# Between Pragmatism and Idealism: Implementing a Systemic Approach to Capacity Development

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**Abstract** Implementing a systemic approach to capacity development is more challenging than stakeholders expect and can be difficult to communicate to colleagues, donors and intended beneficiaries. This article explores challenges faced by the IDS Knowledge Services as it sought to turn an understanding of capacity development into practice. Drawing on the experience of one small scale programme it argues that:

- for organisations to facilitate capacity development, they themselves need to change;
- customary understandings of capacity development are an obstacle to effective demand-led approaches;
- promoting critical reflection may be the most sustainable activity for facilitating capacity development.

It concludes that the process of translating an understanding of capacity development into practice requires treading a line between pragmatism and idealism. This approach has ethical and practical challenges which capacity development practitioners need to counter by considering the impact that they have on others, by being aware of their own capacity and working to change understandings of capacity development.

## 1 Introduction

Implementing a systemic approach to capacity development is more challenging than stakeholders expect and can be difficult to communicate to colleagues, donors and intended beneficiaries. This article explores some of the challenges faced by the IDS Knowledge Services as it sought to turn an understanding of capacity development into practice. It shares insights and ideas that the author hopes will be of both practical and theoretical interest to both capacity development practitioners and those that seek to strengthen theory of capacity development.

## 2 Context

This story begins in 2005, when the Information Department at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) had been providing information and knowledge services such as 'eldis', 'id21' and 'BRIDGE' for over a decade. What had started as a pioneering and experimental approach to provision of information and knowledge services,

collectively known as the IDS Knowledge Services, was becoming more established and by 2005, our reputation as one of the leading players in this area was widely recognised. We had been involved in the creation and handing over of some services based on our models and donors felt that we should be moving to share what we had learned and lever our now considerable capacity to enable others.

The Mobilising Knowledge for Development (MK4D) programme, a three-year funding agreement with DFID (subsequently extended to four years) provided us with an opportunity to do so. The proposal for the MK4D programme primarily focused on the deliverables that would be provided by the IDS Knowledge Services, but in a short section entitled 'capacity building' stated:

> We also plan to take a more proactive approach in capturing, sharing and learning from our experience as a knowledge

intermediary, and using it to help to develop the knowledge sharing capacity of other organisations – particularly those in developing countries… Some resources will be ring-fenced with the intention of catalysing new initiatives in this area and a full-time coordinator will be recruited to take this work forward. (IDS 2005: 25)

That full-time coordinator was myself. This context is shared to help the reader get a sense of the origins, scale and ambition of this area of work, something I often struggled with as I read descriptions of capacity development programmes. It was, I came to realise, an unusual scope. Like many capacity development programmes it was quite supply driven, in that it started from a sense that we had something to share that others would find of use. However, unlike other capacity development programmes, it did not start from a perceived capacity gap within a defined project, from a clearly defined set of stakeholders whom it should benefit, or a model of delivering capacity building interventions.

This article outlines my personal insights generated through research and learning by doing and reflection, as I tried over the period between 2005 and 2009 to design and implement a capacity development strategy.

### 3 Building understandings of capacity development as a basis for action

While IDS had previously been involved in a range of activities to support capacity development, it was a new area for the IDS Knowledge Services. As outlined above, the driver for our work was the sense that we had experience to share that would be of value to others; however, there were relatively few other determinants for our work.

This relatively unusual situation meant that, as the person charged with developing and implementing a strategy, I had a clean sheet from which to start. I was determined that our capacity development work would not fall into the patterns of ineffective action that I had witnessed previously. In early communications about our emerging approach, I stated confidently that 'our capacity development strategy will seek to leapfrog discredited approaches to capacity development' (Taylor and Clarke 2008: 17).

I developed an understanding of capacity development by drawing on the literature, in particular an early draft of the ECDPM framework in 2006 (Morgan 2006): analysis of conversations with colleagues and other capacity development practitioners and through reflection of my own experiences.[1]

The key elements of the understanding of capacity development that emerged from this process can be summarised as follows:

- Capacity is: 'The ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully…'.[2] Capacity development is a process whereby capacity is positively enhanced, it is also an expression of a desired outcome. Capacity development interventions, often called capacity building, are activities, programmes or inputs which are aimed at changing the state of capacity for an organisation, person, network, society or context; needless to say these activities do not always result in capacity development.
- Capacity exists at different interrelated levels: individual; organisational; network or sector; and enabling environment – interventions need to be mindful of the connections between them; for example, increases in capacity at an individual level can decrease capacity at an organisational or even societal level – brain drain is a good example of this.
- Capacity is made up of a set of related capabilities, the skills of an individual to deliver on a set of tasks is only part of a much broader picture and will only be effective if related capabilities of the system, of which the individual is a part, enable them to be.
- Effective capacity development is most likely to result from a range of interventions at different levels that happen over a long period of time. The most familiar type of capacity development intervention is training, which is likely to play a part in any capacity development programme.
- Every person, organisation and system has capacity; it is not something that is generated or increased only through external intervention. Capacity can increase or decrease in response to many factors. Capacity development interventions can deliberately or inadvertently decrease capacity as well as help to increase it.

In addition, work with my colleagues helped generate some shared principles for our capacity development work. Among these principles and aspirations were that it should: be closely tied to our strategic objectives; be designed in collaboration with stakeholders to take into account context and cultures and help us in achieving mutual outcomes; be a two-way learning process not just a one-way transfer of skills; and aim to create new knowledge, as well as replicate/transfer existing knowledge to strengthen our work in this sector (Fisher 2006).

This combination of understanding and principles created the theoretical framework on which I/we[3] sought to base our capacity development strategy and its implementation. What became clear is that the theoretical framework and the approach taken to practice do not embody a typical understanding of capacity development. This article will now explore some of the challenges arising from trying to turn this atypical theoretical understanding into action, and some of the insights that arose in the process.

**4 Facilitating capacity development requires openness for your own organisation to change**
The driver for IDS Knowledge Services becoming involved in facilitating capacity development was the sense that we were moving from a pioneering exploratory phase to a position of acknowledged leadership from where we had a responsibility to develop the capacity of others in that role. However, as many undergraduates know, having a deep knowledge of a subject does not make an expert a good lecturer. Equally, being able to do something effectively does not automatically mean that you will be able to help others to play that role effectively.

It was clear that in order to become effectively engaged in facilitating capacity development, the IDS Knowledge Services and the individuals and teams who delivered them needed to change. The ways of working within the department were set up to deliver services, not to support others to do so. In order to share what we knew with others, we needed to get better at knowing what we knew about what worked and how, understanding what might be of use to others and in what contexts, and how to share it in an effective and sustainable way. In keeping with our pioneering service delivery role, many of the staff were 'doers' who undertook learning by

doing, the results of which were implemented but were not always well documented. Staff worked in teams in which individuals applied and developed their skills and insights, acting with reasonable autonomy and this meant that rarely did one person know about all aspects of service delivery. In addition, the context that provided the basis for our work was largely invisible to us and the thinking that underpinned our work was rarely questioned. Thus, while we were able, in theory, to explain aspects of what we did (building databases, writing document summaries, editorial processes) we were not able to talk about why we did it that way.

Therefore, the knowledge held within the department was tacit, which posed practical challenges. If knowledge of different tasks was mainly held in people's heads, how could it be usefully shared with others without removing staff from service delivery to support others? The knowledge we held was also primarily functional rather than analytical or strategic. The functional nature of this knowledge meant most people in the department were not able to talk meaningfully about creating and enabling a context in which those tasks could be implemented – and implemented in a way that would achieve development results.

Overcoming these challenges required us to be more explicit about our work, to be able to talk about what we do in ways that were meaningful to others. It required finding ways of drawing insights from practice and then ways of sharing them. Practically, within the department there needed to be some people who were less tied to delivery of services who could become involved in engaging with others in capacity development activities but doing so drawing on a body of knowledge and experience, not just their own. This required everyone to be more reflective about what they do and why, more aware of the context in which they operate and the assumptions that guide their action.

It was difficult to see how the changes in the working practice this implied could be undertaken without impacting on the core business of delivering services. For example, staff argued they were too busy to participate in regular reflection events and could not be spared to spend time on capacity development activities. Consequently, the need for the IDS Knowledge

Services to change in response to its new role proved a huge challenge to moving forward and implementing an effective capacity development strategy. When it became clear that facilitating capacity development in line with our principles may impact negatively on delivery of services, commitment to our core business unsurprisingly took precedence and the capacity development agenda became less of a shared priority.

After my initial attempts to demand change proved ineffective, I adopted less direct approaches that did not challenge the status quo. I focused on working with champions within our own system, helping them to have a positive experience of capacity development activities and sharing understandings through informal conversation rather than demands for changes in policy or approach. A more reflective approach was introduced subtly, embedded in accepted activities such as monitoring and evaluation and marketing of services or a strategy review process. It was also integrated into activities accepted as legitimate capacity development activities, for example producing 'how to' guides (known instead as 'how we' guides in order to be less normative). The production process required staff to engage in double loop learning[4] looking not only at *what* we did and *how* we did it but considering why we did it *that way* and encouraged people to engage with the assumptions behind their work.[5] Over time, the value of this culture of deeper engagement with the thinking behind action and greater reflection has been accepted. Learning is much higher profile in the second phase of the Mobilising Knowledge for Development programme starting January 2010 and the need for everyone to engage in facilitating capacity development has now been mainstreamed into job descriptions. This also suggests the usefulness of identifying windows for change, such as the start of a new funding agreement or change in senior management, as points for reviewing organisational ways of working.

## 5 The term capacity development is best avoided
When seeking to develop a capacity development strategy that does not conform to mainstream understandings, the term itself can be a barrier to useful discussion about how to move from theory to practice.

I found that for many people not involved in undertaking capacity development, the term and the activities they associated with it were viewed with some scepticism. Some saw the concept as based on neo-colonial attitudes to development in which knowledge is assumed to lie in the North or as a means of introducing Northern models to the South. Others saw it as a development fad or simply meaningless jargon, while others saw it as a front for generating money for essentially unsuccessful activities. Ironically however, while scepticism about the value of mainstream approaches to capacity development is widespread, in people's minds the term and use of certain approaches remain inextricably linked, so activities that did not conform to such approaches somehow could not be capacity development. For example, after one workshop a participant from IDS commented: '*I learned as much from the other participants as they did from me, so was it really capacity development?*'

For those who were involved in designing and delivering capacity development interventions, an activity-based idea of capacity development prevailed. Practitioners could describe the activities they undertook and clearly had strong ideas about what capacity was and how it developed. However, attempts to probe the ideas that underpinned their work was generally met with confusion, hostility, resistance or on one occasion, the suggestion that I had too much time to think!

Finally, attempts to discuss capacity development ideas with potential beneficiaries or stakeholders were shaped by an understanding of capacity development as provision of training programmes or hardware from the Northern organisation to the Southern. Attempts to discuss ideas that did not fit within this understanding were seen as vague, too theoretical and were generally concluded with the suggestion that I get in contact when I had a better idea of what I had to offer.

I have concluded that the term capacity development is useful when understood as a purpose or outcome that can be worked towards through a range of activities and that this understanding is shared by those involved. However, processes through which shared understanding may be generated or differences in understandings explored are difficult to organise and subject to resistance. In the absence of this shared understanding, more useful

discussion can be generated if the term is avoided. It may be useful to adopt approaches that explore enabling and inhibiting factors that determine whether a person, team, organisation or sector can function effectively without referring to capacity.

## 6 Demand-led capacity development can be difficult to realise

Traditional approaches to capacity development are typically supply driven, whereby capacity development organisations package their knowledge or resources into sharable formats (often training programmes) that are then offered to intended beneficiaries, who accept and decline for many reasons, not all of which will be related to the intended purpose of what is on offer. The limits of such approaches are now well known and increasing importance is placed on demand-led capacity development, which is owned by the organisations involved. However, ensuring your work is demand-led can be difficult if your model of capacity development does not conform to typical understandings, either in terms of the kinds of capacities in question or the kinds of activities that could strengthen those capacities.

In the cases where we did encounter demand for capacity development, it was often for training on specific aspects of delivering our service model such as using certain web technologies or writing for policy audiences. Such requests were probably informed by previous experiences of traditional capacity development activities, rapid assessments about what we as a Northern organisation might have to offer, and a quite technical understanding of the nature of our work.

However, our approach to capacity development suggested that unless functional tasks are embedded within an appropriate enabling framework, then providing training on how to undertake them is unlikely to deliver the intended results. As such, I attempted to resist channelling our limited resources into meeting these demands without reference to the broader context in which skills would be applied and tasks undertaken.

One opportunity for applying our more systemic approach to capacity development was provided by a shift in the IDS Knowledge Services delivery model, which saw greater emphasis on working in bilateral partnership with peers. Capacity development was an explicit objective of some of these partnership arrangements. Pilots in this area were initially undertaken through secondments of IDS staff. Working with those undertaking secondments, I stressed that capacity development aspects of partnership were not just about skills transfer but about strengthening capacity across a range of areas. This process of strengthening could happen in a range of ways such as debate about merits of different ways of working, modelling different approaches to processes such as project planning and learning from doing through reviews and reflection. This met with mixed results both from colleagues and partners themselves. Our report on learning from these engagements included the feedback that: 'Some partners prefer traditional one way learning approaches: there seemed to be a partner preference for teacher/pupil approach to skills building as opposed to discussion and debate' (Kunaratnam, Fisher and Gould 2009).

The attachment to traditional skills building approaches on behalf of both providers and intended beneficiaries of capacity development work is understandable, as it is based on the attractive idea that simple and understandable activities will generate desired and predetermined outcomes. Training is based on the idea that an expert will imbue knowledge to others about the 'right way' of doing something that can then be unproblematically implemented (the paperwork accompanying many training courses starts by stating: 'By the end of the day participants will be able to…'). The emphasis on the expert allows participants to be passive and not take responsibility for their own learning. Approaches that emphasise co-discovery, joint learning, critical reflection and adaptation on the other hand, explicitly demand more effort on behalf of the beneficiary and their organisation and have less definite outcomes.

Another potential barrier to the acceptance of capacity development interventions that encourage people to think not only about a particular task but the context in which it will be implemented are the potential challenges they pose to broader organisational frameworks and the status quo. For example, they may involve recognising that a perceived capacity gap is not due to lack of individual skills but due to

**Table 1 I-K-Mediary Network as an approach to facilitating capacity development**

|  | Individual | Organisational | Network or sector | Enabling environment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Commit and engage | Connecting to peers so helping motivation and addressing sense of isolation | Comparative work looking at context in which intermediaries operate | Values and identity building through I-K-Mediary Network | Activities that build understanding and profile of intermediaries e.g. publications |
| Carry out technical, service delivery and logistical tasks | Skills building workshops provided through network Peer support and exchange | Cross promotion of work and collaboration | Developing common standards and tools that can be used across the sector | |
| Relate to and attract resources and support | Individuals able to strengthen their position within their organisation | Connections with potential partners enabling joint action | Joint M&E and case study creation Joint fundraising | Events to raise profile of the sector and connect stakeholders |
| Adapt and self-renew | Chance to reflect on day to day action as a basis for future innovation | | Spaces for dialogue, collaborative learning and generation of new ideas | Greater connection to related networks, disciplines |
| Balance diversity and coherence | | Analysis across organisational contexts generates learning about how to balance competing demands | Benchmarking for intermediary work | |

Source Adapted from Kunaratnam and Fisher (2010).

management styles that are not compatible with the area of work. Examining and challenging how organisations, or wider systems work therefore touches on issues of power and imply broader change; consequently, they are more difficult for all involved.

Thus, for systemic approaches to capacity development to be demand-led, it requires all stakeholders to commit to engaging in a process that is likely to be challenging, will require change in all organisations and for which outcomes are uncertain. It is little wonder that most demands are for less problematic approaches.

## 7 When is capacity development not capacity development?
As I tried to move from capacity development theory into practice, I began to see that the path was littered with obstacles. The term capacity development was often tied to a set of understandings that I wanted to challenge and demand for capacity development was likely to

be in line with that understanding; I was unlikely to be able to change others' understandings before I started implementing activities. Rather than try to tackle these barriers head on, I decided to compromise by undertaking activities that were based on a systemic understanding of capacity development, without always sharing the thinking that inspired them.

A challenge of undertaking capacity development activities that are based on a systemic but unarticulated understanding of capacity is that the activities may not appear to be capacity development activities to either those participating in them or funding them. This raises some interesting practical and ethical questions for practitioners, which I illustrate here through an example of action.

The main activity pursued under the capacity development strand of the Mobilising Knowledge for Development programme was the creation of a peer-learning network for knowledge and information intermediaries, now known as the

I-K-Mediary Network (Table 1). The decision to try to create such a network emerged from an analysis of some of the challenges faced by knowledge and information intermediaries and the sector more broadly. It recognised that there were challenges at multiple levels: a lack of recognition of the role which can lead to an unfavourable external environment, unsustainable funding arrangements, inappropriate delivery mechanisms and low status for individuals; the relatively new nature of the work meant that there was a lack of existing bodies of knowledge to draw on, meanwhile lessons were not being learned; the lack of common identity among people undertaking similar work was leading to duplication of effort, lack of comparative analysis across different contexts and a sense of isolation for those undertaking work.

The peer network was developed as an intervention explicitly intended to strengthen the capacity of the individuals involved, their organisations and the sector as a whole. The kinds of activities and outcomes it has and could in future enable are outlined below in relation to the ECDPM five capabilities[6] and different units within a system.

Although I always saw the creation of the network as a capacity development intervention, I was not always explicit about it. Instead this insight shaped the leadership I brought in the early stages; the emphasis on the network as a means for co-learning, reflection and joint action as opposed to as a route to delivering training or gaining access to resources. Most members, particularly the most active, joined the network because they saw the value in these ambitions but without necessarily seeing those as related to capacity development. Indeed, the idea that the network itself should also do 'capacity development' by sourcing training for members and undertake training of others is a recurring theme.

This example raises questions about how open and transparent it is possible to be about activities that seek to move away from traditional capacity development approaches yet retain capacity development ambitions. Is it ethical to invite people to participate in activities that you perceive as capacity development but they may not? Is it practically sustainable to operate in this way?

In this case, it is not clear whether it is important that members share the analysis of capacity and its development that inform the design of the network as long as they share the network objectives. However, if there was broader understanding of participating in the network as a capacity development activity, it may enable members to justify time and expense incurred in participating in taking part in an online discussion or joint activity or attending a workshop. It would also help to demonstrate capacity outcomes. Finally, it might help with fundraising for the network if donors saw this as a capacity development activity in its own right, rather than as a means of delivering capacity development activities.

## 8 Who decides if capacity has been developed?

Recognising that there are different understandings of capacity, and it is not always worth trying to agree common understandings, means there will be situations where practitioners and potential beneficiaries of capacity development will differ as to the outcomes of particular interventions.

In another smaller scale and potentially more problematic example, advice was sought from IDS to help design an online portal and create a proposal for it. In a two-day workshop (paid for by a third party), it became clear that not only was an online portal unable to address the issues the stakeholders hoped it would, but they did not have the individual or institutional capacities to deliver such a project. Rather than presenting different portal models and how to develop them as intended, the workshop focused on an interrogation of the problems that the portal was intended to address and encouraged the participants to think about the particular strengths that they had that they could bring to this problem. The portal idea was abandoned in favour of another strategy the organisation was much better placed to pursue.

Could this workshop be considered a capacity development intervention? The participants in that workshop almost certainly did not feel that their capacity had been strengthened and may have felt their time was wasted. However, in preventing their organisation putting time resources and their reputation into a project that was almost certainly doomed to failure, it could be argued that the workshop helped them to

avoid damaging their capacity and wasting further time in future.

This raises some interesting questions. As a capacity development practitioner, can you claim to have had a positive impact on capacity if the so-called beneficiaries do not agree? On a practical front, is a capacity development practitioner who fails to deliver what is requested by clients able to stay in business?

## 9 Critical reflection as a sustainable approach to capacity development

One thread running through the challenges and insights described above is the centrality of the value of critical reflection as a key means to capacity development. This insight is based on an assumption that capacity development is a process of change, rather than a description of actions intended to bring about change. The ability of a system, organisation or individual to critically reflect on itself and the context in which it is operating can enable it to identify changes that would strengthen it and to identify strategies for achieving those changes.[7] It can help you see how others can help you to bring in skills and resources you need to strengthen your own capacity, so helping you own your development.

However, while almost all systems have the ability to review and reflect through formal and informal processes (strategy reviews, evaluations, staff appraisals and development, or in response to external competition, personal ambition or dissatisfaction), that sometimes lead to action, it is possible that the depth and nature of the reflection that generated the action could be connected to the kinds of outcome generated. Not all strategies for self- or organisational improvement have the desired outcome, perhaps because they are not based on a thorough or honest enough assessment of the situation (many of my New Year's resolutions would fall into this category). Deep reflection can be difficult to make time for and even harder to undertake.

Capacity development interventions that help individuals and organisations to effectively reflect in order to assess their own capacity and identify strategies for strengthening it – unbounded by traditional ideas of capacity and how it develops – may be the most sustainable of all. If the ability of a system to reflect on its own capacities is what enables systems to become active demanders of

external capacity development interventions, this could potentially address the problems of supply and demand within even the most traditional of capacity development activities.

## 10 Conclusions

Adopting and implementing a capacity development approach based on a systemic understanding of capacity is challenging on many levels for all involved. It is complex when people want it to be simple; outcomes are difficult to predict when people want certainty; change is long term when people want quick results; it implies change in whole systems rather than plugging gaps in parts and so challenges the powerful.

When moving from theory to practice, capacity development practitioners who wish to uphold an atypical approach to capacity development work need to tread a fine line between pragmatism and idealism. One such compromise is finding opportunities to implement their approach, whether the thinking behind their action is articulated or not. Pragmatic approaches include working strategically within norms and frameworks that stakeholders do understand, identifying and working with champions rather than getting ownership from all involved, generating quick wins while also pursuing longer-term change objectives and identifying windows for change.

But such pragmatic approaches raise a number of ethical questions and practical challenges. Ethical questions include issues of transparency and contact with stakeholders such as colleagues, beneficiaries and donors. Practical questions include uncertainties about the sustainability of such approaches, particularly their financial sustainability.

Capacity development practitioners need to be aware of themselves as actors in order to counter these risks. As well as reflecting critically on the impact they are having on others through their actions, they need to think systemically about their own capacity to operate.[8] Over the longer term, capacity development practitioners need to work both individually and together to change the system in which they operate. They need to challenge outdated ideas and understandings about capacity development in order that the term and the action it inspires can play a truly useful role in achieving positive development outcomes.

**Notes**

1 This process of reading and informal conversations generated an understanding in which it is difficult in hindsight to attribute particular influences or ideas. Influential individuals were Kattie Lussier, Jenny Pearson, Andrew Chetley and Alison Dunn. Papers included Ballantyne, Labelle and Rudgard (2000); Brinkerhoff (2005); Black (2003); Chambers, Pettit and Scott-Villiers (2001); Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth and Smith (1999); and Ubels, Yocarini and Zevenbergen (2005).

2 OCED/DAC GOVNET definition, which has received broad consensus (OECD 2006: 12).

3 At times in this article I refer to 'I', which refers to the author personally and a small group of close colleagues largely within the (now disbanded) Strategic Learning Initiative team. At other times I use 'we' to refer to the broader IDS Knowledge Services as a whole. Interestingly, the process of translation of theory into practice is characterised by divergence between 'I': the person charged with developing a capacity development strategy, and 'we', the broader system in which I was attempting to do so particularly as the interests of the two agendas collided.

4 'Double-loop learning occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organisation's underlying norms, policies and objectives' (Argyris and Schon 1978: 2).

5 This approach is reflected in the 'How we' guides which try to explain why we take a particular approach to practical aspects of our work and not just describe what we do (Daniel, Fisher and Kunaratnam 2009).

6 The ECDPM framework identifies five core capabilities all of which are necessary to ensure overall capacity (Baser and Morgan 2008: 28–33); the analysis in Table 1 interprets these capabilities in relation to a particular set of actors and the context they are operating in and identifies activities which may facilitate the strengthening of those capabilities.

7 This insight was in part influenced by work by the Facilitating Learning and Action for Social Change group work on change processes (Taylor, Deak, Petit and Vogel 2006)

8 This insight was inspired by the work of the Community Development Resource Association and is explored in depth in a recent practical guide (Barefoot Collective 2009).

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