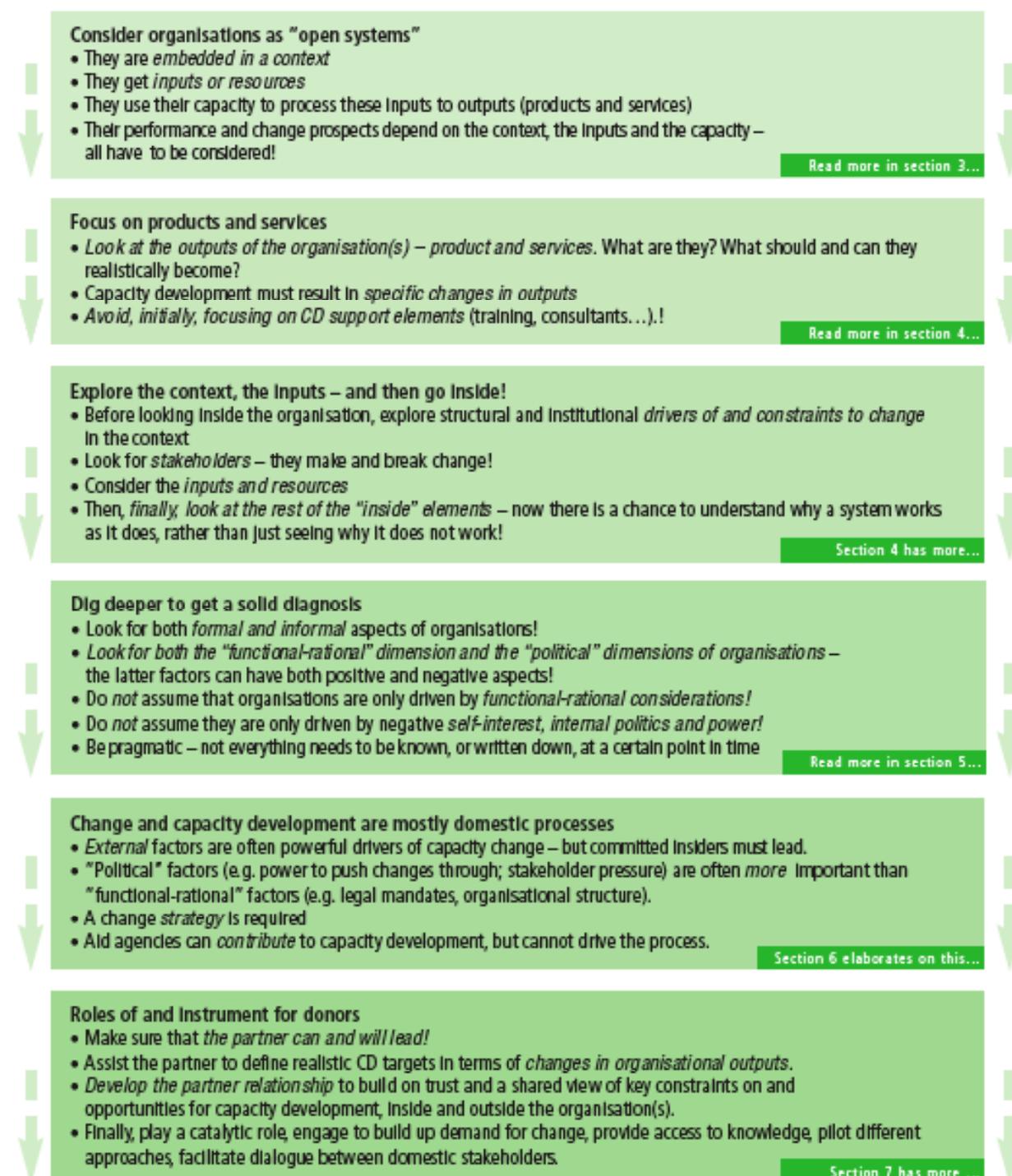
- “A sound analysis of local country context and the host organisation assists in identifying key constraints to performance and any opportunities to promote change.” (AVI, 2009, p1)
- “The principle of “good practice” must be put into the context of the findings of organisational and environmental assessments in order to create a “best fit” for each individual organisation” (VSO, 2009, p11)

Understanding and leveraging the enabling environment is an essential part of understanding the local country context

- Country political economy studies provide a valuable first step in approaching capacity development. In principle, the results of such studies can be widely shared among stakeholders who are interested in promoting capacity development in a country. So far, this has not generally happened” (OECD, 2006, p21)
- Change tends to happen when broad alliances across civil society, often supported by media attention and the private sector, and linked into reform elements within government, coalesce around an issue of political importance and exert pressure for effective change. (OECD, 2006, p21)

If the enabling environment is hostile to capacity development efforts, mitigating measures must be found. Some difficulties can be avoided by careful lobbying and clever project design, however for more persistent problems, a coordinated effort including sharing resources and information across all stakeholders in the development community may be required. Until now this has not often been achieved.

The following table is taken from the EC Europaïd paper: *Institutional Assessment and Capacity Development – Why, What and How?* (2006). It covers the issues we have raised, providing a useful set of guiding principles laid out as a step-by-step process.



Avenues for further research

Once the definition, challenges and guiding principles of effective capacity development outlined in this paper have been discussed and agreed, a very useful exercise would be the compiling and evaluating of the various tools that organisations have developed in order to undertake capacity development. Another potentially illuminating exercise would be compiling a set of indicators for monitoring the results of capacity development efforts. As intimated at the beginning of the previous section, these tools and indicators could be presented as part of a “best practice” guide, or set of guides, aimed at various categories of actor in the international development sphere.

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