

# Concern Practitioners' Perspectives of Capacity Building

International NGOs are perceived, perhaps erroneously, to be moving away from grassroots support to a greater focus on policy gains for the poor. Concern is also moving to work more strategically, but we would suggest that engagement on the ground has to remain a core part of our role in development.

Building the capacity of local organisations to drive civic-led development remains integral to our overall strategy when we develop partnerships with institutions at all levels — from micro to global. The lessons and trends we have noted in capacity-building practice over recent years can be summarised under three broad headings:

## The focus of capacity building

1) Capacity building seems to be increasingly directed towards 'managerialism' and organisational development, and away from a developmental approach focusing on

positive change in poor people's lives. We should not lose sight of the end we are trying to achieve: poverty reduction.

2) While learning is happening on a continuous basis, learning about management processes seems to be prioritised at the expense of learning about what actually improves the lives of poor people.

3) Our internal organisational orthodoxies are sometimes fundamentally capacity inhibiting — preventing our national staff from contributing their rich, culturally appropriate or challenging perspectives.

## Linking civil society and government

1) We need to specify what part of 'government' we mean. We tend to throw many different elements of the State together — civil servants, technical services, politicians, local councils — without analysing how differing capacities at different levels

might best be developed. With a better understanding of government we can work to improve civil society—State interaction on both sides. An important component of capacity building is the linking of institutions for mutual and public benefit.

2) There is a need for government agencies and civil society to analyse, together, the underlying causes of poverty. Currently, separate analysis leads to separate mindsets and planning and advocacy, and does not build mutual trust.

## The view of civil society

1) Civil society is often viewed as a cluster of individual civil society organisations, as opposed to a broader space for (especially poorer) citizens to debate, act and link their own development needs to those of the nation. Furthermore, INGO support to local NGOs often undermines their critical role as 'facilitator of the development of the poor'. We seem to

be pushing local NGOs to deliver services instead of linking poor people to existing services.

2) The emerging focus on public-private partnerships in service delivery might benefit from the thinking behind the Irish 'Social Partnership' model, where key institutional stakeholders (the government with trades unions,

employers and farming organisations, and the voluntary sector) are forced to negotiate mutually beneficial ways forward. Here, institutions which are effectively 'unions of the poor' would need to be involved, and there would be much work required to support these, especially in Africa.

In summary, our capacity building has often been too instrumentalist in

nature and has not always fostered a deeper analysis of the roles of multiple local actors and their contexts.

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## El Triunfo? Organic Capacity Building in Rural Honduras

It started over 30 years ago in some 120 rural communities in southern Honduras. The people involved were not part of an aid chain. There were no local NGOs, international NGOs or back-donors striving to prove themselves by means of targets reached or projects or programmes effectively managed.

The facilitators of the sessions dedicated to analysing the lived experience of the participants had never heard of a logframe. There were no expectations that in one, two or three years' time the results of this initiative to build local leadership would show 'measurable results evidenced by changes in government policies leading to improved living standards'.

Instead, there were aims shaped around a slow and steady strengthening of social and political awareness and analysis. There was an emphasis on dialogue and exploration, on relationship building and on seeing the whole picture. The work was based on fundamental values of solidarity, volunteerism and communal action and these values were made explicit at every opportunity.

Now, three decades and two generations later, we can see the footprints of this initiative led by the grassroots church in collaboration with the 'escuelas radiofónicas'<sup>1</sup> of the time. We can see the fruits of a Freirian-inspired<sup>2</sup> civil society capacity building initiative that would never have called itself by that name at the time. We can witness the outcomes of a slow and steady building of awareness of the structural causes of poverty, of rights and responsibilities and of the strength that lies in collective action: action that is identified and led by the people most affected — the communities themselves.

So it is that these twenty or so communities have access to roads, primary schools and functioning water committees whilst their neighbours lack such infrastructure. The families from these communities have actively engaged in pushing for agrarian reform and have benefited from the resulting changes in systems of land tenure.

The commitment, the values and the vision of a strong and autonomous actor for change has passed down the generations. Currently, for example, the

granddaughter of one of the original participants is a key figure in a campaign against gender-based violence. This, perhaps, encapsulates the essence of sustainable civil society development.

So what do we learn from this story? What can we take away for reflection? Firstly, a greater investment in capturing and analysing these stories of the long-term impact of civil society capacity building is needed. Furthermore, it is for the civil society actors themselves to define the answer to the 'capacity building for what?' question, and their answers may lead us in many different and unforeseen directions. Lastly, we should learn that not everything can or should be defined in terms of predefined targets and outcomes which increasingly are centrally driven, and which relegate civil society actors to being instruments of delivery or watchdogs of government.

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Thanks for the original information on El Triunfo are due to Sally O'Neill, Regional Director of Trocaire in Central America.

<sup>1</sup> A network of radio schools spread across Latin America in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s who were dedicated to at-distance literacy and 'conscientization' programmes.

<sup>2</sup> Paulo Freire — a Brazilian educationalist whose works, such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, generated a major movement across Latin America of non-formal adult education focused on linking increased 'awareness' with social action for change. At the core was 'conscientization' — developing a consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality.