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Capacity-building for knowledge generation: Experiences in the context of health and development

Anke van der Kwaak, Hermen Ormel and Annemiek Richters (Eds)



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Introduction

Creative pathways: From capacity development to action learning

Anke van der Kwaak, Annemiek Richters and Hermen Ormel

'If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.'

Martin Luther King

This book is about capacity-building for knowledge generation in a diversity of settings, especially in Africa. The programmes presented throughout the book aimed to support this capacity-building process, and each created its own context-driven pathway to reach its own specific goals. In this introduction to the book and its chapters we present and discuss the different definitions and models of capacity-building and action learning and the framework that has guided our work. We conclude with a brief overview of the content of the seven chapters.

Formal and informal forms of education

On the verge of the new millennium the participants of the World Conference on Higher Education (5–9 October 1998), assembled at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Headquarters in Paris, stated in their *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century* their conviction 'that education is a fundamental pillar of human rights, democracy, sustainable development and peace, and shall therefore become accessible to all throughout life and that measures are required to ensure co-ordination and co-operation across and between the various sectors, particularly between general, technical and professional secondary and post-secondary education as well as between universities, colleges and technical institutions.' They further emphasized that higher education systems 'should enhance their capacity to live with uncertainty, to change and bring about change, and to address social needs and to promote solidarity and equity; should preserve and exercise scientific rigour and originality, in a spirit of impartiality, as a basic prerequisite for attaining and sustaining an indispensable level of quality; and should place students at the centre of their concerns, within a lifelong perspective, so as to allow their full integration into the global knowledge society of the coming century' (World Conference on Higher Education 2008).

According to the preamble to the Declaration, higher education includes 'all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent state authorities. Everywhere higher education is faced with great challenges and difficulties related to financing, equity of conditions at access into and during the course of studies, improved staff development, skills-based training, enhancement and preservation of quality in teaching, research and services, relevance of programmes, employability of graduates, establishment of efficient co-operation agreements and equitable access to the benefits of international co-operation' (Ibid.).

Reflecting on the above as it regards the field of health and development, we found that in many parts of the world there is indeed ample training in medicine, epidemiology, statistics and quantitative research and analysis, but, as the chapters in this book demonstrate, a real need exists for capacity-building in a range of complementary methodological approaches and theories, especially in the fields of (medical) anthropology, public health, health systems research, health economics, community health, applied statistics, philosophy and ethics and other health-related subjects. In addition to the work in this field of complementary approaches carried out in formal educational settings such as universities, polytechnic institutes, colleges and schools, a lot of training takes place outside these settings, especially within development programmes in partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations and knowledge institutes (see, for instance, King et al. 2010).

This book touches on training and other forms of capacity-building that take place outside traditional school settings where hierarchical teacher–pupil relationships dominate. In contrast to this, we present processes taking place in settings where a variety of actors exchange, learn and study to, in the words of Martin Luther King, move their work forward. Before we present the different tools and approaches used in such informal, fluid learning practices we first share some ideas and concepts about capacity-building.

Definition and models of capacity-building

There is a wide body of literature on capacity-building and capacity development. The term capacity development emerged in the lexicon of international development during the 1990s. The question is what is the difference between capacity-building and capacity development? The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2009) defines capacity development as the process taking place at different levels, through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time. Capacity development is a process of change, and hence is about managing transformations. The various levels it involves are interlinked and interdependent. An investment in capacity development must design and account for impact at these multiple levels. *Capacity development* used to be seen as a process ‘from within’, while *capacity-building* was seen as a process ‘driven from the outside’. Today, these different definitions have blurred, and “capacity-building” and “capacity development” are used interchangeably and included as a goal in the programmes of most international organizations that work in development, including the United Nations (UN), the World Bank and a host of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). UNDP (2009) sees capacity-building as a long-term continual process of development that involves all stakeholders; including ministries, local authorities, NGOs, professionals, community members, scholars and others. Capacity-building uses a country’s human, scientific, technological, organizational, institutional and resource capabilities. The goal of capacity-building is to tackle problems related to policy and methods of development, while considering the potential, limits and needs of the people of the country concerned. We have chosen to include capacity-building in the title of this book as defined by UNDP (2009), but also use the term capacity development as synonymous, as do other authors in this book.

Global initiatives

The World Bank's *Capacity Development in Practice* initiative (2011) takes as a starting point that, to gain sustainable results, it is critical to strengthen stakeholder ownership and address the efficiency of policy instruments and the effectiveness of organizational arrangements. In each of the World Bank's thematic programmes a mix of four main business lines are used to address a country's development needs. The first is innovation: platforms are offered for nurturing and sharing innovative practical solutions to development challenges. The second deals with knowledge exchange, which includes just-in-time sharing of information and experiences among development practitioners and leaders, debates about various options for policy reform, topic-specific field visits between developing countries, or dialogues among various development stakeholders as a way of building consensus and coalitions for reform, such as global dialogues on the economic crises. The third line is leadership, whereby the World Bank offers customized support to high- and mid-level decision-makers and emerging leaders at the national and subnational levels who are looking for innovative solutions to tough development challenges, whether in fragile states and post-conflict situations or in major reform initiatives such as decentralization. The last key issue is structured learning, consisting of providing training courses, workshops and conferences that help clients (government officials, private-sector managers and civil society organizations) develop skills and address capacity constraints in priority sectors or disciplines. The World Bank offers a range of frameworks, strategies and documents to support its capacity development strategy.

What we can learn from this is that capacity development can never be a vertical approach targeting only one level or group of professionals, clients or others, but has to be also a horizontal and mainstreamed process which reaches out to different groups of stakeholders at the same time.

When we look at NGOs there is a wide range of approaches and philosophies in terms of capacity development. The Dutch NGO Oxfam Novib (2011), for instance, states that it has contributed a lot to capacity development in the past, such as with HIV and AIDS workplace policies, but that it wants to strengthen this process more systematically from 2012 onwards. It intends to undertake capacity assessments with its partner organizations using a tool to map and monitor capacities by asking 20 questions that help identify an organization's capacity regarding five core capabilities, as presented by Heider (n.d., see below). Similar processes seem to take place within other NGOs. There are a large number of documents, guidelines and training tools all focusing on the capacity development or capacity-building of NGOs. Important questions which are asked, such as 'who builds whose capacity?' (Eade 1997), still seem valid.

In this context, Sanyal (2006) underlines that an important reason for the inability of NGOs to bring sustainable impact has been their failure to establish the right linkages between local imperatives and global systems. She then points to a new type of NGO that aims to create linkages between local issues and global institutions. These NGOs have been variously termed as "intermediary NGOs", "bridging organizations" and "support organizations or half-way houses". They have two different features: they are located at the centre of several

constituencies – local groups, national bodies and international institutions – and their activities include innovative programmes such as organizational capacity-building, training, staff development, research, advocacy, collection and dissemination of information, and networking, all of which are not considered traditional NGO activities. These features enable such organizations to establish the “bridging ties” between civil society groups and organizations and the institutional structures at the national and global level. In her article Sanyal focuses on the Indian NGO, the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA). Her analysis of the governance issues related to this NGO’s work is interesting for this chapter, as she shows the paradox related to the Society being sandwiched in between international and national agencies on the one hand and local communities on the other. Although the model seemed to work well in terms of local responsiveness and legitimacy, the Society’s influence at the global level decreased while the NGOs also missed out actual contact with the communities themselves.

Competencies, capabilities and capacity

The current thinking on capacity-building looks at how capacity emerges and how it is sustained. Heider (n.d.) makes a distinction between the development of:

- individual competences (the mind sets, skills and motivations of individuals);
- collective capabilities (the capacity of a system to carry out a particular function or process); and
- overall capacity (the overall ability of an organization or system to create public value).

She underlines that in capacity development the capacities of these three levels need to have the following five capabilities:

- to commit and engage (volition, empowerment, motivation, confidence);
- to carry out technical tasks (directed at the implementation of mandated goals);
- to relate, attract resources and support (manage relationships, resource mobilization, networking, legitimacy building);
- to adapt and self-renew (learning, strategizing, adaptation, repositioning); and
- to balance coherence and diversity (encourage innovation and stability).

One of the current definitions of capacity development is building abilities, relationships and values that enable organizations, groups and individuals to improve their performance and achieve their development objectives (Ulleberg 2009). This is nothing new, but also here the concept of change or transformation is essential. If capacity development is defined as initiating and sustaining a process of individual and organizational change that can equally refer to change within a state, civil society or the private sector, it is also meant as creating change in processes that enhance cooperation between different groups of society (Ibid.). This definition emphasizes three aspects: (i) capacity-building as the catalyst and constant fuel for a process of change, (ii) the importance of building institutional capacity and (iii) the involvement of a wide range of groups in society. Here the importance of a more participatory learning process becomes clear, whereby all stakeholders – clients and programmers – are involved (Ibid.).

What we have seen so far is that there is an overlap in many of the approaches and definitions. As editors and authors of the current book we see some challenges: capacity development is mostly assumed to automatically contribute to positive change, ignoring that some aspects may be less desirable depending on who's in charge, who's involved and what are tangible benefits for staff and end-users. Then there is attention to context, but cultural specificities are hardly mentioned in the writing about capacity development other than a call for local appropriateness or responsiveness.

To start with the first challenge: in literature, besides the assumed benefits of capacity-building, there is growing concern that 'often it does not lead to lasting organizational improvement, and can even cause organizations harm' (Blumenthal 2001: 1) or even the idea that the wrong capacities of the wrong people are strengthened (Ebrahim 2003). In a paper about the capacity development of voluntary and community organizations in the UK the authors underline that because there are so many possible reasons for building capacity and so many possible ways of achieving capacity, capacity-building is a reflection of the ideological, theoretical and conceptual confusion surrounding it (Cairns et al., 2005). Is it organizational change, training, organizational development, organizational performance, strategic review or business planning we are talking about or a key building block in developing civil society and improving the lot of disadvantaged groups – a means to achieve radical social and economic change? Organizations and NGOs might indeed be totally confused about what they are offered or are supposed to do from the perspective of funders or others with whom they have a dependency relationship. Cairns et al. (2005), therefore, propose the term "action learning" which refers to the idea of achieving organizational change and performance improvement through peer reflection and critical review of working practices. Action learning is advocated as a means to build capacity by several writers (Schofield et al. 1995, Jones 2001) especially those who take an empowerment approach. Fowler (2007), referring specifically to NGOs, argues that action learning is a key means by which an organization can 'gain mastery of itself'.

Kaplan (1997) argues in this context that to be effective facilitators of capacity-building in developing areas, NGOs must participate in organizational capacity-building first. Steps to building organizational capacity include: developing a conceptual framework, establishing an organizational attitude, developing a vision and strategy, developing an organizational structure and acquiring skills and resources. He also argues that NGOs who focus on developing a conceptual framework, an organizational attitude, vision and strategy are more adept at being self-reflective and critical, two qualities that enable more effective capacity-building.

Thus, action learning could be the right term, but what about the second challenge: the accountability to culture and context? Ebrahim (2003) has presented several frameworks of capacity-building and summarizes lessons learned, namely that simple training programmes can achieve little on their own, that effective capacity-building 'is rarely confined to addressing only one of the elements in isolation', the greater contexts need to be examined, analysed and addressed, and capacity-building is a long-term process that requires patience. That is indeed useful, but until now culture is missing. For this we have to turn to the topic of cultural competence.

In the field of cultural competence a wide variety of definitions is to be found. Cross (1988) defines it as a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or professional and enable that system, agency or professional to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. He proposes a continuum that ranges from cultural destructiveness, cultural inability and cultural blindness to cultural pre-competence and advanced cultural competence.

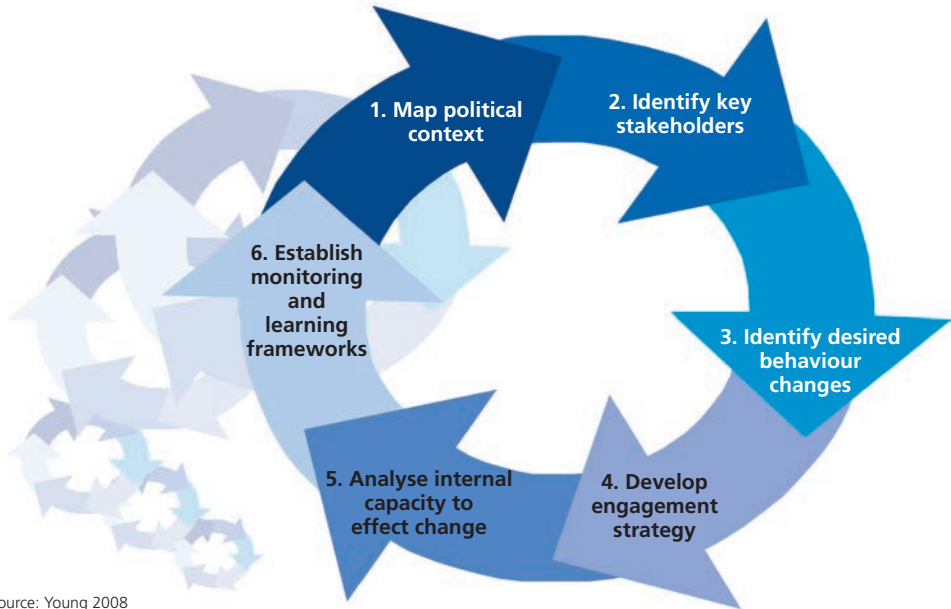
Within the realm of cultural competence there is an emphasis on communication and the ability to be aware of one's own cultural background, biases and behaviour, the ability to pay respect and be open to other cultural behaviours and backgrounds, knowledge on basic cultural issues, recognition of basis difference and skills in terms of verbal and non-verbal communication (Teal and Street 2009). However, it seems that this cultural competence needs to be integrated into the different approaches to capacity-building or action learning to be effective. This means often that stakeholders have to be involved in action learning processes from the start. Needs assessments and involvement of policymakers, implementers and especially end-users, clients and target audiences are a way to do this. This book presents case studies in which these circumstances were often present. Another aspect related to cultural competence is that involving those who matter means actually sharing the outcomes of the action learning process. In the next section we, therefore, focus on knowledge translation.

Knowledge brokering

Evidence-based policy can be defined as government(s) 'mak[ing] well-informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation' (Davies 1999a, as quoted by Davies 2004). Policies, programmes and interventions aiming at improving health and well-being are more effective if they are based on sound evidence (i) regarding the nature of the problem and related influencing factors, and (ii) regarding what works, and what doesn't, to achieve results and impact. Regrettably, action learning findings often do not find their way into new and adapted policies and programmes. This can be due to a lack of understanding, of advocacy skills and empowerment to become recognized contributors to the policy development and monitoring processes or to advocate effectively for social science research to inform policies and programmes. Simultaneously, policymakers and end-users may not be trained to access, digest and apply action learning findings. From the various models representing the "translation" process from research findings to policy and programme application, Figure 1 visualises the knowledge translation process and has inspired this book. Once new or adapted knowledge has been produced through research, a number of steps are needed for it to find its way into policies, programmes and, ultimately, practice.

Special attention in this process goes to dialogue and communication between action learners, researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders, from the early stages of capacity development or action learning processes, from topic prioritization and design, as donors and the research community alike increasingly recognize that it is essential to address the gap between research findings and their uptake. Knowledge brokering is a

Figure 1 Knowledge translation process



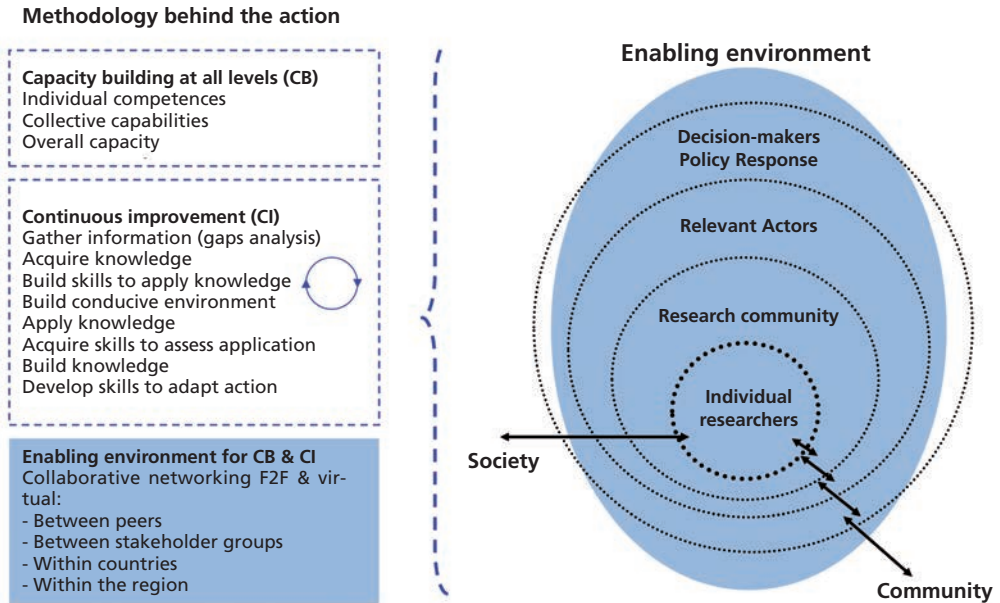
Source: Young 2008

strategy to close the gap and foster greater use of research findings and evidence in policy-making. The “flow model” presented in Figure 1 takes the researcher and important stakeholders through six steps that build on each other and include: mapping the political context, identifying key stakeholders, identifying desired behaviour changes, developing engagement strategies, analysing internal capacity to effect change and establish monitoring and learning frameworks (Young 2008). This means that this process has to take place at the beginning of any capacity development process or action learning initiative.

Our framework

It is now time to present the framework used for this book and the case studies it contains. The capacity-building and action learning processes described in this book have engaged the research and NGO communities in diverse settings including African countries as well as global constellations. All processes described are aiming to strengthen intellectual engagement and the culture of enquiry (see Figure 1). This means that not only knowledge institutes and researchers participated but also problem owners, policymakers, interventionists, advocates and other end-users of research.

Capacity-building from our perspective is a way of action learning including building capacity to coordinate, network and translate knowledge to ensure that research is relevant to inform policy and practices. It indeed focuses on three levels: the individual, the collective and the overall capacity. The process also strongly invests in the continuous improvement of aspects of enabling environments as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Broad-based capacity development or action learning

Source: the authors

The content of the book chapters

Each chapter in this book presents one of more cases of action learning or capacity development. All chapters have at least one author who actually works or used to work at KIT. KIT is an independent, not-for-profit organization and knowledge centre, founded in 1910, which is involved in international development projects and cultural initiatives in more than 60 countries around the world. KIT development researchers and advisors all have a combination of field, academic and teaching experience. KIT advisors are also involved in operational research projects on what works, why and for whom, particularly in Asia and Africa. The joint action learning programmes of KIT and its partners produce a growing evidence base for innovative problem-solving approaches. Capacity development is central to KIT's approach: we aim to build capacity development components into all the work we do. We emphasize sharing knowledge and exchanging ideas through networks, meetings, writeshops and publications. The co-authors of the different chapters are often researchers or professors from other universities and knowledge institutes or work at the NGOs with whom KIT collaborates.

In Chapter 1, *Pam Baatsen and Barend Gerretsen* take us into the world of online capacity development within the e-learning module on health systems strengthening (HSS) and HIV responses. They argue that the success of scaling up responses to HIV and AIDS in part depends on improvements in the structures and functioning of the broader health system and that experts dealing with HIV need to be empowered with health system competences. The chapter describes the virtual learning concept and approach and how the individual capacities of 49 consultants – regularly working for the UNAIDS Technical Support Facilities – from African, Asian and Latin American countries were enhanced.

Chapter 2 contains a case study looking into the strengthening of collective capabilities under the title 'Young people living with HIV: Life skills, self-esteem and social media in Kibera, Nairobi'. *Anke van der Kwaak, Hermen Ormel, Francis Obare and Tobias Ouma* present a small knowledge translation process that followed an action research project among young people living with HIV. The dissemination of the study went hand in hand with mind mapping skills, expressing ideas and initiating a virtual community. Bridging and bonding by building capacities is the central focus of this chapter.

Chapter 3 presents two research training processes carried out with, respectively, the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) and The AIDS Support Organization (TASO) in Eastern Africa using a participatory approach, starting with identifying research problems and leading up to dissemination of the studies in books and journals. *Anke van der Kwaak, Betty Kwagala, Josephine Birungi, John Nduba, Liezel Wolmarans and Gerard Baltissen* show how capacities were developed at three levels in the organizations: individual professionals were trained, the collective was strengthened, as there were multidisciplinary regional and national teams doing research, and at the end the overall capacity of the organization and its stakeholders was strengthened. The chapter shows that leadership and an enabling environment are key to this process.

Lucie Blok, David Plummer, Georges Tiendrebeogo and Françoise Jenniskens reflect in Chapter 4 on the methodological challenges in studying complex systems. The chapter entitled 'Impact of HIV programmes on health systems strengthening in five African countries: Methodological challenges in studying complex systems' explores the experience of research designed to study the impact of HIV programmes on health systems in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Madagascar and Malawi. It reflects on the methodological challenges and research innovations within a regional approach of action learning.

Chapter 5 takes us into the field of results-based financing and shows how proper preparation prevents poor performance. *Bertram van der Wal and Jurrien Toonen* share with us the interesting ins and outs of implementation processes of results-based financing in Mali and Ghana. The chapter shows that a one-size-fits-one approach led to two different models whereby capacity development, involving local communities and mobilizing resourcefulness were key. The dynamic approach and need for continuous improvement and contextualization are very strongly presented.

In Chapter 6 *Rob van Poelje* takes us back to the beginning of action learning, namely multi-stakeholder process and analysis. He presents the so-called Multi-Country Programme (MCP) in five African countries, focusing on social science research on HIV and AIDS. He shows that stakeholder and peer processes can start to lead a life of their own, that regional approaches do not come naturally and that systems, teams, peers and countries need to be motivated and taught how to share their competencies and how to collaborate to come to more effective outcomes and outputs.

In the last chapter of the book the follow-up of the process presented in Chapter 6 is described – namely the case for a Great Lakes Applied Research Centre. The authors, *Annemiek Richters, Hermen Ormel and Anke van der Kwaak*, reflect on a rich process of action learning on vulnerabilities and agency among institutes working in a regional network.

One can argue that the book ends on a negative note, as the research centre never materialized. However, it is stressed that the development of networks and research alliances is very possible, but that without funding and leadership it will not be viable. The processes described in this chapter – as in the rest of the book – show that capacity development cannot be a goal in itself but that it should be part of an existing financed programme. Only then will a multi-level strengthening of capacities and capabilities be realized. Creative collaboration, critical reflection and contextualization prove to be key within a dynamic process moving forward.

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