

# Issues on Capacity-Building in Education Research, Experiences from the Perspective of IDRC

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## BUILDING CAPACITY IN EDUCATION AND IN EDUCATION RESEARCH

The notion of capacity-building is today a central concept in the aid strategies of many international organizations and donors. In its most general sense it denotes the establishment of the human, technical and institutional foundations on the basis of which actions can be taken to achieve higher development objectives. In education, capacity-building has been usually associated with the development of the human competence, the creation and strengthening of institutions, and the formation of an efficient infrastructure for planning and delivery of educational services.

In education research, the views about capacity building have become increasingly more complex over the last decade. From an early, somewhat limited notion of technical or advance training of the few who would enter the new cadres of educational researchers, capacity building has become a richer and more encompassing concept. Building capacity in education research has come to mean developing a national pool of research abilities and skills, institutional structures, financial resources and the political conditions deemed necessary to identify problems and assess needs, establish priorities, design and implement development programs, and plan, formulate, analyze and evaluate educational policies.

Donor agencies and international organizations have had an active and direct role in shaping the current understanding of building capacity in education in developing countries in the 1980s. The relationship between these organizations and developing countries has not been free of difficulties. More often than not, conflicts have emerged between the donors' agendas and priorities and those of the countries in need of strengthening their capacities in education in general and in educational research in particular.

This paper addresses some issues that need further examination in the current efforts to build capacity in education in general and in educational research in particular. It also outlines some of the experiences in capacity building of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in funding research in education.

## DILEMMAS AND TENSIONS IN BUILDING CAPACITY IN EDUCATION

Donors have been major actors in educational development, wielding enormous financial power and influence not only on State institutions and universities but also upon individual researchers. Africa is perhaps the best example of this trend in its current expression. Despite the fact that the role of donors in developing countries has changed over the last ten years, and that their views on capacity building have evolved, some key concerns emerging from the donors-developing countries relationships around capacity-building in education remain much the same.

Perhaps less explicitly addressed in education research, some of the practical, financial, political and even ethical considerations voiced ten years ago about donors' driven initiatives to build educational research capacities in the developing world can be raised today about some of the on going efforts. Much concern still exists about the power of the donors. Both individually and

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collectively, donors are perceived as capable not only of influencing but also conditioning indigenous actions to build or improve capacity in education and in education research.

In today's scenario it is of great urgency not only to know more about the various programs and activities being led by different donors, but also to examine some of the longer term risks and implications of their current actions. In a context of rapid change in world development and a dramatic crisis of resources in the developing world, those risks are greater now and the implications potentially long lasting.

There is a wide range of issues that needs to be examined in regard to the on going strategies in capacity-building in education research. To what extent, for example, do current strategies reflect developing countries' research priorities? How effective are the efforts made by donors to broaden developing countries' participation in the definition of the agendas that guide donors' allocation of financial resources? What is the correspondence among the various donors' initiatives aimed at capacity building in education research? What is the impact of these various initiatives on national resources and structures? What consideration is being given by the various international actors in these initiatives to the political, social, cultural and ethical implications of current capacity-building strategies? And how do these initiatives relate to broader development issues, both in terms of the donors' working agendas and in terms of the efforts being made by developing countries to cope with their development crisis?

### **Capacity-Building and National Needs**

While developing countries in most regions, particularly in the poorest countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia struggle to cope with the economic and social impact of adjustment programs, education has witnessed a new revival in the international arena. Governments in developing countries are being impelled to respond to various initiatives to better their educational capacities. These attempts not only bring additional pressures to the fragile educational and service structures in many countries, but risk stretching their material and human resources in many directions. The question of how education fits into nationally defined development priorities is an issue that needs further attention from both governments and donors.

One of the changes in the approach to capacity-building over the last decade seems to be a shift in the focus of attention from needs defined by developing countries to more programmatic concerns defined by the donor country. Many efforts today tend to emphasize thematic and/or process-oriented aspects of capacity-building, seeking to determine what works, rapidly and at low cost. Within the framework of these efforts, broad approaches that are often regional in scope are being adopted which risk translating capacity-building efforts into macro geographical exercises without national boundaries or cultural specificity. What capacity-building in education and in education research means in each national setting, and how such understanding reaches the international centres of decision-making for the allocation of aid to education, are issues that need to be explored further.

### **The Need for Further Coordination**

Donors and international organizations face a pressing responsibility to coordinate their efforts. How this coordination can take place given the variety of priorities, agendas and geo-political interests behind their actions, is an issue that must also be faced in regard to capacity-building in education and in education research.

To be effective, however, such coordination cannot be restricted exclusively to the members of the donors' community. It requires opening the on going discussions and efforts to the participation of the principal actors operating at the implementation end of the spectrum. Donors need to look beyond governments as their counterpart.

The existing mechanisms for developing countries' participation and for the coordination of the international fora that address issues of capacity-building in the South must be revisited. Developing countries' participation in these fora cannot be limited to government representatives. Donors in turn have different expertise and work with different audiences that must be brought into the picture in a coordinated manner. There is a whole conglomerate of non-government organizations, private research institutions, higher education centres and researchers that should be seen as direct partners. In many countries, they are the agents most actively involved in the identification of viable, low-cost alternatives and it is they who can assist and enlighten donors seeking to respond to the question of how to build research capacity in education more effectively.

### **Enhancing Developing Countries' Participation**

Despite the progress made, the donors' community has still a long way to go in identifying mechanisms on the basis of which the international discourse on partnership can take a more concrete and effective form. The issue of capacity-building in education is not exclusively one of more or massive financial resources. Building capacity in the developing world implies accepting and heeding the principles and values which give concrete expression to concepts such as empowerment and self-reliance, so often cited in today's international discourse about education.

A forward looking notion of capacity-building must encompass not only the empowerment and self-reliance of developing countries' governments to dialogue with the international community, but also of developing countries' peoples to interact with their own governments. In this regard, the donors' concept of and efforts in capacity-building in education must be rooted in a broader vision of effective political participation in social policy processes.

### **Building Capacity In Education in a Broader Context**

Such a vision implies placing capacity-building efforts in education and in education research in the context of national development from an inter-sectoral perspective. Strengthening capacity in education in developing countries is more and more a central ingredient of national efforts in social policy reforms. Within this framework, it is then critical to examine the international approaches promoted for capacity-building, for its maintenance and utilization, and the impact they may have on the broader inter-sectoral policy capacity of the State in developing countries.

Quite often the main obstacles found in those national settings where education and education research capacity are needed are not exclusive to the education sector itself. Some of the major constraints to building, sustaining and utilising research capacity in education are by-products of the prevailing atmosphere of political intolerance, instability and repression coupled with the effects of economic decline and unequal distribution of available resources. The combined effects of these factors lead, to a large extent, to the current lack of resources in the education sector, brain drain, decline of research institutions and emasculation of the most creative and productive researchers. The conditions of most countries in Africa, Central America, and the poorest nations in South-east Asia are tangible examples.

The impact of the overall national environment on the research community and institutions is often more complex than can be captured by regional and cross-country international strategies to

capacity-building. How these strategies relate to specific development environments at the country level, and how the lack of attention to their characteristics may impair donors' efforts, need to be examined more carefully. Capacity-building efforts without changes in the broader national environments risk making little difference in the long-term. Adopting an inter-sectoral approach implies looking at how developing capacity in education research, for example, fits into the broader economic strategies of governments, but also at how it relates to their political actions, including safeguarding the human rights of researchers. In this regard, the donor community can learn a great deal by examining the impact of years of repressive political regimes in the Southern-cone of Latin America. Under conditions of political environments unfavourable to the strengthening of research capacity in education, universities and private research institutions often suffer the most. They are, at the same time, key to capacity-building in regard to issues such as academic freedom and the right of the scientific community to hold critical and differing ideas to those of the State.

### **Modes and Approaches to Capacity Building In Education**

The relevance of these issues in building educational research capacity, and the growing influence of donors and international organizations in this sphere, highlight the need to pay further attention to the modes of operation and methods used for capacity-building. There is a need, for example, to elucidate in the context of different national environments, the implications of short-term project funding as a mechanism of building and sustaining research capacity. Often the emphasis on institutional needs ignores the cumulative and long-term impact of problem-oriented research projects. Conversely, the funding of individual researchers may create tensions with the funding of institutional projects which might not necessarily strengthen capacity. How could these tensions be resolved is a question in need of further examination.

In environments where capacity is weak, qualified human resources are scarce. How to tap into local/national expertise in a creative and reliable manner to build research capacity without overloading the individual and institutional capability that already exists is another critical issue. Equally important are the efforts to maximize the utilization of the products resulting from this type of support. How could information bases that can service not only donors and international organizations but the decision making centres at the national levels be created and maintained?

Excessive reliance on research which is policy relevant may risk ignoring the importance of funding basic research in education. While the need to optimize existing resources justifies the funding of research that can have the greatest impact under difficult economic circumstances, basic research is crucial to the generation of knowledge and to the critical debate that must accompany policy decision-making.

The broader issues of how development assistance is identified and utilized also require attention, particularly in national environments where human resources are limited. Although the use of foreign experts has proven to be expensive, donors and their constituencies tend to ignore local capacities even when this is most suitable. While this tension is not easily resolved, it nevertheless requires increasing attention. Long-term capacity will be difficult to build if a dependency on foreign expertise for research, policy analysis and implementation of development programmes is maintained.

The panorama of declining institutional capacity in many countries as a result of national economic constraints often leads to building or encouraging institutions parallel to those which are in decline. Further attention must be paid to rehabilitating weaker institutions, particularly those with a tradition of national research in education. Donors are often more inclined to develop their own mechanisms and institutions to meet what they perceive to be the needs for research, policy analysis and

implementation capability. African and Latin American universities have suffered most from this phenomenon. Current initiatives in Africa, for example, such as the African Capacity Building Initiative (ACBI), the African Capacity Building Foundation, the Task Force of the DAE, and the establishment of expatriate dominated units in the Ministries of Planning, Finances, Education, etc. need to be examined with this perspective in mind. The establishment of donor driven and sustained institutions risk being seen as an expression of donors' distrust of local institutions and capacities, and may undermine the potential capability of local institutions, contradicting thus the declared objectives of building and strengthening indigenous capacities in education research.

## **IDRC EXPERIENCE IN CAPACITY BUILDING IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

The experience of IDRC in building capacity in educational research is framed within the mandate of the Centre. The activities that IDRC supports **help developing countries build the scientific competence of their institutions and researchers so that these countries can work to solve their own problems. Research projects supported by IDRC are, therefore, identified, designed, conducted, and managed by developing country researchers in their own countries, to meet their own priorities.**

In its work in education, the Centre applies a variety of capacity building mechanisms in addition and/or as a complement to regular problem-specific project funding. In all its modes of operation, IDRC deals primarily with developing country research institutions as its formal partners, these government based, private research NGOs or universities.

Seven broad inter-related modes of support can be identified in the Centre's efforts to build research capacity in education:

### **Networks**

Support to networks of researchers and research institutions in developing countries has been used over the past several years by the Centre to strengthen communications among researchers and institutions, encourage the dissemination and utilization of research results, facilitate the training of researchers and exchange of technical expertise, and promote information exchange among researchers and policy-makers. Networks can be national, regional or inter-regional in scope.

In Africa, IDRC has supported the development of the Educational Research Network for Eastern and Southern Africa (ERNESA) and the Educational Research Network for Western and Central Africa (ERNWACA). Both networks were established to facilitate exchange of information, enhance research training and output, share research experiences and expertise, foster the emergence of a research culture and a community of scholars around issues of educational practice and policy.

In its short existence, ERNESA has contributed to strengthening local research capabilities in a number of ways. This network has brought to the attention of African educational researchers the need for communication and sharing of information. It has encouraged the setting of national professional educational research associations. Ten such associations are now in existence in Eastern and Southern Africa. It has facilitated, within each country, communications between researchers working in universities, Ministries of Education and other national institutions. In some countries it has led to the creation of documentation centres. ERNESA has also contributed to the organization of regional workshops and to the exchange of information with IDRC-related networks

in other regions such as REDUC in Latin America and the South-east Asia Research Review and Advisory Group (SEARRAG).

Through ERNESA, African researchers have contributed to the discussions of international initiatives in education such as those that followed the release of the World Bank Report on Education in Sub-Saharan Africa and those which corresponded to the process and outcomes of the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA). Some of the national educational associations fostered by ERNESA have become important mechanisms for bringing together researchers and policy-makers to air their views on pressing educational issues. This has been particularly true in countries such as Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe. Both ERNESA and ERNWACA, however, are donor driven initiatives and have as yet to take up a fully independent existence. Further efforts must also be made to strengthen the much needed communication not only among the researchers involved but also among their institutions.

In Latin America, the Centre has supported the establishment of two regional networks. One of them, the Latin American Network of Research in Education and Work, comprises over three hundred researchers across the region, including among its members various regional organizations such as the Unesco office for Latin American and the Caribbean (OREALC) and Cinterfor. The network focuses on issues related to research on technical education, vocational training, the transition between the school and the labour market and education for the informal sector. The other is the Network on Indigenous Education in Andean Countries. It involves research institutions and NGOs working on research and extension activities in formal and non formal education related to indigenous people. It addresses issues of adult basic education, literacy and bilingual education.

In Asia IDRC supports the South-east Asia Research Review and Advisory Group (SEARRAG). This is a regional network of researchers developed following the model of the international Research Review and Advisory Group (RRAG), created by IDRC in the late 1970s. At national levels, the Centre provides support in Thailand for the Qualitative Research Network and for the Network on Qualitative Research Training in Non Formal Education. While the former attempts to strengthen qualitative research capability in general through intensive training, research awards, and dissemination of information through a newsletter and publications on qualitative research approaches, the latter provides training for researchers on qualitative research methods at the national, regional and provincial levels.

### **Small Research Grants**

Support to small-research grant programs is another effective mechanism for supporting the building of research capacity in education. This approach is aimed primarily at developing local capacity in educational research in weaker environments by supporting young researchers and thus strengthening national efforts in training the new generation of researchers.

Examples of this mode of support can be drawn primarily from the IDRC experience in Africa. Two small-research grants schemes in Eastern and Southern Africa, BOLESWA (Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland) and KUTERA (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) provide unique on-the-job-training opportunities for capacity building. Junior educational researchers are supported to undertake educational research in the framework of their institutions. Local senior researchers are used as trainers, coordinators and supervisors of the grant awardees. This approach has proven to be an important component in capacity-building and for the utilisation of existing capacity in strengthening local research institutions. In Eastern Africa, universities have benefitted from this scheme, while

among the Boleswa countries national educational associations and other educational institutions have been the main beneficiaries.

Both schemes have fostered networking within the countries involved, utilisation of local training capacity, exchange of information, breaking of academic isolation and emergence of a nascent scholarly community. Regional dissemination workshops have provided important fora for peer review and exchange on such issues as the formulation of research problems, research methodologies, data analysis, policy implications and quality control in general. There are still aspects which further development is required, including the selection of awardees, co-ordination, supervision and quality control. When the current phase of these initiatives is completed in 1992, they will have trained close to one hundred researchers in the region.

### **Program Support**

Support to programs of research in institutions of proven quality has been a mechanism used by IDRC to maintain and strengthen research capacity in education. This approach often involves a combination of project support, training and dissemination with a policy-oriented research focus and frequently involves longer-term support. It is built around the existing research programs of an institution, and provides the research institutions with greater flexibility to establish research and institutional development priorities.

This mechanism has been used primarily with institutions in the Southern-cone of Latin America. Research centres such as the Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo en Educación (CIDE), the Programa Interdisciplinario de Investigación en Educación (PIIE), and CENECA in Chile, and the FLACSO Program in Argentina have received this type of support. In most cases where this mechanism has been used, it has been highly effective in reinforcing the policy analysis capacity of the institutions and in maintaining a critical mass of researchers. Broad thematic research areas have been addressed through this type of support including the relationship between education and society, and between education and re-democratization, educational decentralization, the links between education and communication policies, and the role of secondary education.

The Program Support approach was an important tool in research-capacity building during the time when educational capacity in Southern-cone countries, and social sciences capacity in general, were seriously threatened by politically repressive governments. The research outcomes of these activities have, over the medium-term, provided important input into the processes of educational reform that are currently taking place in the countries where the institutions are based.

### **Institutional Support**

Support to research institutions has been an important aspect of IDRC' operations in capacity-building. In its broader form institutional support comprises the financing of the basic operations of an institution ranging from support for the salary of researchers to limited support for infrastructure. In its narrower expression it involves support aimed at strengthening specific research functions within an institution. Universities, private research centres, research units within Ministries of Education and even small grass-roots NGOs which combine research and extension activities have benefited from this mechanism. In some cases the aim is to improve research and policy analysis capabilities, in others it is to develop capacities in particular research approaches or methods, to strengthen dissemination capacities or simply to facilitate exchange of expertise.

Often research projects supported in weak research institutions or in countries where the overall research environment in education is poor include institutional support in its narrower expression.

This approach has been used in some of the Andean countries and in Central America, in some countries in South-east Asia and later in Indochina, and in Africa. Given the budgetary constraints experienced by research institutions in the Sub-Sahara, for example, assistance of this kind has been a welcome relief. This type of support in periods of scarcity has enabled many small institutions in Eastern Africa to retain and sustain their research programmes, personnel and overall research infrastructure.

### **Support of Research NGOs**

Building research capacity among NGOs is a critical and necessary component in capacity building efforts. Small, private research institutions often closely associated with non formal educational initiatives at the community level have been traditionally key agents in the development and implementation of low-cost innovations in education and in fields that involve a strong education component, such as health, nutrition, community development and the environment. In IDRC's experience in supporting research in education, research NGOs have often occupied an important place as partners in project support.

In Latin America research NGOs have played a vital role in servicing the educational needs of communities and groups such as marginal youth, women, and ethnic minorities. A similar phenomenon is now being witnessed in Asia. In Africa, the experience, although more limited, has been equally rich. A project to examine the use of computers in education in Kenya and the Mindsacross project in Uganda are examples of work at this level.

Efforts to support capacity building among research NGOs, particularly in Eastern and Western Africa need to be given more attention, as a recognition of the plurality of actors involved in educational change. Thus, for example, the WCEFA has recognized the need for partnerships with community-based organizations in the provision of basic education. Their research capacities have to be built, improved and sustained if they are to provide informed inputs into education policy, change and implementation. This perhaps represents one of the most critical challenges for donors to face in the future.

### **Collaboration with other Donors**

One recent example of inter-agency collaboration in capacity building in education research is the on going involvement of IDRC in the Task Force of Donors on African Education. The Centre, as the leading agency of the working group on Capacity-Building in Educational Research and Policy Analysis has commissioned studies aimed at assessing the existing policy analysis capacity in education in sixteen countries, eight in West and Central Africa and eight in Eastern and Southern Africa. The purpose has been to gather information on the status of management, training programs, research quality and research results as a means to identify current strengths and weaknesses in capacity-building in education research in the region.

Collaboration with other donors and international organizations has also taken place in the past, in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and West Africa around specific research projects. Areas that have benefited include research on pre-school education, distance education and technical-vocational education, among others.

### **Cooperative Program Support**

IDRC efforts in education research also attempt to involve Canadian expertise in building education research capacity in developing countries. Through different modalities, the Centre supports joint



ventures between Canadian and developing country research institutions around issues of common interest and experience which are worth sharing and replicating.

The Cooperative Program Support of IDRC is aimed at strengthening partnership relationships rather than traditional relations of technical assistance. Collaborative projects supported by the Centre have provided Canadian educators and researchers the opportunity to build upon their understanding of the developing world and its different research and cultural traditions, and to expand their comprehension of education problems affecting the Canadian society. Developing country researchers and institutions have benefited from the technical capacity that exists in Canada in areas of research methodology and data analysis, access to information and training. Issues of bilingual multi-cultural education, women's education, education of ethnic and indigenous minorities, vocational education, and global issues on low-cost programs of health, nutrition and environmental education have been research areas of mutual benefit.

The exchange of researchers and training of junior researchers of Canadian and developing country origins have occurred as part of collaborative research in areas where practical educational experience is of mutual benefit. This has ranged from opportunities of exposing researchers, educators and educational policy-makers in Canada to educational experiences and innovations in the developing countries, to establishing bridges between researchers and institutions in Canada with partners in the South, and to creating opportunities for the enhancement of institutional research capacities in education which may involve public and private sectors.

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