



Praxis Paper 18

Investigating the Mystery of Capacity Building

*Learning from the Praxis
Programme*

By Rick James and Rebecca Wrigley
Illustrations by Linda Lönnqvist

Investigating the Mystery of Capacity Building

Learning from the Praxis Programme

By Rick James and Rebecca Wrigley

Keywords: Capacity building, leadership, development, evaluation, civil society, NGO, donor

Executive Summary

Capacity building is a mystery. Despite all the attention given to capacity building over the last decade, we are left with nagging doubts and unanswered questions. We are not sure what works and why. Some are not convinced that capacity building makes any positive difference at all.

This paper investigates this mystery. It draws on the experiences shared by capacity building practitioners through the INTRAC Praxis Programme over the past four years. This DGIS-supported programme encouraged capacity building practitioners to reflect on, learn from and disseminate their experiences in the field. To date, practitioners have written 17 Praxis papers, 31 Praxis Notes, and attended six Praxis-supported workshops. They have written from diverse contexts on a wide variety of themes, and yet common issues have emerged. This paper synthesises this learning.

Practitioners highlighted that the capacity building 'prize' is:

- Confused – being rarely defined or even translated
- Contested – as different stakeholders have different implicit agendas
- Contextual – as it differs in different contexts and cultures
- Counteracted – by an aid system that inhibits capacity building
- Complex – being ultimately about change in human systems

To build capacity effectively, stakeholders need to articulate more clearly and negotiate a shared understanding of capacity building. This understanding should be rooted in the specific context and culture in which it takes place. We have to mitigate the inherent obstacles to capacity building in the aid system as far as possible. We also need to appreciate the degree of difficulty entailed in building capacity. Changing complex human systems by making shifts in relationships and power is not a straightforward endeavour.

Praxis Paper 3 used the analogy of seeing capacity building as a crime. We know that for any crime to be committed there needs to be *motive*, *means* and *opportunity*. The *motive* for capacity building, however, is too often external to the

system. We want to change others; we do not want to change ourselves. Donors recommend capacity building for partners. But capacity building disturbs the status quo and is therefore uncomfortable (sometimes painful). Strong internal incentives (motives) to change must exist to overcome the inherent resistance to change.

The *means* and methods of good practice in capacity building are becoming clear. Experiences from all corners of the globe highlight the benefits of using methods that retain and develop ownership; are people-centred and relational; engage with peoples' values and emotions; use experiential approaches where appropriate; and explicitly adapt to context and culture.

But most frequently missed in the capacity building mystery is the *opportunity* to change. We mistakenly assume that once a capacity building event has taken place, capacity has been built. Yet we know that planning to change is different from changing itself. We fail to implement good intentions because the opportunity to practice what we have learnt is not there. To build capacity effectively, we need to pay more attention to managing and resourcing the implementation of change.

Praxis has highlighted the need for able accomplices (consultants, coaches, trainers) to support capacity building. These accomplices facilitate, but do not direct, the processes. Good quality providers insist the motive for change is internalised; have competence in a variety of capacity building methods (including being able to address the personal and relational); are prepared and able to provide follow-through during the implementation stage.

Capacity building also needs backing from far-sighted donors, acting as accomplices to the process. Capacity building requires generous support that may not fit easily with the prevailing demands of the aid system for immediate and measurable results.

We need to be able to place a value on the capacity building prize to assure all involved that it has been worth the effort and to learn more for next time. Because capacity building is so complex, we fear and rarely undertake evaluations. Yet the Praxis programme highlighted a number of experiences of relatively simple processes that yield both important narrative and numbers.

It transpires that good practice principles of capacity building are clear, in spite of its context-specificity and complexity. The real capacity building mystery is why we do not implement them. There are undoubted resource constraints (both skills and money), but mostly what is lacking is the will to implement them. Local civil society organisations (CSOs), international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donors must all take responsibility for addressing their contribution to capacity building. It will involve risk and demand courage. But only if we all work together can we hope to solve the capacity building mystery.

Contents

Executive Summary	i
Acknowledgements.....	iv
1 Introduction	1
2 The Prize: What have we learnt about the concept?.....	3
2.1 Confused Understandings	3
2.2 Contested Purposes.....	4
2.3 Contextually Determined.....	5
2.4 Counteracted by the Aid System	6
2.5 Complex Change in Human Systems.....	6
3 Securing the Prize: What Have We Learnt about Good Practice?	8
3.1 The Motive: Inspiring Common Purpose and Direction	8
3.1.1 <i>Who Has the Motive for Change?</i>	<i>9</i>
3.1.2 <i>How Strong is the Motive for Change?</i>	<i>10</i>
3.2 The Means: Implementing Quality Capacity Building Practice	11
3.2.1 <i>Developing Client Ownership and Responsibility</i>	<i>11</i>
3.2.2 <i>Taking a People-Centred and Relational Approach</i>	<i>12</i>
3.2.3 <i>Using a Variety of Methods that Fit the Purpose</i>	<i>15</i>
3.2.4 <i>Responding Appropriately to Culture and Context.....</i>	<i>16</i>
3.2.5 <i>Communicates in Culturally Sensitive and Relevant Ways</i>	<i>17</i>
3.3 The Opportunity: Providing an Enabling Environment	18
3.4 The Accomplices: Who Provides Active Support?	20
3.4.1 <i>Capacity Building Providers: Enabling Organisations to Develop Themselves.....</i>	<i>20</i>
3.4.2 <i>Donors: Catalysing and Backing Capacity Building</i>	<i>22</i>
3.5 A-Valuation of the Prize: Using Narrative and Numbers.....	23
4 Supporting the Prize: a Situational Approach for Providers.....	26
5 Conclusions	28
References and Bibliography.....	30

Acknowledgements

This paper is the product of many people's work. In particular, we would like to thank those development practitioners who have made the opportunity to reflect on, learn from and document their experiences through Praxis. In addition, our learning has been richly fertilised by experiences and wisdom shared through Praxis workshops and events, especially those attending the Catalyst Group meetings. We would especially like to thank Bruce Britton for his enlightening metaphor of capacity building as a crime and Linda Lönnqvist for her enlivening cartoons.

Furthermore, little of this would have been possible without the far-sighted and generous support of DGIS in the Netherlands.

1 Introduction

Capacity building is a mystery. It is camouflaged by jargon, diverse interpretations and conflicting agendas. Despite considerable emphasis and apparent investment in capacity building over the last decade, we have nagging doubts. Some are not sure what works and why. Others are not convinced capacity building makes a difference at all. Still others are not even clear what capacity building is.

To address this confusion and learn from capacity building practice, INTRAC launched the Praxis Programme in 2003 with funding from the Dutch Foreign Ministry. Praxis catalyses the sharing of experiences and supports the development of innovative practices in the field of organisational capacity building through initiating and facilitating learning groups of researchers and practitioners from around the world. Praxis disseminates the resulting reflection and analysis through practitioner-oriented publications, as well as workshops, conferences and e-mail learning groups. Capacity building practitioners have documented their learning and experiences in a total of 31 Praxis Notes and 17 Praxis Papers. This paper analyses and synthesises the most important insights that have emerged to date.

The geographic and cultural scope of the Praxis output is wide. Practitioners have written up experiences from countries and contexts as diverse as Iran, Cambodia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Bosnia, Uganda, Spain, Caribbean, France, South Africa and Tajikistan. The capacity building topics covered are extremely varied, including: leadership development; analytical and adaptive capacity; organisational capacity building of community based organisations (CBOs); cross-cultural management; contextual perspectives; capacity building in the context of HIV/AIDS; effective mechanisms and forms of communication; innovative approaches and tools for M&E and impact assessment. Some of the experiences focus on capacity building of individuals; others on capacity building of informal community groups; others on capacity building of organisations; and others on capacity building of sectors and societies. Yet irrespective of this diversity of context, topic and audience, common themes and threads emerge.

The first is that the concept itself is still shrouded in confusion. Different stakeholders support capacity building for very different reasons. There are varied definitions of the 'prize' — different answers to the question, 'capacity building for what?'

But more encouragingly, the essence of good capacity building practice is strikingly similar across the Praxis outputs. The same learning emerges from experiences of individual leadership development as it does from experiences of organisational development and even societal development. Similar learning emerges from very different contexts. It appears that we do actually know a considerable amount about what works and what does not work.

While we may know what constitutes good practice in capacity building, sadly we often fail to implement it. This is the real mystery of capacity building. Key stakeholders may not have the will, ability or opportunity to make it happen. The challenge looking ahead is to see how we can overcome these.

In Praxis Paper 3, Bruce Britton introduced the helpful metaphor of treating organisational learning as a crime. To solve a crime we need to establish three key factors:

- the motive (the reason),
- the means (the methods) and
- the opportunity (the occasion to implement).

All three must be present for something to happen. In the same way, for capacity building to take place, we need to make sure there is sufficient motive, appropriate means and enough opportunity. This paper uses and extends this metaphor. As well as illustrating the importance of motive, means and opportunity, the Praxis outputs emphasised the need for capacity building to have a:

- clear, agreed prize (or loot);
- 'insider'/local knowledge of the context where the prize is located;
- able accomplices
- generous backers and
- a valuation of the prize

But before leaping ahead into the 'how to' of capacity building, we must first stop and reflect on what we have learnt about the capacity building prize itself.

2 The Prize: What have we learnt about the concept?

The diversity of Praxis experience shows that the practice of capacity building is:

- Confused
- Contested
- Contextual
- Counteracted
- Complex



I will now explore each of these characteristics further.

2.1 Confused Understandings

People understand the concept and purpose of capacity building differently. The Praxis outputs described it as 'broad', 'contested', 'ambiguous' and 'imprecise'. This lack of a definitive reference point has created misunderstandings. If we are not sure what we are aiming for, it is much harder to obtain the capacity building prize.

In many parts of the world, capacity building is seen as a foreign, Anglophone concept that automatically carries with it overtones of Western political democracy. It is seen as part of an internationally determined, donor development discourse. This is why the Iranian government, for example, regards capacity building as a 'bad word' (Praxis Paper 8). Capacity building is not easily translated into other languages, even French and Spanish (Praxis Papers 1 and 5). The English word is used, 'as if to emphasise the concept's esoteric character' (Praxis Paper 9). This also

prevents a tight definition of what capacity building means in different contexts and consequently hampers our understanding of how it occurs.

Capacity building is inextricably linked with that equally elusive concept of 'partnership'. Despite the rhetoric of capacity building being a two-way, mutual process of learning, the reality is that it is something that Northerners believe their partners need. They rarely apply it to themselves.

Yet Praxis experiences make it clear that, for capacity building to be effective, the goal, or prize, must be clear and agreed by different stakeholders. Without consensus at the outset, misunderstandings and tensions arise during the capacity building process. It may re-surface in the form of disagreements about the methods to use or even in assessments of whether the intervention was successful or not. If the prize is not made clear, then more resource-dependent stakeholders (local organisations or capacity building providers) may find themselves co-opted into a donor's agenda that contradicts their values and beliefs about development.

It is therefore critical to make the time at the start of the process to explore the distinct, and not always complementary, agendas and interests involved and to negotiate an agreed purpose. This is not as easy as it may appear, since capacity building purposes are often contested.

2.2 Contested Purposes

To build a common consensus we have to clearly define the purpose of capacity building and what impacts it aims to achieve. Stakeholders have different, dynamic and often multiple purposes. Some highlighted by the Praxis programme include:

- **an instrumental focus:** capacity building is about improving development project implementation, results and accountabilities;
- **a social/political focus:** capacity building is about prompting societal and democratic change;
- **an organisational focus:** capacity building is about improving development organisations' sustainability, autonomy, integrity, independence and resilience;
- **a transformational focus:** capacity building is about shifting relationships and power dynamics.

Those who believe that capacity building must deliver quick, measurable results through the simple transfer of skills, will favour a more instrumental approach. Those who believe that capacity building requires a change in power relationships will take a transformational approach. Different understandings of the ultimate purpose of capacity building (linked to different underlying theories of development) require resolution. In practice, in the pressure to sign contracts and reach deadlines, it is often easier to leave the definition and the different interests imprecise. We achieve

consensus by not clarifying the prize. This can often lead to inadvertent and passive acceptance of the agenda of others — including many donors — to better demonstrate results and to achieve efficient grant management.

2.3 Contextually Determined

The culture and context significantly influence capacity building needs and solutions. Politics, economics, social, religious, ethnic, class, environmental and historical factors all affect capacity building. For example, a number of Praxis Papers and Notes describe how the onslaught of HIV/AIDS is decimating capacity throughout sub-Saharan Africa, forcing organisations to address new and complex needs. In such contexts, capacity building becomes more a matter of capacity maintenance. Praxis Paper 8 revealed how the election of a new president destroyed the favourable political environment for capacity building overnight. In a different way, Praxis Note 20, which analysed organisational learning in different cultures, showed how even something as seemingly natural as 'learning' was situational. In the particular context of Cambodia, the Khmer word that was initially used to translate 'learning' was a confusing and potentially divisive concept — though the equivalent translation of 'wisdom' was not. Praxis Paper 10 described how the contextual circumstances of the congested lives of leaders had a profound impact on inhibiting capacity building change, by not allowing leaders the space to reflect.

Contexts are not static. Capacity building processes need to evolve to fit the changing circumstances. Praxis Paper 9, for example, identified six distinct phases of capacity building for the situation in the Balkans, which moved from an immediate post-conflict crisis; to minimum security; to a state of flux and trauma; to increasing political stability; and finally to a return of refugees and a functioning local government.

The Praxis Papers (1, 5, 8 and 9) which examined the perspectives on capacity building from France, Spain, Iran and Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo, respectively, revealed how different countries interpret capacity building differently. Even amongst the donor states of the UK, USA, France and Spain, there are significant differences. According to Praxis Paper 1, Anglophone countries perceive capacity building as more about organisations and results, whereas Francophone ones emphasise individuals and processes. Unless we understand intimately the context that we are operating from and operating into, we may well blunder in with foreign and superficial solutions that do not meet the underlying needs. For example, Praxis Paper 9 described how one donor's response to forty years of ethnic conflict ignored the need to firstly restore trust and confidence and completely focused on civic education for elections.

The Praxis documents also demonstrated the importance of applying capacity building to the specific situation of the organisation. Capacity building must adjust to

the organisation's reality and perceived needs. By way of illustration, Praxis Note 18 analysed the differences and similarities in capacity building of CBOs that are small, informal, less educated and voluntary. Every organisation is unique and what makes it change will not always be the same.

2.4 Counteracted by the Aid System

The capacity building prize is well protected by the aid system. Many elements of the aid system act as major disincentives and in some cases prevent the achievement of good quality capacity building. Elements of this 'security system' include:

- the increasing preoccupation with proving quantifiable results within a short, project-based period obviously makes taking a longer-term approach difficult;
- the aid system's need to disburse large sums of money quickly prevents an incremental approach to capacity building;
- the donor need for local organisations to be able to absorb significant sums of money very quickly can push them beyond their competence;
- the competitive bidding process require organisations to prove they already have adequate capacity. There is certainly no room in proposals to identify or admit weaknesses — self-assessment is purely about emphasising existing strengths;
- recent aid trends, such as efforts to harmonise donor support, greater alignment of aid with foreign policy, preoccupation with security, a re-focus on economic growth (not poverty alleviation), a reasserted central role of the state (with general budget support), counter-terrorism measures (requiring complicated and intrusive demands), have all in different ways added further obstacles to attaining the capacity building prize.

Despite the rhetoric of empowerment and local autonomy, the aid system is ultimately a political entity that responds to the realities of the time. Objectives of security and fighting the 'War on Terror' currently take precedence over local ownership and autonomy. This 'security system' makes capacity building more difficult to achieve, but not impossible. To penetrate the protection, we need to have very good 'inside' information and recognise the inherent dysfunctionality of the aid system in promoting capacity building. Only then will we be able to respond in more creative and effective ways.

2.5 Complex Change in Human Systems

The Praxis experiences indicate that: 'Capacity building is fundamentally a *human process of development and change that involves shifts and transformations in relationships and power*'. The problem requires analysis, learning, adaptation and human motivation. It is an organic, not mechanical, process of change. It is a process that challenges our assumptions about the way things are and could be — about power, helping, achieving and succeeding. Capacity building

interventions are about creating a disturbance or tension which provokes people to think and act in a different way. Capacity building is:

- ***Influenced by Relational and Power Dynamics*** — organisational capacity building involves both individual and collective processes of change. These depend on a web of interconnected relationships both internally and externally. Each organisation is composed of a unique group of changing individuals. These people bring their own personal histories, values systems, beliefs and behaviours. But organisational capacity building is not just about individual contributions, but is also about the interactions and collective processes between those individuals. These interactions bring a relational dynamic that is central to organisational capacity building. Capacity building is therefore about improving:
 - *'Relationship with self'* — i.e. having the integrity to match outward behaviour with inner values; being aware of one's identity, strengths and limitations; having the humility to be open to learning and change.
 - *'Relationship with others'* — i.e. earning legitimacy from outside. For organisations this comes from constituencies; for leaders, it comes from followers. It also involves collaboration with others.
- ***Shaped by Complex Human Systems*** — Organisations are, and operate within, complex living systems operating in diverse cultures and contexts. Capacity building is about being part of, but also reshaping, these systems.
- ***Based on Human Motivation*** — Capacity building is a people-centred process which is fuelled by human motivation.
- ***Uncertain and Unpredictable*** — An individual, organisation or society is a complex, living system. We cannot direct or control what will happen, we can only disturb it. One contributor to a Praxis workshop on impact assessment, likened capacity building to 'kicking a dog'. Unlike an inanimate object, like a ball, we do not know where a dog will run. Capacity building involves working purposefully at the edge of uncertainty — observing and making sense of emerging events and adapting confidently to change when it is appropriate.

Clearly, the capacity building prize is more complex and challenging than most imagine. Human change is complicated at an individual level. Collective organisational change is exponentially more so. It is therefore not surprising that research in the commercial world has shown that 75% of organisational change efforts fail (Quinn, quoted in Praxis Note 6).

To secure the capacity building prize, we must first admit its complexity. Any change process involving human systems is necessarily difficult. We must also understand how context shapes capacity building. We need to know how the prevailing aid system protects the prize. We need to know how we can circumvent this security. To build capacity effectively we need to expose and negotiate the contested purposes to reach a common and agreed understanding of the prize.

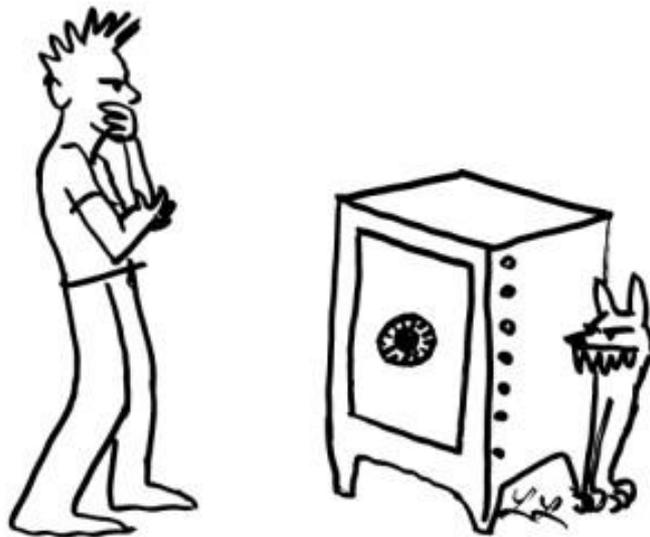
3 Securing the Prize: What Have We Learnt about Good Practice?

It is clear from all the Praxis Papers is that we already know a lot about capacity building good practice. The diversity of contexts, topics and points of focus of the interventions clearly highlights key elements of good capacity building practice. They emphasise the need for the organisation to have a strong motive to change, appropriate means and sufficient opportunity. They also highlight the importance of able accomplices and enlightened backers.

3.1 The Motive: Inspiring Common Purpose and Direction

Any crime investigator will look for motive. Motive is the reason for action. People are motivated to do something in order to gain pleasure or to avoid pain. Individuals, organisations and societies will not change without a motive. While this is clear to criminologists, we often ignore it in capacity building. The motive in capacity building is at the core of change. But we need to ask:

- Who has the motive for change?
- How strong is that motive for change?



the Motive

3.1.1 Who Has the Motive for Change?

Those involved in capacity building programmes tend to have multiple, sometimes conflicting, and often superficial motives and purpose. Section 2 outlined how these differences are rarely clearly identified or explored, often leading to misinterpretation. Where there is no consensus it is often unclear where the motivation comes from and who defines purpose and direction of a capacity building programme. Whose interests does it really serve?

The most common fault of all capacity building is that the motive for change is external to the system. The pressure for much capacity building often comes more from the donor than the recipient. Northern agencies often define capacity building needs of partners. They inadvertently perceive capacity building as something other individuals, other organisations, other countries need. Capacity building therefore is something that 'we do for them'. Donors often do not wait until the motive is clearly present. Such issues are rarely considered in planning, funding or contracting decisions. Yet unless the individual or organisation 'internalises' this need to change, there is no authentic motive for change. Local partners become the victims of the capacity building crime, when it is inflicted on them.

The Praxis outputs without exception highlight the importance of the client of capacity building 'owning the need for change'. They must be the 'subject' not the 'object' of capacity building. For example, Praxis Note 13, which describes the experiences of CABUNGO with mainstreaming HIV concluded:

*'In getting organisations to mainstream HIV/AIDS internally, there is a need first to **create awareness of the need** for such a response. There is a need to provide information about the estimated costs for organisations of doing nothing, as well as the costs of developing and implementing HIV/AIDS policies, for example. Our experience highlighted the need to **awaken peoples' will to respond** before any real action would take place.'*

This echoes the experiences of many other practitioners, including those undertaking research on leadership development. Praxis Note 14 demonstrates that leaders are only open to changing their more autocratic style of management when it becomes clear to them that it is 'placing impossible demands on their lives, as well as causing severe organisational problems'. Change frequently occurred when *external* feedback was accepted and *internalised*. External inputs can catalyse change, but only if the internal motive for change pre-exists.

Praxis Note 20, investigating organisational learning across cultures, also concluded that the success of capacity building primarily depends on internal motivation. It asserted that for learning to take place, it requires pre-existing 'attitudes of: openness to new ideas, willingness to give and take feedback, curiosity, confidence,

trusting yourself and others, risk taking, willingness to overcome fear, exploring what we don't understand'. Praxis Note 14 on leadership development in Malawi reinforces this: 'Most of the change that occurs in a person depends on the person and their beliefs and values; sense of self; openness to change; and aspirations and determination.'

Motivation for change is not as clear-cut as we might think. If capacity building is such an obvious 'good thing', why do people and organisations choose not to develop themselves? We may need to look beneath the surface and find out more about this motive for change.

3.1.2 How Strong is the Motive for Change?

There is some ambivalence towards capacity building. Capacity building is not simply about learning new skills and acquiring new knowledge. As we saw in the previous section, capacity building involves changes in power relations within and between organisations. Human change can be a painful process, which involves admitting error or ignorance. This is sensitive and personal. The process may involve bringing tense issues to light, into consciousness, revealing 'the elephant in the room'. It may be about giving up bad habits and behaving in new ways. This requires determination and courage. The motive for change must be stronger than the incentives to remain the same.

Major change only happens with a major motive. We may also need to explore the question of who within the organisation is motivated to change? Who knows about the problem? Who can solve it? Who cares about it enough to change?

The Praxis outputs reiterate that for organisations, which are inherently 'change-averse', capacity building processes need leadership. This is sometimes described as leaders 'driving' or 'supporting' or 'buying into' the change process. The extent of leadership power needed in a capacity building process depends on how fundamental and how sensitive the change process is. For example, the Praxis Papers on HIV mainstreaming in the workplace revealed that the issues involved are so personal, sensitive and related to the culture of stigma and fear that strong leadership is required. Leaders have to have a strong personal motivation to drive change in this area because HIV is not an urgent organisational issue until it is too late — and a colleague is sick with AIDS.

Motive for change is more than just the individual motive of leaders. A collective motive to change must be there or develop. A critical mass of dissatisfaction with the status quo can develop into a collective motive for change. This collective motive for change is assisted when people feel they have had the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the identification of both the need to change and the appropriate ways forward.

3.2 The Means: Implementing Quality Capacity Building Practice

Almost irrespective of context, topic or focus of the capacity building, a number of key elements of good practice in capacity building emerge from the different Praxis documents.



the Means

3.2.1 Developing Client Ownership and Responsibility

The means or methods of capacity building must retain and even develop client ownership of and responsibility for the change process. At the core of good capacity building practice is a coherent theory of change. This might be termed a 'responsibility-based approach' to change. For example, Praxis Paper 6 described how leaders only changed when they took personal responsibility for their own situation, rather than externalising blame on others.

Consequently, good practice capacity building involves the staff of the organisation. For example, in Praxis Note 24, the authors assert that discussion is vital to capacity building of CBOs in order to overcome the view that, 'everyone is an expert on their own situation'. They emphasise that: 'Mentors do not give answers; instead they present key issues and problems to the group using creative, interactive techniques.' The ACCORD Praxis Note 21 showed that to be effective in responding to HIV 'you must involve all staff in the process of policy development'. Open discussion is a critical part of HIV/AIDS capacity building. Praxis Paper 7 reinforces such participatory approaches. Its authors explain that although outsiders can give insights, even these external insights are interpreted through people's own internal lens before they decide what to do. Good practice in monitoring and evaluation of capacity building reinforces these participatory approaches. Praxis Paper 2 and Praxis Notes 15 and 25 highlight the importance of self-assessment of capacity changes.

'Experience suggests a participatory process helps ensure more active engagement by local people, a greater degree of local ownership, and increased reliability and quality assurance. It also helps overcome some of the ethical issues around such processes, including agreeing on its scale and scope, who is involved, and who has access to the data.'
(Praxis Paper 2:12)

But, as Praxis Note 9 usefully reminds us, good practice capacity building is more than just participatory techniques. It has to be embedded in a specific context to be useful:

'This work poses a conundrum: across the spectrum of CSO activity ... regardless of context ... outcomes of process-led work are remarkable for their similarity, blandness, lack of creativity and paucity of analytical power. Emphasising the importance of the process does not seem to be a solution in and of itself. It is critical that practitioners take the point of departure in the particular characteristics and needs of the target organisation in order to adapt their methods and facilitation during each capacity building process.' (Praxis Note 9:4)

3.2.2 Taking a People-Centred and Relational Approach

It is a truism that organisations are composed of people. Yet we ignore this in some capacity building programmes. Praxis practitioners have repeatedly highlighted that organisational capacity building is a collective process of human change. Leaders behave as human beings, not a collection of traits; staff are people, not just disembodied 'human resources'. How any organisation behaves depends on how the people behave. It is not just how they behave as individuals, but about how they behave in relationship to each other. As Praxis Paper 6 shows, leadership is a relationship between people in an organisation, not an individual person. Capacity building is about changing how people relate.

People-centred capacity building recognises that change is as much about unlearning bad habits as cultivating new behaviour. Praxis Paper 9 emphasised that capacity building in the Balkans is 'a process that seeks to replace a set of cultural dispositions, learned behaviours and values inherited from over 40 years of communist rule'. This was also graphically illustrated by the Praxis Note 14, which argued that autocratic leadership behaviour became habitual and then even addictive. Leadership development programmes might therefore learn something from personal change programmes such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

A people-centred approach to capacity-building features several key factors:

- Views people **holistically**. Individual and organisational behaviour are influenced by rational thinking and intellect, but also by emotion and even faith. Good capacity building practice consciously engages peoples' **emotions**. As Praxis Note 24 pointed out: 'there is a link between emotion and motivation to act'. On a similar note, Praxis Note 20 on organisational learning asserted: 'it is sometimes enough to engage with peoples' emotional experience as a key factor in individual and organisational development'. This is well illustrated by the moving story of an organisation's experience of HIV/AIDS 'Robbed of Dorothy' (Praxis Note 12), which showed that it was only when the leader was personally struck by the death of a friend that he started to push the organisation to respond to HIV. In HIV mainstreaming, getting PLWAs (People Living With AIDS) to share personal experience was a powerful tool to engage people's emotions as well as intellect. A few of the documents (Praxis Note 14, 17 and Praxis Papers 6, 12) also introduced a spiritual dimension into holistic capacity building. They argued that spiritual faith could be an important influence on behaviour. If an individual or organisation is to change the way they behave, reference to their faith (which underpins their values and assists in overcoming their fears) may be important.
- Sees **self-awareness** as a critical first step in change. We do not change unless we realise and accept where we are. Self-awareness for individuals and organisations is essential in promoting change. This process is described by the papers in various ways: from a formal organisational assessment procedure, to more informal notions of 'taking stock'; to facilitated discussions of 'where are we?' to intensely personal reflections described as taking a 'fearless moral inventory'.
- Engenders **hope and trust**. Capacity building has to bring hope and inspire people to change. A few of the Praxis experiences illustrated a more 'appreciative inquiry', rather than problem-centred approach, to change. Capacity building will not occur without hope and trust. As Praxis Paper 9 demonstrates from the context of Bosnia, Herzegovina and Kosovo: 'Confidence building is a prerequisite for capacity building. Listening and facilitation of dialogue that aims firstly to awaken individuals and groups to the possibility of doing something and second to re-establish trust, cooperation and solidarity as the basis for collective action.'
- Places **values at the core of change**. Praxis Paper 6 on leadership change in East Africa pointed out that 'Values were the most important lever for change. The realisation that there was a considerable difference between the people they wanted to be (their core values) and the people they were (their leadership behaviour) was what drove the change process.' People and organisations change when there is a dissonance between their core values and their behaviour. A desire to align their behaviour with their values is what drives capacity building.

- Recognises the potentially creative or destructive **tensions** in human relationships. One forthcoming Praxis Note describes conflict as a natural human condition — part of our personal, family, social and community relations. In itself it is neither positive nor negative. It can, for example, be a catalyst for change, growth and learning. It is the way we manage conflict that determines whether it debilitates or enriches a developmental process. Good quality capacity building therefore seeks to strengthen the relational skills of those involved and enable them to manage conflict creatively, rather than ignore conflict or even fuel it.
- **Gender** is a vital part of seeing people holistically. Everyone belongs to a particular gender and this has implications for capacity building. Interestingly, few of the Praxis documents highlighted these implications, although in the work on leadership development and also responding to HIV, the gender dimension was more obvious. There is also clearly a cultural and contextual dimension to the gender question with different perspectives in different places. Such a difference is well illustrated by Praxis Note 22 on analytical skills training in Central Asia, where some participants felt that 'the Soviet era had fully addressed gender inequalities', whereas the external facilitators were not so sure.

Personal and Relational Change through Capacity Building

The importance of the personal and relational is well illustrated by the review of CABUNGO, a Malawian capacity building provider (Praxis Paper 12). Clients said CABUNGO helped them:

- become more self-aware at individual and organisational levels;
- shift relationship between leadership, staff and board creating more ownership, motivation, energy, passion and empowerment;
- adapt organisational actions in new, self-defined ways;
- become more organised by 'putting the house in order' — i.e. structures, systems, competencies, funding;
- have more trust internally;
- change the way the organisation relates to others, for example, the communities in which they work and the donors that fund them.

Good capacity building takes a people-centred approach to change, but not at the cost of ignoring the systems elements (described above as 'putting the house in order'). It is not a question of either or, but both, as Praxis Note 21 on HIV workplace policy illustrates. It describes how addressing stigma in the organisation and developing and implementing a workplace policy is inextricably linked. It is not effective to address one without the other. Capacity building should not therefore be compartmentalised into simply changing individual human behaviour — you also have to change organisational systems and structures.

3.2.3 Using a Variety of Methods that Fit the Purpose

The Praxis experiences emphasise that capacity building can take place through a wide variety of methods and that, indeed, this variety is necessary in quality capacity building. Organisations are made up of diverse people, who learn in different ways and from different methods.

In the past, there has sometimes been an almost exclusive focus on training as the prime capacity building method. Training is much easier and simpler to plan and fund than more informal and evolutionary processes. Praxis Paper 9 describes CSOs as 'being trained to death'. While training is still a very important capacity building method, it should not be the only one. Training can easily fail to address the messier, more complex and unpredictable nature of capacity building. It often avoids getting embroiled in the personal — yet it is the personal values and beliefs that determine behaviour.

Some of the recent trends and innovations in capacity building are a shift towards:

- **experiential and process-led** approaches in line with the good practice thinking described earlier. Praxis Paper 9 quoted Balkan capacity builders who claimed: 'Longer-term mentoring, coaching, advice and facilitation is considered the only effective way to ensure the application of knowledge gained in training as well as to bring about change in individual and organisational attitudes.' How far this shift has permeated actual practice is more debatable, as training is still the predominant method of capacity building, according to Praxis Papers 8 and 9. Not surprisingly, the aid system finds discrete training packages easier to support than open-ended, evolving processes. Furthermore, many cultures find a more didactic approach to capacity building closer to their expectations and past experiences.
- **modular inputs.** Although training still seems to be the prime methodology used, it appears to be becoming more modular. For example, Praxis Notes 17, 22 and 24 all describe capacity building processes with a number of short training inputs over a period of 4 to 18 months. This space between inputs allows participants to digest, apply and implement the learning from the training inputs. It also provides the opportunity to receive support from mentors or peers between modules.
- **mentoring and coaching** is itself becoming a popular capacity building method, as described in detail by both Praxis Note 27 and Praxis Paper 14. Mentors and coaches are involved in facilitating individuals and organisations to reflect on and improve their performance. In the Balkans, one of the key success factors in capacity building was 'in-house trainer consultants over an extended period'. Praxis Note 24 describes the Barnabas Trust's mentoring and coaching work with CBOs. It involves a two-year relationship with trained and experienced

mentors who visit the organisation on a weekly or bimonthly basis, working through all of the different elements of organisational life.

3.2.4 Responding Appropriately to Culture and Context

The development sector inherently involves situations where people work across cultures and contexts, for example, between international and local partners or between urban and rural staff. The multidimensional influences of culture and context can strongly affect and shape good quality capacity. These influences include values and beliefs, attitudes and assumptions, sense of space and time, language and communication, habits and traditions, history, social hierarchies, gender, faith and so on. Various Praxis Papers and Notes have emphasised that, without first acquiring an understanding of the cultural and contextual dimensions of capacity building, we can have little sense of the potential success or failure of an intervention.

For example, it is clear that within many contexts, partners, colleagues or clients may expect those facilitating capacity building processes to be 'experts' who 'know all'. The perceived qualifications of the facilitator/trainer evidently influence participants' attitudes towards the process (see Praxis Note 20). Tensions are created where external facilitators, managers and staff have different perceptions about the purpose of capacity building, the needs and the methods that are most appropriate. As Praxis Note 26, describing a capacity building process in Niger, illustrates:

*'It is critical to pay attention to **the cultural and social factors** that influence the change process. We use methods and tools developed in the Western NGO world in our capacity-building interventions. But how can we facilitate a process in evolution without imposing our values and our ways of working, without having to avoid certain issues or practices (such as money or leadership) that are rooted in a particular ethical approach? How can we provide support, but still leave the creative space to the actors involved?'*

When facilitating capacity building processes, those from different cultural backgrounds therefore need to be particularly aware of the way they interpret and respond to diverse organisational situations. Using unfamiliar methods, such as participatory or experiential processes, may take people too far beyond their comfort zone. Rather than stimulating and reinforcing capacity building, this may create confusion and heighten people's resistance to new ideas and change. An alternative can be to start by respecting local forms of knowledge; exploring what capacity building means in each particular culture; and identifying the appropriate forms of inclusive reflection, learning and change that already exist.

3.2.5 Communicates in Culturally Sensitive and Relevant Ways

A number of the Praxis Notes described innovative and culturally sensitive ways of communicating. The language of capacity building brings with it all sorts of culturally and politically loaded baggage, that makes it appear 'foreign', donor-driven and external. Clearly this is an anathema to the objective of client ownership. Development is an endogenous process that can and should be communicated in its own culturally appropriate ways.

As Praxis Note 6 on using African proverbs notes:

'The failure of so many development interventions over the past half-century can be partly attributed to their lack of rootedness in the society they were designed to change. For development interventions to catalyse fundamental change, they have to engage with people's identity and values, whether they be individuals, communities, organisations or indeed nations. Capacity building needs to be grafted onto pre-existing foundational values, not simply importing another's value base.'

Using proverbs can help to connect with people's identity and values. In this case the traditional wisdom contained in African proverbs applies both to understanding organisations and to improving their performance. The use of proverbs in this way presents a new and creative way of communicating and discussing organisational principles that transcend the common communication barriers. It therefore offers an important means to making capacity building more effective. In a similar way, storytelling is a powerful way of connecting capacity building with people's own lives.

Other Praxis Notes describe the importance of metaphor in assisting people to understand some of the concepts in capacity building. Praxis Note 9 from the Balkans highlights the use of analogy in assisting groups to become more self aware through exercises such as describing the organisation as an animal. In South Africa in Praxis Note 24, the metaphor of building a house provides the structure for the process of building a community organisation. Other Praxis publications use organic metaphors to describe organisational elements, such as seeing an organisation like an 'onion' or a submerged hippo. Others describe the process of capacity building as 'capacity cultivation' — emphasising that all you can do from outside is help create the conditions for capacity to develop, you cannot build it yourself. Praxis Paper 8 from Iran describes the use of 'the city of Medina under the Prophet Mohammed' as a religiously appropriate metaphor for encouraging civil society.

Praxis Note 7 outlines the importance of 'Working without Words', emphasising the value of illustration and cartoons in assisting people to reflect on capacity building issues and think in a positive and creative way. Cartoons can clarify a situation in a memorable and amusing way that is accessible to all. Such a process enables people

to think outside of their customary logical, rational way, often releasing energy and reducing tensions.

3.3 The Opportunity: Providing an Enabling Environment

The final critical element in any capacity building 'crime' is having the opportunity. By opportunity, we mean that people have the time, resources, legitimacy and encouragement to implement change. Many capacity building efforts fail because the opportunity to commit the crime never happens. Participants return from training, inspired to make a difference, only to be overcome by the weight of work or not being given the opportunity to put new learning into practice. Similarly, organisations plan strategically to focus on certain activities in the future, but the need to raise funding to pay salaries or get reports in on time overtakes them. The demands of our individual and organisational workloads precludes capacity building.



There is also the danger that we sometimes inadvertently equate a capacity building plan or a strategic plan with the actual implementation. We think we have a new strategy just because we have a new plan. Planning is not the same as action. Capacity building plans are frequently left on the shelf, because people are too busy with other things to implement the plan. Trained individuals are not given the opportunity to practice what they have learnt. Organisations move onto other priorities before any change has taken place. The opportunity to change requires time and space. But we are impatient and not determined enough to see change happen. After all, it was 44 years after Wilberforce first challenged Parliament that the abolition of slavery was finally achieved. Nelson Mandela was in prison achieving little visible impact for 27 years. The major changes in society take time. Yet in capacity building today we demand quick, almost immediate results with numerical proof of impact.

It is often only the planning of the job that is funded. Capacity building events, such as strategic planning sessions, HIV policy development processes and training courses, are funded. The better ones end up with action plans. But then the capacity building funding stops. There is often nothing planned or provided for the change process itself — such as HIV policy implementation. It is an all-too-frequent anomaly for a donor to fund a local CSO to develop an HIV policy, but then refuse to support the implementation. In such cases, the donor is assuming and hoping that simply by assisting with just the means, the motive and opportunity will be there. In addition, the capacity building provider (consultant/trainer) may move on to another client when 'the job is done'. But the real work of change, which only takes place back in the organisation, has not yet begun.

This implementation of change needs resourcing and managing. There are always time costs and often a financial cost too. These costs have to compete with other demands within the organisation. There are other prizes, perhaps bearing more immediate financial benefit, such as project funding, that distract attention from the capacity building prize. As a result, once a particular capacity building event has finished, there is a temptation to put it to one side and concentrate on other things (rather than making or taking the opportunity to implement the decisions for change). There is also the temptation to wait for the financial resources before implementing any change.

Much of this implementation will be rather boring, 'grunt' work. This 'perspiration' phase is vital to apply the 'inspiration' of capacity building events. As CABUNGO's work on their HIV response (Praxis Note 13) emphasises, the lofty principles now need application in practice. The authors went on to point out: 'Most work on HIV over the next ten years will be at the mundane and increasingly obvious level'.

To ensure there is sufficient opportunity to implement requires a process perspective — with longer-term follow-up built into contracts. A more modular approach to training enables participants to implement changes between modules and then reflect back on this process in the next module.

It is counter-productive to restrict this opportunity to change into a time-bound project deadline. The Praxis outputs show from experience that authentic change takes time. Capacity building is an ongoing journey that is often discontinuous. Yet our indicators are about destinations. There is certainly a need for process 'milestones' to remind people of what has already been achieved and keep people on track. But this should be about progress on the journey. To build capacity takes dedication and determination — the opportunity to change has to be developed over a long period of time.

This opportunity to implement change may be encouraged by developing links with other individuals and organisations in similar positions. These communities of practice can assist ongoing learning. Praxis Note 16 describes the features that make

such communities of practice more or less successful. The community has to have tangible ongoing benefits to members to keep the learning alive. These practical challenges are illustrated by both the Vision Quest example (Praxis Note 17) and the Analytical Skills Training Programme (ASTP) (Praxis Note 22) experiences, which attempted to develop communities of practice after the modular training, but found them difficult to formalise and sustain.

3.4 The Accomplices: Who Provides Active Support?

To build CSO capacity successfully requires accomplices. Two invaluable accomplices are capacity building providers and donors (or backers).



3.4.1 Capacity Building Providers: Enabling Organisations to Develop Themselves

The Praxis outputs illustrate the importance of having the support of quality capacity building providers while also ensuring that the client takes responsibility for, and has ownership of, the change process. Capacity building providers must have the skills to facilitate the quality capacity building practice described in this paper while not using their expert status to control the change process. As Praxis Note 20 points out, it has to be 'more about facilitating a process rather than prescribing methodologies or tools'.

But this external role can be critical in providing a structure and an external perspective to the process. Capacity building providers can share learning from other organisations. They can inject energy and reduce tension in a capacity building process and ensure the CSO does not get caught up and distracted by its own work. Section 3.3 demonstrates that follow-through support by capacity-building accomplices is often necessary. Praxis Note 22 concludes that this follow-up by capacity building providers was 'one aspect of the Analytical Skills Training Programme that could have been usefully prioritised'.

The skills these accomplices bring to the process of capacity building are to:

- Recognise and respond sensitively to the influences of culture and context. This may also include the importance of communicating in the local language, as Praxis Note 24 demonstrates. Many international capacity building providers are 'ill-prepared and poorly informed about the settings in which they found themselves' according to Praxis Paper 9.
- Develop client-ownership of the process to focus on their motive for change.
- Take a people-centred approach to change. Work with the personal (exercises that encourage reflection, learning and personal growth). Be able to work with emotions and manage tensions creatively.
- Understand and challenge power dynamics in a sensitive and courageous way.
- Balance structure and flexibility, i.e. provide clear frameworks but allow emergence and adaptation happen.
- See the interrelationships between elements. This might include how extended relations can affect leadership behaviour; how staff relationships affect organisational behaviour; how inter-organisational relationships can influence impact and how global events impact on the organisation.
- Have the confidence and competence to use a variety of methods, including the more experiential.
- Engage in open and equal dialogue able to communicate in a culturally sensitive and creative way.
- Continuously reflect and learn from capacity building experiences.

Such qualities are rarely found in a single individual. Consequently, it may be better for capacity builders to work in pairs or teams. Some of the Praxis documents alluded to the benefit of having multicultural teams to ensure that these diverse quality demands were realised. The ASTP programme in Central Asia (Praxis Note 22) found that it was often a combination of local and expat that worked best. It also found that a partnership between two capacity building institutions, one European and one local, provided even greater sources of complementary expertise and availability.

The availability of local capacity building providers able to deliver high quality capacity building services is very limited in most developing contexts. For example, despite the magnitude of the need in HIV, 'there are only a very limited number of capacity building providers who have both an understanding of HIV/AIDS and an understanding of organisation development and change' (Kerkhoven, quoted in Praxis Paper 4, p. 27). More seriously still, it seems that as fast as local practitioners develop the skills and experience to facilitate quality capacity building, they are lost to other types of development work. Of the recent Praxis-supported leadership research undertaken in 2003–4 (Praxis Paper 6), 75% of the researchers have left their organisations. Similarly, 40% of the researchers in the 2005 Praxis-supported

HIV research have also already left. Many of these have joined international donors like CIDA and Danida — who were supposedly supporting CSO capacity building.

Praxis Paper 12 shows that local capacity building providers can have a significant impact on the capacity of local organisations by delivering quality services in a locally appropriate way. However, they also face specific challenges in achieving and maintaining the quality of their practice and their organisational sustainability in the longer term. Many operate on a not-for-profit basis but also rely on consultancy income. This creates a sometimes contradictory dynamic between proactively achieving developmental aims and reactively responding to the needs of consultancy clients as they emerge. Their situation is made even more precarious because most of their clients are unable to cover the true costs of providing quality capacity building services unless the process is subsidised by a donor. Does the donor community value capacity building providers enough to find more flexible funding mechanisms which ensure their long-term survival in the sector?

3.4.2 Donors: Catalysing and Backing Capacity Building

The Praxis outputs emphasise that donors can have an important role in putting capacity building issues onto another organisation's agenda. For example, Praxis Note 12 reveals that: 'Two main factors brought a change to CDRN. First, one of our main donors, CORDAID, had entered into a long-term relationship with us and one of the key objectives was about helping CORDAID partners with HIV/AIDS and health issues.' This, combined with personal experiences within the organisation, was enough to catalyse a response.

Other ways in which donors have contributed to capacity building include providing information and contacts to partners, putting them into contact with others to learn from; documenting and disseminating learning, enabling exposure visits. But the key role, if not the most attractive one, is funding the capacity building process.

Implementing good practice capacity building is both expensive and long term. This means that it requires enlightened outside support in the CSO sector. A far-sighted donor must bank-roll the job as a longer-term investment (rather than tied to specific short-term outputs). In the current aid environment this is no small challenge.

Donor goals in capacity building are often very self-oriented. As we saw in Section 2, while their language of capacity building talks of empowerment, their actions often reinforce an instrumental approach. They see capacity building needs through the lens of their own need for good project proposals, reports, financial management, and monitoring and evaluation, as Praxis Paper 9 pointed out. This can turn capacity building into a means for donors to efficiently disburse funds, ensure accountability and manage risk. By not recognising the power that they have, and by pushing their agendas and the process at their pace, donors can undermine and may even remove

local ownership. Donors need to take into account the constraints of the context the CSO is working in.

Donors can also set overly ambitious targets for CSO capacity building programmes. In other sectors, such as small business start-ups, only 20% survive their first five years. Yet 100% of CSOs are not only expected to be surviving, but much stronger, five years after capacity building interventions. Perhaps we need to shift our focus from organisational sustainability to sustainability of capacities in individuals. In contexts of extreme and increasingly debilitating poverty, mere survival of CSOs may be a massive 'capacity building' achievement. Praxis Paper 4 argued that in the context of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, mere survival and capacity maintenance are indicators of success not failure. The greater the capacity building need, the greater the degree of difficulty and the less the chance of success. Encouragingly, USAID's evaluation of their work in the Balkans, used the fact that 26 out of 28 supported NGOs had survived to the end of the project timeframe as the most significant indicator of success, according to Praxis Paper 9.

Many donors are failing in their all-important funding role. Good practice capacity building requires generous, but considered and careful support. Some fail to provide the long-term resourcing support that is needed. Frequently, in order to reduce the capacity building budgets, the costly (but vital) elements such as follow-up or mentoring are compromised (as illustrated by Praxis Paper 12 about CABUNGO and Praxis Note 22 from Central Asia). It is easier for many donors to support one-off capacity building events, rather than the ongoing costs of implementing the change. So for example, it is much easier to get donor support for HIV policy development than support for its implementation. While the means are funded, the opportunity to change is not.

Donors to capacity building also have to contend with the problem that many are also grant funders to partners' projects. In any grant management process there is a monitoring and policing role, making sure that the funding was used accountably. Partners may not be sure whether the donor will be an accomplice supporting the capacity building crime, or whether they are in fact an undercover police agent, who will turn informant — feeding back sensitive information to the project grant managers. For example, if a donor staff member hears about major problems in a local partner (in the course of a strategy development process), they may feel obliged to report this to their grant-making department.

3.5 A-Valuation of the Prize: Using Narrative and Numbers

Another critical element in the capacity building mystery is the need to be able to value the prize or 'count the loot'. This is a complex process, as Praxis Paper 2 on capacity building impact assessment clearly describes. It states that capacity

building, like other development interventions, is difficult to assess due to unclear programme design, complications of power and control, problems in measuring complex and intangible change, and in attributing any impact to the capacity building on its own. Given the complexity of the capacity building prize (a human process of development and change that involves shifts and transformations in relationships and power), this cannot be easily reduced to quantitative measures alone. It requires both narrative and numbers.



The Loot

The complexity of the task means that many capacity building initiatives remain un-evaluated. Because there is limited monitoring and evaluation, there is limited evidence of impact (though this does not mean that there has been no impact, but just that we have no information). Lack of monitoring and evaluation can lead to operational problems, as Praxis Note 11 illustrates. The capacity building work at Mulanje Mission Hospital led to unforeseen increases in both salaries and incentives that almost caused bankruptcy.

Capacity building providers have a responsibility to make a-valuation of the prize. We need to be able to show donors that their investment has paid some dividends — preferably in making a difference to the lives of the poor. This requires discipline and effort.

There are encouraging examples from a number of Praxis Notes that it is possible to generate useful and important, if not definitive, information about the costs and impacts of capacity building. Praxis Note 18 describes ongoing monitoring

throughout the process, such as where the capacity builder undertook regular reviews of the intervention with the client asking: Were the commitments upheld by both parties? Were the objectives met? If not why not? What is the way forward? Did we get the capacity building prize we were hoping for? Something different? Maybe better? Why? Why not? What have been the costs?

In addition, Praxis Note 15 describes a 'quick and dirty' evaluation of a capacity building intervention. Using ranking exercises, timelines, and capacity assessment frameworks, staff perceptions of the extent of change and the reasons for that change were elicited. These could be plausibly associated with capacity building interventions, if not directly attributed. In monitoring and evaluation of capacity building the 'best' is easily the enemy of the 'good'. Extremely time-consuming and expensive monitoring and evaluation processes are designed, but rarely implemented. It is better to undertake a more limited and qualified valuation of the prize, rather than none at all.

The review of CABUNGO, a Malawian capacity building provider, (Praxis Paper 12) used a version of the Most Significant Change methodology to value CABUNGO's contribution to capacity building. This methodology revealed changes in relations and power that other methods might have missed out. It encouraged the partner to take responsibility for their own learning from the evaluation, by involving the partner in the analysis, not just the presentation, of the findings.

The Praxis workshop held by the Community Development Resource Association in South Africa emphasised the importance of linking monitoring and evaluation to organisational learning, but also warned of its potential misuse. Participants concluded that:

'from a learning perspective monitoring and evaluation has been a crucial means of introducing a more conscious, purposeful, planned and 'businesslike' approach to many organisations in the development sector. However, it should not only be looked for in reports, they have to live in the culture and orientation of the organisation as a whole and the individuals in it. The practices of monitoring and evaluation have to contribute towards increased understanding, thinking and practice within the organisation. But, as learning organisations committed to shifting the power relations in society that impoverish and exclude, we are concerned that it is becoming too much of an end in itself. Our experience suggests that while there is evidence that monitoring and evaluation can contribute significantly to improving the efficiency of delivery, it has a tendency to reinforce rather than transform existing power relations. The growing emphasis on monitoring and evaluation is conflating and confusing the two vital functions of accountability and learning.'

4 Supporting the Prize: a Situational Approach for Providers

The preceding findings reveal a number of implications for capacity building providers. To summarise, capacity building providers must endeavour to:

Understand the Context

To build capacity effectively we need to know a lot more than we generally do about where the prize is located. The external context exerts an important influence on both the capacity needs and the capacity building solutions. Praxis has highlighted the importance of tailoring capacity building to the national culture and context.

Clarify the Prize at the Outset

Because capacity building is such a confused and contested term, it is vital to clarify what agendas different stakeholders have at the outset. The diverse purposes need to be clearly understood and negotiated before the process gets underway.

Set up a System for Valuation

Having clearly identified the prize, it is also vital to develop a process for valuing the prize. Capacity building providers need to justify their existence by being able to demonstrate to the client or the donor or to other stakeholders that meaningful change has occurred. This requires both quantitative and qualitative information.

Tamper with the 'Security Systems'

There are a number of factors in the prevailing aid system that inhibit capacity building. Providers need to appreciate these constraints in order to then confront them or work around them. Capacity building providers need to transparently 'bend the aid rules'.

Ensure Adequate Motive

Capacity building providers should focus their energies on those with the motive for change. The mentoring and coaching programme of the Barnabas Trust (Praxis Note 24) only works with those CBOs who already have a clear vision, who have survived the first six months at least, who are accepted by the community and who have integrity and commitment. They should not waste time on processes where the motive for change rests exclusively with an external donor.

Adapt the Means to Fit the Prize

Capacity building providers need to be able to adapt the methods they use to fit the prize. They need to be able to use methods that promote ownership and responsibility, that take a personal approach to change; but that are adapted to the specific culture and context they are operating in.

Provide the Opportunity to Implement

Capacity building providers must be aware that the events they facilitate or the reports they write are only one part of the process of change. They must pay considerable attention to the implementation of the change — ensuring that the opportunity to change is supported. For example, this may require making follow-through not an optional extra for contracts, but a non-negotiable essential element.

Develop and Implement Own Good Practice

Capacity building providers would benefit from clarifying their own good practice approach to capacity building. They must have the courage to implement this approach in all contracts, even if it means:

- they lose out in the bidding process;
- more time invested in understanding the context;
- choosing to disengage if insufficient motive exists;
- developing the skills to implement new methods;
- sticking with the client until there is opportunity to change;
- measuring themselves against these principles.

Lobby for Enlightened Donors

Capacity building providers, with their own sources of self-generated income, are often in a good position to negotiate and lobby with donors — certainly better than many partners who are resource dependent and dare not question donor practices. Donor support to capacity building is critical, but difficult. Donors need all the encouragement they can get.

5 Conclusions

It is clear from the Praxis experience that we already know a lot about good practice capacity building. The diversity of contexts, topics and focus of the interventions highlighted common principles. These are not new. Indeed, many have been part of development theory for years. They are echoed by trends in the commercial management field. INTRAC and others have been advocating such approaches for the last 15 years in almost every publication and training course. And yet if we know what makes capacity building effective, why do we so rarely implement it? If capacity building is so obviously in everyone's interest, why do we struggle so much? This is the real mystery of capacity building.

This paper has highlighted a number of reasons for this. First, we easily underestimate the complexity of the capacity building task. Capacity building is a human process of change that involves shifts in relationships and power. It is therefore incredibly difficult. It is personal and often painful. Capacity building is no quick fix. Even on an individual level, human change is demanding — on an organisational and societal level, exponentially more so. Part of our problem with capacity building is simply that we may not really want it enough to overcome the inherent resistance to change.

Secondly, the Praxis programme has also revealed that culture and context have a considerable influence on the capacity building needs and the appropriate solutions. For example, capacity building will be different in post-conflict contexts or in situations of escalating HIV/AIDS. Our capacity building is often constrained by our ignorance of the situation. Capacity building has to be situational — based on a thorough analysis of the context so that the process addresses an authentic need in a way that is culturally appropriate. Capacity building needs different communication and application in different contexts, in different cultures, in different organisations. Because capacity building is complex, personal and situational, we should stop pretending it is easy and quantifiable. We saw that capacity building is complex to evaluate, and little information exists about the impact of programmes to date. But there are relatively simple ways in which monitoring and evaluation of capacity building can and should be done.

Thirdly, Praxis has also shown how the prevailing aid system prevents many capacity building efforts from succeeding. A preoccupation with short-term results and disbursement of large sums of money with limited transaction costs undermines efforts to implement high quality capacity building. We need to challenge and, where possible, circumvent these constraints.

Fourthly, a major reason for our failure to practice good quality capacity building is that we ignore the critical needs for both motive and opportunity. Any client of capacity building must have a strong motive to change. We cannot merely assume

that because an outside donor thinks an individual, organisation or even society needs to change, that this motive is owned by the client. We should focus our capacity building efforts on those who have clearly demonstrated their commitment to change.

The methods of capacity building should reinforce this motive, and take a personal and people-centred approach to change. There are benefits from using a variety of capacity building methods and communicating creatively and sensitively. Our mechanistic, blueprint approaches have not generally worked. To be effective, we need to tap less tangible, but arguable more powerful, elements of human motivation, intuition and skills. Experience also emphasised that it is vital to make and take the opportunity to change. We cannot just assume that because capacity building was planned it would happen. Implementation of change processes needs management and support with time and resources.

Fifthly, we have tended to underplay the importance of having good accomplices. There is a lack of good capacity building providers in many parts of the world. Capacity building organisations are often fragile and dependent on one or two individuals. The current donor practice of hiring staff from local capacity building providers to manage their own programmes is making this a dwindling resource.

Donors themselves have a critical role to play in catalysing and investing in the capacity building process. This requires donors with foresight and insight who have the courage to support the shifts in power and relationships that capacity building requires.

All of those involved in capacity building must work together to implement good practice. We have to take responsibility for our contribution to the process. We need to negotiate honestly and openly with other stakeholders to create a clear and agreed purpose with a flexible framework. Only by working together honestly and creatively can we unlock the capacity building mystery.

References and Bibliography

Praxis Paper 1: *Capacity Building from a French Perspective* by Mia Sorgenfrei, 2004.

Praxis Paper 2: *Rising to the Challenges: Assessing the Impacts of Organisational Capacity Building* by John Hailey, Rick James and Rebecca Wrigley, 2005.

Praxis Paper 3: *Organisational Learning in NGOs – Creating the Motive, Means and Opportunity* by Bruce Britton, 2005.

Praxis Paper 4: *Building Organisational Resilience to HIV/AIDS* by Rick James, 2005.

Praxis Paper 5: *Capacity Building: Perspectives from the Spanish NGO Sector* by Charlotte Hursey, 2005.

Praxis Paper 6: *Realities of Change: Understanding How African Leaders Develop* by Rick James with Julius Oladipo, Moses Isooba, Betsy Mboizi and Ida Kusiima, 2005.

Praxis Paper 7: *Building Analytical and Adaptive Capacities for Organisational Effectiveness* by Mia Sorgenfrei and Rebecca Wrigley, 2005.

Praxis Paper 8: *Building Organisational Capacity in Iranian Civil Society: Mapping the Progress of CSOs* by Catherine Squire, 2006.

Praxis Paper 9: *Civil Society Capacity Building in Post-Conflict Societies: The Experience of Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo* by Bill Sterland, 2006.

Praxis Paper 10: *NGO Leadership Development: A Review of the Literature* by John Hailey, 2006.

Praxis Paper 11: *Counting the Organisational Cost of HIV/AIDS to Civil Society Organisations* by Rick James with Brenda Katunda, 2006.

Praxis Paper 12: *Learning from Capacity Building Practice – Adapting the 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Approach to Evaluate Capacity Building Provision by CABUNGO in Malawi* by Rebecca Wrigley, 2006.

Praxis Paper 13: *The Organisational Impacts of HIV/AIDS on CSOs in Africa* by Rick James with Brenda Katunda, Betsy Mboizi, Emily Drani, Daudi Kwebwa and Rogers Cidosa, 2006.

Praxis Paper 14: *Coaching and Mentoring for Leadership Development in Civil Society* by Fran Deans and Louise Oakley with Rick James and Rebecca Wrigley, 2006.

Praxis Paper 15: *Organisational Capacity Building in Central Asia: Reflections from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan* by Lola Abdusalyamova with Hannah Warren, 2007.

Praxis Paper 16: *We're Too Much in 'To Do' Mode: Action Research into Supporting International NGOs to Learn* by Maaïke Smit, 2007.

Praxis Paper 17: *Organisational Learning in Civil Society: Influences of Culture, Relational Dynamics and Informality* by Susie Prince and Rebecca Wrigley, 2007.

Praxis Paper 18: *Investigating the Mystery of Capacity Building: Learning from the Praxis Programme* by Rick James and Rebecca Wrigley, 2007.

- Praxis Notes 1-4: *Cross-Cultural Management and NGO Capacity Building* by Terence Jackson, 2003.
- Praxis Note 5: *Mayan Organisation and Management* by Feliz Alvarado, 2004.
- Praxis Note 6: *Using African Proverbs in Organisational Capacity Building* by Chiku Malunga with Rick James, 2004.
- Praxis Note 7: *Working without Words: Exploring the Use of Cartooning and Illustration in Organisational Capacity Building* by Bill Crooks, 2004.
- Praxis Note 8: *The Multi-Cultural Iceberg: Exploring International Relationships in Cambodian Development Organisations* by Jenny Pearson, 2005.
- Praxis Note 9: *Metaphor and Analogy: Creating Meaning and Understanding Complexity* by Bill Sterland, 2005.
- Praxis Note 10: *The Crushing Impact of HIV/AIDS on Leadership in Malawi* by Rick James, 2005.
- Praxis Note 11: *Capacity Building in an AIDS-Affected Health Care Institution, Mulanje Mission Hospital Malawi* by Hans Rode, 2005.
- Praxis Note 12: *Robbed of Dorothy: The Painful Realities of HIV/AIDS in an Organisation* by Betsy Mboizi with Rick James, 2005.
- Praxis Note 13: *Building Capacity to Mainstream HIV/AIDS Internally* by Rick James and CABUNGO, 2005.
- Praxis Note 14: *'Autocratics Anonymous': A Controversial Perspective on Leadership Development* by Rick James, 2005.
- Praxis Note 15: *'Quick and Dirty' Evaluation of Capacity Building: Using Participatory Exercises* by Rick James, 2005.
- Praxis Note 16: *Communities of Practice: Lessons from Latin America* by Brenda Buccheli with Gaby Romo, 2006.
- Praxis Note 17: *Vision Quest: Learning about Leadership Development in Malawi* by Rick James, 2006.
- Praxis Note 18: *Capacity Building at the Grassroots: Piloting Organisational Development of Community Based Organisations in South Africa* by Schirin Yachkaschi, 2006.
- Praxis Note 19: *Future Directions and Donor Policies: Where Does Capacity Building Fit?* 2006.
- Praxis Note 20: *Organisational Learning Across Cultures* by Jenny Pearson, 2006.
- Praxis Note 21: *Addressing Stigma in Implementing HIV/AIDS Workplace Policy, an ACCORD Experience in Uganda* by Angela Hadjipateras with Sunday Abwola and Harriet Akullu, 2006.
- Praxis Note 22: *Analytical Skills Training in Central Asia* by Mia Sorgenfrei with Charlie Buxton, 2006.

Praxis Note 23: *HIV/AIDS in South East Asia* by Mark Shepherd and Robert Baldwin, 2006.

Praxis Note 24: *Mentoring Leaders of HIV/AIDS Community-Based Organisations* by Camilla Symes, 2006.

Praxis Note 25: *Learning Leadership Development from African Cultures: A Personal Perspective* by Chiku Malunga, 2006.

Praxis Note 26: *Capacity Building: Impact from Practice Success Story: SongES Niger 2002-2006* by Bénédicte Maccatory and Kadidia Mambo-Danté, 2006.

Praxis Note 27: *Executive Coaching for Leadership Development* by Dr William Ogara, 2006.

Praxis Note 28: *Appreciative Approach to Capacity Building: The Impact of Practice* by Dipankar Datta, 2007.

Praxis Note 29: *The Serendipity of Capacity Building: A Story from Sri Lanka* by Udan Fernando, 2007.

Praxis Note 30: *Building the Capacity of Human Rights Leaders and their Organisations* by Margaret Ladner, 2007.

Praxis Note 31: *Children in Emergencies: Improving Quality of Response through Capacity Building* by Carol Toms & Heather MacLeod, 2007.

Praxis Note 32: *Learning and Accountability: A Monitoring & Evaluation Consultant's Perspective* by Jerry Adams, 2007.

Praxis Paper No. 18

Investigating the Mystery of Capacity Building

Learning from the Praxis Programme

Rick James and Rebecca Wrigley

Capacity building is a mystery. Despite all the attention to capacity building over the last decade, we are left with nagging doubts and unanswered questions. We are not sure what works and why. Some are not convinced that capacity building makes any positive difference at all.

This paper investigates this mystery. It draws on the experiences shared by capacity building practitioners through the INTRAC Praxis Programme over the past four years. This DGIS-supported programme encouraged capacity building practitioners to reflect on, learn from and disseminate their experiences in the field. To date, practitioners have written 18 Praxis papers, 31 Praxis Notes, and attended six Praxis-supported workshops. They have written from diverse contexts on a wide variety of themes, and yet common issues are emerging. This paper synthesises this learning.

ISBN 978-1-905240-15-9

INTRAC

Postal address: PO Box 563, Oxford, OX2 6RZ, UK

Registered and visiting address: Oxbridge Court, Old Fruiterers Yard, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0ES, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1865 201851 Fax: +44 (0)1865 201852

Email: info@intrac.org Website: <http://www.intrac.org>

INTRAC is a company limited by guarantee No. 2663769

Registered in England

A Registered Charity

Charity No. 1016676