



Discussion Paper BRIEFS

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Strengthening Capacity to Improve Nutrition

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The failure—or limited achievements—of many large-scale nutrition programs is very often a function of insufficient sustainable capacities within communities and organizations responsible for implementing them. The principles behind successful community-driven nutrition programming in Asia where a dual programming model was adopted have been described earlier. In short, they include direct action in the form of community-based nutrition programs, backed up by supportive or enabling sectoral policies and programs. This paper starts by summarizing these previous findings as a basis for considering issues of capacity and institutional development as they pertain to such a model.

What Is Capacity and Capacity Development?

First, the author considers definitions of *capacity* and *capacity development*, and then reviews the various rationales for an intensified focus on this area. He outlines the linkages between the programming and capacity development processes, before putting forward a new approach to assessing, analyzing, and developing capacity. The ensuing sections then focus in more detail on the ingredients and influences of capacity at the levels of the community, program management, supporting institutions, and the government. Finally, the implications of a more proactive focus on strengthening nutrition capacity for donor modes of operation and support priorities are discussed.

The Rights-Based Approach to Nutrition Interventions

A fundamental premise, as enshrined in major international conventions and declarations, is that adequate nutrition is a human right. In order to operationalize a truly human rights-based approach to nutrition action—whether policy or programs—a fundamental first step is to assess capacity. The rights approach demands an active involvement of “beneficiaries” in processes to improve nutrition. Nutrition-vulnerable individuals, households, and communities are no longer objects of welfare transfers,

but rather subjects whose capabilities are ultimately the foundations of sustainable progress.

Strengthening Capacity for Nutrition Will Lay the Foundation for Human Development

Much of the discussion of capacity and capacity development in this paper is not specifically focused on nutrition. This is because many of the requirements in these areas are generic to a variety of social development concerns. The need for change from a nutrition perspective however is particularly pronounced, largely because malnutrition is so multifaceted, that is, its causation and sustainable remedies cut across classic sectoral divides. This is particularly true of general, as opposed to micronutrient, malnutrition. The capacity to reduce malnutrition thus relates indirectly to the capacities to successfully undertake various activities that may have several nonnutritional benefits.

The Gap This Research Fills

There are few studies of capacity or institutions deriving from a nutrition perspective from which to draw relevant findings. Indeed this represents a gaping hole in nutrition-relevant research globally, though one that is increasingly recognized. Some work is underway at the level of academic capacity building, but little on explicit capacity development for community nutrition programming. The approach of

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considering the type of programs that are appropriate with respect to problem and context often does not extend into supporting institutional structures. Even if the “Triple A” cycle of assessment-analysis-action is carried out appropriately and a resource analysis

is undertaken, other essential elements of capacity are often not investigated. This paper suggests a process for systematically and comprehensively analyzing capacity.

Some Recommendations for Donor Policy and Practice

First, donors themselves need to provide more support for capacity assessment and development, operational research, and the building of policy-research-training-program networks.

Second, the rights-base for nutrition-relevant actions should provide guidance, in its emphasis on duties and obligations at different levels in society. A concrete, rights-based programming process demands a focus on individuals as subjects—not objects—and thus on their inherent capacity. Inclusion of stakeholders in the process of preparing a project or program—right from the initial problem assessment to the design of appropriate actions—is one of the most important capacity development tools. Such a re-definition of the role of "recipients" demands in turn a fundamental redefinition on the part of donors of the key concepts of planning, performance, speed, and quality.

With regard to planning, the traditional project cycle implies a linear progression from problem identification to project preparation, appraisal, implementation, supervision, and evaluation. It assumes that solutions to known problems can be fully determined at the outset and that projects can be fully designed and costed in advance and successfully implemented to a fixed timetable. This approach is clearly ill-adapted to a learning-by-doing approach that is the foundation of true capacity development.

Performance needs to be considered more with respect to the degree to which the donor is slowly becoming redundant as local capacities develop. Capacity development indicators are required to measure such dimensions of performance. Speed

should be understood in terms of capacity development, not the processing of donor finance.

Quality relates not only to the customary performance standards set by the donor, but crucially to such process factors as the degree of active local ownership of the project. At the level of donor capacity, such a realignment of procedures will necessitate shifts in the incentive environment. The monitoring of staff performance needs to be related more explicitly to contributions to capacity development, not just to disbursing loans and generating traditional project outputs.

Finally, donors need to attach greater priority to encouraging and supporting the monitoring and evaluation of both capacity development and program performance, so as to better know what works, where and to disseminate success stories more widely. We need to know more about the applicability of different kinds of indicators to different kinds of functions for different types of organizations at varying stages of their evolution. Donors should also periodically evaluate themselves from a capacity development perspective.

Keywords: nutrition, capacity development, human rights, policy recommendations, Asia

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