

Adaptive Management for International Development Programs

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Introduction

Capacity development, that is “the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time” (OECD 2005) has been a key aim of international aid programs. However, capacity development efforts have not met with resounding success despite approximately 25%, or USD15 billion a year, being spent by donors in recent years on technical assistance¹ which has predominantly been aimed at developing capacity. A 1998 review by the World Bank (World Bank 1998) found that the success rate for capacity development efforts was between 30 – 40%. The Commission for Africa (2005) noted in 2005 that achievements were below expectations. The OECD (2007) sees capacity development as being one of the areas which are least responsive to development assistance and therefore one of the greatest challenges.

This paper proposes that development practitioners and donors could benefit from taking an evaluative inquiry-type of approach to the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of capacity development programs. An alternative approach, “adaptive management”, is proposed. Adaptive management moves away from a rational linear $A + B = C$ approach to capacity development towards constructing and testing theories of change² for knowledge generation, adaptation and program improvement.

This paper is divided into three sections. It begins with a brief discussion on how evaluation may contribute to the advancement of a theory of change as it relates to capacity development. Secondly, an alternative approach to the design, implementation and evaluation of capacity development programs are discussed. Drawing on an approach more commonly seen in natural resource and conservation management, the principles and processes of adaptive management are explored as an alternative model. Several challenges to the implementation of adaptive management are highlighted. The paper concludes that while there is much to do to test this alternative model, experience to date supports a learning approach to implementing and evaluating capacity development programs.

A Lack of Theory about Capacity Development

More than 35 years ago, Rossi (1972) 42 cited in (Deutscher 1979) noted that “A large part of the problem presented by broad aim programs lies in the absence of reasonable social science theories which could serve as a guide to the design of social action programs”. It is argued in this paper that the relatively poor success rates of many broad aim capacity development programs is due to an absence of a clearly articulated theory of change or theory of how capacity develops.

The absence of an articulated theory of capacity development to guide program designers and implementers may be explained by a number of factors. The concept of capacity development has been influenced by multiple disciplines and ideologies³ about development processes. The current popularity of the systems approach to capacity development is favoured because of its comprehensiveness and holistic nature. Yet this comprehensiveness, along with the multiple disciplines and ideologies on which capacity development draws, results in a certain vagueness and lack of focus (Lusthaus, Charles Adrien et al. 1999). Additionally, Morgan (2006) suggests that without a common language and understanding of capacity and the lack of an accepted and tested theory, capacity development as a subject has little intellectual status within the broader development community and some people find it difficult to engage and buy-in to the concept.

The absence of a theory of how capacity develops has implications for programs which are trying to build a plausible and sensible conceptual model. In contrast to Chen and Rossi’s (1987) ‘absent’ theory, Weiss (1995) proposes that programs consist of multiple unstated theories which need to be identified in order to make sense of and test them. The further strength of Weiss’s perspective compared with Chen and Rossi’s is the Weiss’ recognitions that decision-making is influenced by politics. International development is an inherently political issue involving political influences and actions. This paper therefore assumes that rather than there being no theory of how capacity develops, it is more likely that capacity development theories are simply not articulated clearly in order for them to be challenged, tested and used by others (Weiss 1995). The absence of articulation itself may be influenced by political processes and decisions. As such evaluative inquiry processes present an

opportunity to construct theory and clarify the way a normative program design is implemented in actual practice, particularly if the implementation is occurring in multiple sites (Stame 2004); Owen, 2006).

Arguments for Alternative Model

The lack of success in achieving capacity outlined in the introduction presents a strong argument as to why a different approach to designing, implementing and evaluating capacity development programs is needed. An alternative approach which openly recognizes and discusses the complexity of capacity development, human dynamics and relationships and theories of change could lead to improved knowledge which in turn could learn to improved outcomes. As the Asian Development Bank (2006) noted in 2006 “more emphasis on operational experimentation, learning by doing, demonstration of results and progressive organizational and procedural adaptation” (ibid: ii) is needed.

Opportunities to create new knowledge and improve the understanding of development generally, and capacity development more specifically, need to be taken. Currently, program designers tend to only give a cursory explanation to what is expected to happen, the how, why and when and rarely is a program’s theory of change made explicit at its commencement (Stame 2004; Mason and Barnes 2007). Development policy-makers, designers and practitioners also design programs with their own biases, assumptions and in line with the latest development ‘thinking’ without necessarily making these influences explicit. Stame (2004) notes programs developed without consideration of research and theories have been given a position of ‘absolute rationality’ at a time when most contemporary policy analysis emphasizes ‘bounded rationality⁴’ and incrementalism. Likewise, evaluations which have concentrated on verifying the soundness of a program, that is what worked or did not work, without questioning the program’s theoretical foundation are equally responsible for adopting an ‘absolute rationality’ bias.

While organizations such as the ADB, noted above, advocate a change in approach it is not always easy to change entrenched ways of thinking and acting. As the Norwegian aid agency, Norad, (2006: 2) comments:

The donor agencies’ willingness to develop and experiment with innovative approaches in technical co-operation is not very impressive. Most technical assistance is delivered in an old-fashioned way, sending experts to partner countries for two or three years, hoping that knowledge and competence will be transferred and that the institutions concerned will be “sustainable” within say 3 – 5 years. Analysis of institutional issues, i.e. their different forms (formal ones such as written constitutions, laws or contracts as well as informal institutions like conduct, conventions and norms) and functions (how they develop and how they guide the behavior of people), are not integrated parts of most programmes and interventions.

However, as Einstein (www.wisdomquotes.com) said “There is nothing that is a more certain sign of insanity than to do the same thing over and over and expect the results to be different”. Perhaps, this is a good reason to try a different approach to the design, implementation and evaluation of capacity development programs. Outlined below is an explanation of an alternative model - adaptive management, followed by some challenges to implementing and sustaining a new approach.

An Alternative Model – Adaptive Management

“Adaptive management” is proposed as an alternative model to designing, implementing and evaluating capacity development programs. The aims of adaptive management are two-fold: firstly, to use an evaluative-inquiry approach to explicitly construct the program theory at the outset and secondly, to use ongoing evaluative-inquiry approach to understand the actual workings of a project, generate knowledge, test the program theory and adapt practice based on this analysis.

The concept of ‘adaptive management’ is not new. The ecologist C.S. Hollings developed the approach in the late 1960s at the University of British Columbia in Canada and the term is common in conservation and natural resource management. More recently, the term has been used in some parts of the development sector, in particular in the context of natural resource management, but it is still far from being commonplace.

It is important to emphasise that this model has not yet been tested. It has been developed following practical experiences with trying to implement learning approaches on a capacity development program in Papua New Guinea, from numerous discussions with development practitioners about capacity development, the factors, particularly cultural and social, which influence changes in capacity,

reviewing current literature and looking at the models and experiences of other alternative approaches such as outcome mapping⁵ and people centred logic⁶.

My working definition of adaptive management is:

... a management practice which recognises that both the process and outcomes of development activities are uncertain and therefore views program actions as tools for learning. Actions are designed so that, even if they fail, they will provide useful information for future actions.

Monitoring and evaluation for adaptive management concerns:

developing enabling structures and processes to regularly reassess desired outcomes and learn what strategies work and do not work. These processes shall emphasise collecting and analysing information and reflecting on people's action, interactions and reactions so that capacity development within developing country systems may be better understood.

Under this adaptive management approach, key questions for development practitioners become: what actions did we want people to take as a result of the intervention/program? How did they act? If there were differences, what reasons were behind this? What were the incentives/disincentives for someone to act differently? Did their action change the interactions they have with other people? Was there a reaction (positive, negative)? If so, what? How might we be able to bring about different actions, interactions, reactions based on this experience?

At this point, it could be asked "So, how is adaptive management different from good project and program management?" There are of course similarities. However, project and program management are premised on processes which are guided by planning, organising, directing and controlling where it is possible to develop a plan, follow it and achieve the expected outcomes (Kersner 2003). Adaptive management starts with the premise that even if program managers have plans they may not be able to predict with certainty what outcomes will actually be realised because of the dynamics of human behaviour. Adaptive management for capacity development programs attempts to recognise that planning, directing and controlling with a definite end-point outcome is difficult, if not impossible. It also recognises that program designers, development practitioners and partners may observe selectively and see what they believe rather than believe what they see. This difference in perception influences the decisions that different stakeholders may make and the actions they may take. Argyris and Schon (1974) explain this phenomena in the following way:

When someone is asked how he would behave under certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory of action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives allegiance, and which, upon request, he communicates to others. However, the theory that actually governs his actions is this theory-in-use (Argyris and Schön 1974: 6-7).

Adaptive management therefore proposes to use evaluative inquiry processes to increase awareness of theories-in-use and espoused theories throughout the implementation of programs in order to generate knowledge and learn from it.

Thus, rather than an inputs-outputs study approach to monitoring and evaluation, the focus for adaptive management is on understanding emergent capacity development processes in particular contexts and how programs can best use this knowledge. Thus evaluation activities focus on:

- which aspects of the program were most effective as well as the interceding causal processes;
- the characteristics of the development practitioners, partners and donors and their theories-in-use and espoused theories; and
- the development context.

All of the above temper the relationship between a program and its outcome. Similar to Patton's (1994) notion of developmental evaluation, the purpose of evaluation for adaptive management is "learning, innovation and change rather than external accountability (summative evaluation) or getting ready for external accountability (formative evaluation)" (Patton, 1994: 318). Hailey and James (2002) argue that producing outcomes that are concerned with learning is being accountable.

Drawing on natural resource management's use of "adaptive management" (World Wildlife Fund, 2004) the proposed principles to underpin adaptive management for capacity development programs are:

- Practice adaptive management individually and collectively;

- Promote organisational curiosity and creativity;
- Value failures;
- Expect surprises and capitalise on crisis;
- Encourage personal learning and growth;
- Create learning organisations and partnerships; and
- Contribute to development learning.

The Process of Adaptive Management

Step A: Design an Explicit Model of Program Action

Evaluative inquiry is used to construct an explicit model of how the program is presumed to solve the identified problem with evaluators drawing out designer's and practitioner's espoused theories, including competing theories. Existing lessons learned, theories and research, if it is available, are used to inform this process and determine the plausibility of the assumptions about how change is thought to occur. This process reflects on past experiences, successes and failures and the specific development context, including social, cultural, environmental, political and economic factors, which may influence change positively or negatively. Key questions at this step include:

1. What issue is the project seeking to improve?
 - What weaknesses and strengths are there in relation to this issue?
 - What are the causes of this problem?
 - What contentious and touchy causes are donors, partners and development practitioners hesitant to talk about or act on? Why do people not talk about them? What impact does this have on efforts to address the issue?
 - What existing relevant knowledge, research and experience are there in understanding and / or addressing this issue? What gaps in knowledge are there?
2. What is the long term outcome that the project hopes to achieve?
3. Who are the stakeholders in this outcome?
 - Of these stakeholders, who does the project want to directly influence?
 - Of the stakeholders that the project wants to influence, who can realistically be influenced? These are the project's direct partners.
4. What changes in the knowledge, attitude, skills, aspirations and confidence of direct partners as a direct result in the project's activities?
5. What would direct partners be expected to be doing differently in the short term, medium term and long term?
6. What strategies will be adopted to bring about these changes? Is there a balance of push – pull strategies and functional – political strategies adopted?
7. What factors may hinder or help success? How will these factors be minimised or maximised?
8. Who may experience loss of power, influence, status or social capital as a result of the project's activities? Who may experience increases in power, influence, status or social capital? What impact could changes have in relationships inside and outside the organisation/community? How is this likely to influence willingness to change current practice?
9. What assumptions have been made about:
 - How capacity development occurs in this particular development context?
 - How culture influences, positively and negatively, capacity development efforts?
 - The factors that motivate partners to change?
 - The benefits for partners?

- How partners will respond to the proposed strategies, and how these responses may trigger responses in others?
 - The level of influence of the proposed strategies and development practitioners?
10. What preconceived notions do donors, partners and development practitioners have about each other? How does this affect what strategies are developed and outcomes developed?
11. Review:
- The project's ability to influence direct partners;
 - The development practitioners', donors' and partners' theories-in-use against their espoused theories;
 - The contentious causes which are and are not addressed by this project;
 - The impact that not addressing contentious issues will have on achieving the expected outcomes;
 - The expected outcomes; and
 - The strategies adopted.

Step B: Develop and Implement a Management Plan That Maximises Results and Learning

Within the management structure and operations, formal and informal spaces for learning and feedback loops should be established to encourage double loop learning which questions the program's and individuals' theories of action. Learning may include:

- Action learning groups which meet on a regular basis to reflect on key aspects of the program theory and actual experiences;
- Incorporating discussions on how culture affects capacity development efforts into the implementation of particular strategies;
- Establishing coaching relationships between partners and technical assistance advisers so each can gain a greater understanding of individual and cultural values and perspectives;
- Regular review and discussion of other international, national and local experiences with developing capacity;
- Research which aims to close the knowledge gaps identified in the design phase or implementation.

Anything which can make the most of opportunities which highlight differences of opinion in understandings, positions and styles is positive as it is these points that can lead to more explicit experimentation and testing of assumptions. Questions for learning focus on testing the assumptions articulated in the design phase and creating new knowledge generated from reflecting on implementation experience. Key questions include:

1. What actions did we want people to take as a result of the intervention/program and how did they act?
2. How did we, the development practitioners and donors, say we would act as opposed to how we actually acted? Why was this? What impact did it have?
3. If there were differences, what reasons might be behind this? Where the motivating factors identified in the design correct?
4. Did partners' actions change the interactions they had with other people?
5. Was there a reaction (positive, negative)? If so, what?
6. How might we be able to bring about different actions, interactions, reactions based on this experience?
7. What things happened that were different from the preconceived notions of donors, partners and development practitioners? Why did these happen? Is it necessary to readjust some of the preconceived notions?

8. What new knowledge do we have based on this experience? How can we best use this knowledge for project improvements?
9. What does the project need to do differently to achieve the desired outcomes?
10. Do the desired outcomes need to be modified based on our increased knowledge and experience? If so, how and why?

Challenges and Opportunities

Lusthaus et al (1999) suggest that practitioners need to be more honest about what information monitoring and evaluation can and cannot provide and investments need to be made in learning and other knowledge-generating efforts. They state that: “We are limited by the state of our present knowledge and methodologies and should be careful not to promise more than we can deliver” (ibid: 18). This model is not proposed as a ‘cure all’ but as a different way of thinking about capacity development programs and the monitoring and evaluation of them. Notably, adaptive management is dependent on a belief that it is possible to learn and improve and a willingness to be honest about the current knowledge of capacity development, capacity development processes and outcomes. It also requires willingness by donors, development practitioners and partners to examine what they say and what they do.

As with the introduction of any new model, there are challenges and opportunities concerning its adoption. Some of these are outlined below.

Carlsson and Engel (2002) claim that the conceptualization of learning for development remains ‘fuzzy’ and this fuzziness can present a challenge if trying to obtain commitment to taking a learning approach to evaluation for something as equally fuzzy as capacity development. As such, adoption may take time and go through several phases as suggested by Rogers’ (Rogers 2003) in his concept of diffusion of innovation: awareness, interest, evaluation, trial and adoption. At any point, a new way of doing things may be rejected by all or some of the people to whom it is being introduced.

The ability to learn may also be limited by the depth of individual and organisational insights into cultural, social and political issues and influences. Unwillingness to engage in new ideas and ways of doing things can restrict learning as can fear of exposure or loss of power and authority, reluctance to admit mistakes due to concern over criticism, loyalty to others and space and time for reflection and resistance to managing any related paperwork (Carlsson and Engel 2002; 2002; Hailey and James 2002). Argyris (1990) notes that if people are faced with issues which may cause significant embarrassment or threat they tend to employ defensive mechanisms. He claims that organisations

prevent people from identifying and getting rid of the causes of the potential embarrassment or threat. Organizational defensive routines are anti-learning, overprotective, and self-sealing (p.25).

Adopting an evaluative inquiry approach for the purpose of generating knowledge to create a theory of how capacity building works may also be confronting for some development practitioners since it requires a level of honesty about their current understanding of capacity development and successes in achieving it. It could be difficult for development practitioners, often described as ‘experts’, to say they ‘don’t know’ or ‘don’t know how’. Roper and Pettit (2002: 263) highlight that people sometimes seek to “[explain] away failures” rather than using them as a basis for changing practice. However, this is not a straightforward process as such an approach requires practitioners to change: Hailey and James (2002) claim that:

Organisational learning is not an impersonal process. Merely creating a learning culture or developing a knowledge strategy is insufficient. It requires human beings to learn and change. All the evidence suggests that organisational learning is dependent upon individuals being both open to new ideas and willing to engage in new learning (p.405).

Even if practitioners are open to learning new ways, and willing to engage in theory development, they may not be “equally competent or equally sensitive to the responses of those they attempt to help” (Deutscher, 1979, p.318).

Donors may also not be willing to hear, or pay, practitioners who say they don’t know. Donors themselves may not feel able to say to taxpayers who fund development assistance that they also do not know. Pasteur (2004) also notes that development agencies often prefer a ‘one solution’ approach even though this may limit the organisational learning that can occur. Research which looked at learning in two donor agencies (Cornwall, Pratt et al. 2004; Pasteur 2004) noted that there was a propensity

towards rewarding competition, and independence over team work, honest reflection and sharing and that learning came under the examination of managers and staff for the use of resources and time and suffered from the pressures of existing workloads and other short term priorities. Additionally, donors may find it difficult to conceptualise how they might contract consulting firms and hold them accountable when a program's journey and results are fluid and adaptation is a core part of implementation yet without any increased guarantee of success.

The process of adaptive management may also be challenging for evaluators since it requires them to take a different approach. For example, rather than making judgments on the value of a project, the role of the evaluator changes to one of conceptualizing, drawing out the practitioner's explanations, including competing explanations, and testing new approaches. The evaluator illuminates development practitioners' thoughts with evaluative data and logic to assist with evidence based decision making. The process is ongoing emphasizing continuous improvement and deliberate adaptation (Patton 1994). This places an even greater emphasis on evaluator's 'soft' skills such as facilitation, reflection and learning rather than technical 'hard' skills.

Like any change process, there are challenges and opportunities for development practitioners, donors and evaluators. Perhaps what has not been explored enough at present are the challenges and opportunities for developing country partners including government officials, private sector organisations and non-government organisations. Would development partners appreciate more open and honest discussions about what development is possible given the contextual influences of culture, politics and the economy?

Therefore, adopting an adaptive management approach will therefore take time, commitment and perseverance and openness to trying a different way of thinking about capacity development programs.

Conclusion

Capacity development is difficult and a review of the literature to date suggests that no one has the answer as to how to make capacity development happen. This paper does not suggest there is a 'right' way to develop capacity nor does it suggest that the suggested process of adaptive management will create all the answers. Development is complex and it is impossible to have complete information or predict what outcomes will be achieved from particular efforts. Rather, adaptive management is a way to increase donors', development practitioners' and development partners' knowledge of capacity development and awareness of what capacity development programs say they do, what they actually do and why they do it. The aim is to make invisible thoughts and actions visible, to make unconscious thinking and actions conscious. Only then can they be questioned and challenged and new knowledge created which can be used to improve the design and implementation of capacity development programs.

As noted earlier, effectively implementing different ways of thinking and doing is not expected to be without its challenges. Operationalising adaptive management will require program managers who are committed to learning and who have the management support of donors and consulting firms to try something different to achieve capacity development. Program managers will require support from a team of development practitioners who have the willingness and skills to be reflective and question their own thoughts and actions as well as the thoughts and actions of others. As Antonio Gramsci, the Italian political theorist, noted, there is a need for "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" (Showstack Sason, 2000). On the one hand we need pessimism of the intellect to encourage us to take action and we also need optimism to believe that our actions will achieve meaningful change despite the challenges.

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¹ Technical assistance, or technical cooperation, includes activities which aim to improve the level of knowledge and skills of developing country partners. This can include the provision of consultants, technical advisers and training.

² Theory of change concerns what actions, with what people, in what setting, will produce what outcomes. This definition is termed by some as theory of action.

³ Disciplines include organizational development, sociology, strategic management and performance management and ideologies about development processes include participation, empowerment and ownership.

⁴ Rationality refers to "uncertain but sensible" arguments based on probability, expectation and personal experience. Bounded rationality has developed with recognition that people are only partly rational since in complex situations it is impossible to formulate and solve complex problems and process and consider all alternatives. People are emotional and irrational in the remainder of their actions. Logic differs from rationality since it is concerned with verifiable facts and the demonstrated links between them.

⁵ Outcome Mapping was developed by the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada.

⁶ People Centred Logic was developed by Jessica Dart, Clear Horizons, Melbourne, Australia.