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Capacity building in development projects

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Abstract

Development projects of different types mainly aim to alleviate poverty and ameliorate the livelihoods of local people. One of the strategies commonly used is to focus on organizations and build from their existing capacities in order to improve their living standards or try to build new organizations to work in a common project. Social and human capitals are two key components of these organizations and they might be crucial to the success of the actions that they accomplish. Both can be considered as part of the social capacity of the local organization. This capacity can be enforced with development projects through capacity building. This term means much more than training activities as it includes not only human resource development but also organizational and institutional development (UNESCO, 2010). Capacity and capacity building concepts, as well as capacity measurements in this context are explored to build a framework to evaluate the social capacity generated with the interventions and better plan the actions to be undertaken by the projects to succeed. The focus is set on rural development projects.

Keywords: capacity, capacity building, development projects, rural;

1. Introduction

 Development projects have changed their focus in the last decades (Lusthaus, Adrien & Perstinger, 1999; Horton et al., 2008). Although alleviating poverty and ameliorating the livelihoods of local people have always been common goals, development in 1950s was more focused on providing physical and financial infrastructure, while later approaches realized that not only the establishment of institutions was needed but also the strengthening of those institutions (WRI, 2008). In the 1970s the focus shifted to the intangible aspects, and the emphasis was set on education, health and population. Later on, formal education was substituted for short term training. The 1980s and 90s were characterized by a change in the focus from micro to macro level, aiming at national institutions. The last tendencies tend to build on collaborative projects where processes and ownership are key factors, and include sustainability in their objectives (Lusthaus, Adrien & Perstinger, 1999; Horton et al., 2008).

 In rural areas, development projects have also evolved from an economic perspective that traditionally relied on the ready availability of natural resources, low labor costs, and lax taxes and regulations to recruit businesses to rural areas to a broader concept in which factors like capacity and capacity building may be more important for development than the traditional technology transfer system (Enemark & Ahene, 2002), especially in a global world where resources are becoming scarce and methods and technology of work have changed (WRI, 2008). Hence, development strategies lately center on growing entrepreneurs from within the community, basing business

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development strategies−like improving links to more dynamic and profitable markets− on the existing core capacities of resident people and firms, as well as on maintaining equilibrium with preservation of resources and way of life (Aspen Institute, 1996; WRI, 2008; Berdegué, 2001). In that vein, many authors have recognized that community capacity contributes not only to economic growth but also to social development in rural communities (Cheers et al., 2005) for being a foundation for making good decisions about the stewardship of a region's natural, human and cultural resources, so that its way of life can be maintained and improved over time (Aspen Institute, 1996). As such, the concept is very much related to rural development and sustainability of rural development projects (Aspen Institute, 1996; Chambers, 1991; Flora et al., 1999; Schwarz, 2011).

Capacity can be enforced with development projects through capacity building in order to have a more robust structure and to be adaptive to changes. Capacity building is therefore understood not only as human resource development but also as organizational and institutional development (UNESCO, 2010). Support organizations can help local organizations in different areas, including: building technical, financial, business, and political skills, building social and institutional capital, upward influence and government capacity-building, facilitating finance, increasing equity and transparency and building linkages and networks (WRI, 2008).

As Cheers et al. (2005) point out, a general problem in existing instruments to measure community capacity is that "they are too subjective, general, or narrow; based on vague definitions of community capacity; uninformed by established rural and community theory and research; and/or designed for different contexts" (Cheers et al. 2005:1). Thus, this paper aims to clarify the concepts of capacity, capacity building and their operationalization in the context of rural development projects. A framework is presented to analyze the robustness of community or organization´s capacity in order to better plan the actions to be undertaken by the project to increase the likelihood of achieving the outcomes of the project (Goodman et al., 1998) as well as to evaluate the changes in capacity generated with the intervention. The evaluation of the social potential or capacity may be measured through a competence scheme, organized in three dimensions: technical, behavioral and contextual (IPMA, 2009), and analyzed through the project cycle phases.

2. Definitions of capacity

There are different definitions of community capacity in the literature, some treating the concept as a generic attribute or generalized orientation and others arguing that it is only appropriate to assess capacity in relation to a specific object or objective of change (Maclellan-Wright et al., 2007). Many of the literature that focuses specifically on particular contexts is related to public health, organizations or community economic development (Chaskin, 2001; Enemark, & Williamson, 2004; Cheers et al., 2005; Markey and Vodden, 2005; Maclellan-Wright et al., 2007). Cheers et al. (2005) propose an alternative view that will be followed in this study, considering that the concept community capacity remains the same and includes the same capacities regardless of an assessment purpose, but how it is operationalized in a particular assessment and how much each capacity contributes depends on the purpose at hand.

The Aspen Institute (1996) defines community capacity as "*the combined influence of a community's commitment, resources and skills that can be deployed to build on community strengths and address community problems and opportunities*". Horton et al. (2008) define two categories of capacity that organizations need to develop: resources (staff, infrastructure, technology and financial resources) and management (strategic leadership, program and processes management and networking creation). Each of these categories has operational and adaptive aspects that have to be established and maintained (Horton et al., 2008). Goodman et al. (1998) define it with a focus on health promotion and disease prevention through diverse dimensions, emphasizing the participation of individual members in building relationships for planning and decision making. For Kretzman and McKnight (1993) community capacity is a set of individual, association and institution assets that exist within communities. Chaskin (2001) defines community capacity as "*the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social*

capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well being of a given community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organized effort” (Chaskin 2001:295). The UNDP (1998) proposes another definition in which human resources are central to capacity development: “*Capacity is defined as the ability of individuals and organizations or organizational units to perform functions effectively, efficiently and sustainably*”. They also highlight that the concept is dynamic and not passive and the importance of considering the context within which organizations function.

Authors like Brown, LaFond & Macintyre (2001), Kwan et al. (2003) or Laverack (2005) indicate that capacity is an elusive concept, as it is described as a process or as an outcome. Chaskin (2001) also identifies different emphasis on various dimensions of the concept, with focus either on individuals, organizations, connections or participation. For Brown, LaFond & Macintyre, a common feature of all definitions is the link between capacity and performance, even though they argue that there is a lack of common understanding of the nature of that relationship, as of the meaning of adequate performance and the influences of the external context on both capacity and performance. Chaskin (2001:292) finds other common factors: *“(1) the existence of resources, (2) networks of relationships, (3) leadership, and (4) support for some kind of mechanisms for or processes of participation by community members in collective action and problem solving*”. Many authors, as Innes and Booher (2003) and Falk and Harrison (1998), point out learning as a central element of the concept. The difficulty is to operationalize the relation between these factors, to understand the engaged mechanisms, the aims of harnessing them and the strategies to promote or build community capacity. Hence, to move from the broad concept to social action is difficult and there is a need of greater specificity of goals to be achieved, means to reach them, and better analysis of local dynamics to understand its impact on implementation (Chaskin, 2001; Kwan, 2003).

3. Definitions of capacity building

Capacity building is also an abstract and multidimensional concept. Definitions range from an external intervention description (traditional top-down approach based on financial and physical resources provision and technology transfer) to a discussion of a process of change (bottom-up development with a holistic approach) (Brown, LaFond & Macintyre, 2001; UNDP, 2002; Horton et al., 2008). Enemark & Ahene (2002) define it as the development of human resources (knowledge, skills, individual and group attitudes) for the purpose of developing and managing certain areas in society. Brown, LaFond & Macintyre (2001) offer some definitions from the International NGO Training and Research Center, focused on the activities to increase the abilities to carry out efforts to improve the lives of the poor, to improve the capacity of implementing organizations and to strengthen the position of organizations in their society. This approach has also been named capacity development, defined by Lavergne (2004) as the process whereby individuals, groups, organizations and societies enhance their capacities in terms of human, organizational, institutional and social capital. The OECD has defined Capacity Development as "*the process by which individuals, groups, organizations, institutions and societies increase their abilities to: (i) perform core functions, solve problems, define and achieve objectives; and (ii) understand and deal with their development needs in a broad context and in a sustainable manner*" (Enemark, & Williamson, 2004:640). Also the term was subject of attention in the Agenda 21. The concept was related to sustainable development and defined with a national perspective and a focus on policy. “*Skills, knowledge and technical know-how at the individual and institutional levels are necessary for institution-building, policy analysis and development management, including the assessment of alternative courses of action with a view to enhancing access to and transfer of technology and promoting economic development*” (UNCED, 1992).

Brown, LaFond & Macintyre (2001) indicate that most development organizations are involved in capacity building for achieving development goals and contributing to sustainability, which is seen as a long lasting result of capacity building. These organizations enhance or accelerate the internal process of capacity building especially in terms of specific skills through planned interventions, such as technical assistance, training courses and other actions. According to WRI (2008), the increase of social and economic resilience of local organizations is one of the outcomes of building capacity and inclusive local organizations from their core competencies. Social capacities that can be enforced to increase social and economic resilience include group visioning and enterprise planning; undertaking collective management activities, crafting an equitable benefits distribution plan; resolving internal

management disputes; negotiating with outside funders or government agencies; crafting a business plan; applying accounting and fiscal management; undertaking marketing and communication; and maintaining quality control. Developing these latent capacities often requires systematic support from intermediary organizations that can act as facilitators, trainers, organizers, honest brokers and connection points with government and the private sector (WRI, 2008). The Aspen institute (1996) also describes the outcomes derived from capacity building: expanding diverse, inclusive citizen participation; expanding leadership base; strengthened individual skills; widely shared understanding and vision; strategic community agenda; consistent, tangible progress toward goals; more effective community organizations and institutions; better resource utilization by the community.

4. Operationalization of capacity and capacity building concepts

As multidimensional and abstract concepts, many attempts have been developed to describe capacity and capacity building in terms of their components, strategies, dimensions, or interventions in order to operationalize the concepts (Goodman et al., 1998; Brown, LaFond & Macintyre, 2001). In practice, most capacity building interventions focus on the organizational or human resources/ personnel level and the literature and measurement experience is dominated by experience in these areas. The measurement approaches usually come more from field experiences than from theoretical literature (Brown, LaFond & Macintyre, 2001). A summary of all the indicators found in the literature review is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Organization capacity characteristics

Level	Competence & authors	Level	Competence & authors
Individual capacity	Leadership [2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17] Entrepreneurship [2, 7, 11] Financial skills -Economic literacy [2, 3, 5, 12, 14, 16, 17] Technology skills [2, 14] Political skills (Communication; Organizational; Electoral) [2, 5] Planning skills [2, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17] Management skills, changes management [9, 12, 14, 16, 17]	Social capacity	Participation and cooperation [2, 9, 10, 12, 15, 17] Commitment [4, 12, 17] Trust [2, 4, 7, 10, 12] Communication [5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 17] Network building [1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15] Entrepreneurship [2, 7] Norms [9, 12, 17] Team work [7, 9, 11, 17] Group process skills (Problem/ conflict-solving skills; consensus building, decision-making) [1, 2, 4, 9, 10, 14, 17] Sense of community, shared values [3, 4, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15] Vision and Strategy [8, 9, 13, 16, 17]

[1]Armstrong et al. (2002); [2]Aspen Institute (1996); [3]Brown et al. (2001); [4]Chaskin (2001); [5]Cheers et al. (2005); [6]Coleman (1988); [7]Diallo (2005); [8]Flora et al. (1999); [9]Foster-Fishman et al (2001); [10]Goodman et al. (1998); [11]Innes & Booher (2003); [12]Kwan et al. (2003); [13]Liou (2004); [14]Lusthaus (1995); [15]Maclellan-Wright et al. (2007); [16]UNDP (1998); [17]WRI (2008)

Brown, LaFond & Macintyre (2001) have described four components to analyze capacity at different levels: inputs, process, outputs and outcomes. The inputs represent the resources that are required for producing capacity-related outputs and outcomes and the processes represent the functions at each level that transform resources into capacity outputs and outcomes. Maclellan-Wright et al. (2007) also with a focus on health, develop an instrument with 9 domains and 29 items that provides quantitative and qualitative information on community capacity within the context and scope of community-based funding programs: participation; leadership; community structures; asking why; resource mobilization; links with others; role of external supports; skills, knowledge and learning; sense of community. Goodman et al. (1998) propose a set of indicators based on a symposium of experts on community capacity: participation and leadership, skills, resources, social and interorganizational networks, sense of community, understanding of community history, community power, community values, and critical reflection.

The definition by Chaskin (2001) for community capacity and capacity building is operationalized through a relational framework composed of six dimensions. The first three dimensions are related to community capacity per

se and include (1) the definition of its core characteristics, (2) the levels of social agency in which capacity is embedded and through which it may be engaged or enhanced, and (3) its particular functions. The fourth dimension focuses on the strategies to promote community capacity. Within these strategies, efforts may focus on programmatic approaches (job training and placement, structuring access to financial opportunities) or more procedural ones (voter registration, block club organizing). The fifth dimension describes conditioning influences that support or inhibit capacity or attempts to build it. And the sixth concerns particular community-level outcomes that result from the functions of community capacity, as for example better services, influence on decision-making, or economic-wellbeing (Chaskin, 2001).

Lusthaus et al. (1995) propose a framework for institutional assessment to strengthen organizational capacity based on four dimensions: forces in the external environment; institutional motivation; institutional capacity; and institutional performance. The WRI (2008) proposes a set of dimensions for assessing the strength of local organizations and their potential to drive local development: vision and strategy, leadership, inclusiveness and gender balance, physical participation, process participation, internal processes, technical capacity, administrative capacity, financial control, and funding. Also Kwan et al. (2003), summarize the most common themes in people's conceptualization of community capacity as knowledge and skills, public participation, functional organizations, community infrastructure, and collaboration.

Other authors have established a distinction between micro, meso and macro level analysis (Enemark, & Williamson, 2004; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Liou, 2004; UNDP, 1998). The micro level is related to individuals and families, and their skills, education, job training and social cares. The success or viability of a capacity initiative is invariably linked to the capacity of leadership and management. Increasingly, the dimensions of accountability, performance, values and ethics, incentives and security are becoming ever more important in individual level capacity assessments and technical assistance development programs (UNDP, 1998). The entity/organizational level is also called the meso level (Liou, 2004). At this level, successful approaches to capacity building go beyond the traditional capacity development, and include the role of the entity within the system, and the interaction with other entities, stakeholders, and clients (UNDP, 1998). The dimensions considered within this level are: mission and strategy, effective leadership, relationships, and vision to transform individual interests into a dynamic collective force; culture/structure and competencies, processes; human resources; financial resources; information resources; and infrastructure (Liou, 2004; UNDP, 1998; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001). The macro level is the highest level within which capacity initiatives may be considered and it refers to the action environment (socio-political, government/public sector, economic/technological, physical). This level includes both formal and informal organizations within the defined system. The dimensions of capacity at the systems level include: policy, legal/regulatory, management or accountability, resources and process (Liou, 2004; UNDP, 1998).

Regarding the methods applied to assess capacity, Brown, LaFond & Macintyre (2001) find that most of the studies reviewed combine several data collection instruments for developing a comprehensive picture of capacity and thus, many combine quantitative and qualitative data. According to these authors and others like Horton et al. (2008), capacity and capacity building assessments have been often applied by external agencies and self-assessments are less common, even though both present advantages and disadvantages. The first are considered more objective, while the second imply a greater involvement of assessed people and ownership of the results, thus increasing the likelihood of improving their capacity. Stronger approaches use a mixture of methods that combines subjective and objective measurement.

5. Conceptual framework

In this section, a framework to analyze capacity in development projects is presented. The framework tries to guide the mapping of capacity at individual and social levels and the role of development projects as tools for building capacity and hence, for increasing success and sustainability of interventions. It is based on a multi-disciplinary approach, taking advantage of various theoretical perspectives, including: social and human capital theory, social capacity, capacity building, competences evaluation methods from psychometric perspectives, methodologies from the logic of participation (Korten, 1980; Uphoff, 1985; Cernea, 1992; Oakley, 1993; Chambers, 1997) and social learning processes (Friedmann, 1993; Cazorla, & Friedmann, 1995). Its character is rather descriptive and exploratory than prescriptive and further work needs to be done to test validity and usefulness.
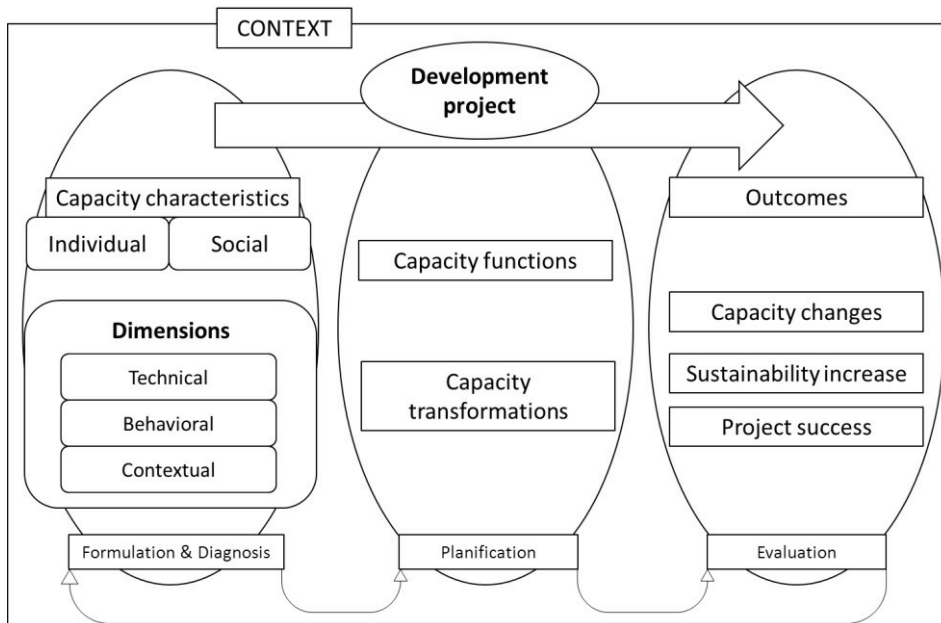

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

The framework is a base to analyze the critical elements of capacity at each level (individual and social) that promote success over time (understood as sustainability, adaptability and robustness as economic organizations related to global markets), dividing them in three dimensions: technical, behavioral and contextual elements. The changes in capacity can be analyzed by looking at changes in performance (functions) and outcomes. The context is another important element to take into account in the analysis, as it is unique of every project (Lusthaus et al., 1995; Brown, LaFond & Macintyre, 2001). The framework could be used at different points of the project cycle. First it would serve in the diagnosis included in formulation phase to assess the community or organization capacity and hence to better define the planning phase in order to build on existing capacity and improve the weak elements. Then it could be used in the monitoring and evaluation phase to check the changes in capacities and the effects of the project (figure 1).

Capacity characteristics found in the literature have been divided in two main groups, related to individual or social capacity. Individual capacity can be characterized by two main dimensions: technical and behavioral capacities. Technical capacity is needed in any organization to perform all the required activities involved in a

business. It can be divided in financial skills, technology skills, political skills, planning and management skills. Behavioral capacity is related to personal attitudes and skills needed in the relationships between people and groups of stakeholders (IPMA, 2009), such as leadership or entrepreneurship. Social capacity is required to promote many capabilities that enable a community based enterprise or organization to succeed in the long term aside from technical capacity (WRI, 2008), and it can also be divided mainly in behavioral and contextual capacities. The first include capacities such as commitment, trust, network building, entrepreneurship, norms, team work, group organizing, sense of community, shared values, negotiating and political skills; and the second includes among others, vision and strategy, legal and financial skills or institution building.

6. Conclusions

Development projects have evolved in the last decades from a focus on providing physical and financial infrastructure to approaches with a focus on education, training, and capacity building in order to alleviate poverty and ameliorate the livelihoods of local people. In rural areas, development projects have also evolved in a similar way from an economic perspective based on the ready availability of natural resources, low labor costs, and lax taxes and regulations to recruit businesses to rural areas to a broader concept in which factors like capacity and capacity building may be more important for development than the traditional technology transfer system, for their influence in projects sustainability and hence in economic growth and social development.

As it has been shown, both concepts are abstract and multidimensional and there is still no consensus in the definitions, or whether it is an objective by itself or a means to achieve it, although there are some common features to all the definitions. Capacity is defined by the existence of resources, networks, leadership and group process skills and capacity building is a cyclical concept related to the development of human, organizational, institutional and social capital. Because of the difficulties in clearly delimiting the concepts, and the influence of the external context, their operationalization and measure over time is also hard and there is a lack of more field experiences and triangulation methods, especially in the field of rural development projects.

The framework that is presented is a base to analyze the critical elements of capacity at each level (individual and social) that promote success over time, dividing them in three dimensions: technical, behavioral and contextual. The changes in capacity can be analyzed by looking at changes in performance and outcomes. The context is another important element to take into account in the analysis, as it is unique of every project. The framework could be used at different points of the project cycle: in the formulation phase to assess the community or organization capacity, in the planning phase in order to build on existing capacity and improve the weak elements and in the monitoring and evaluation phase to check the changes in capacities and the effects of the project, to know in what extent a development project is a good instrument to develop the competences of involved stakeholders. Further research is needed to validate the framework, and determine the relationships between elements and between them and the expected outcomes.

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