

Capacity Building and the Results Conundrum: Which Approaches for What Results?

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1. Introduction

Throughout its 25-year history, Universal Management Group¹ (UMG), Ltd has grappled with the issue of how to assess capacity building initiatives, and how to describe the various different approaches that donors and aid agencies take². Concurrently, many of these agencies, such as the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada have struggled with articulating and documenting the results of their capacity building activities. Part of this difficulty lies in the fact that although there is an (over) abundance of information regarding capacity building, especially related to the public and non-profit sectors, there is a dearth of information concerning what mix of activities works, what doesn't work, what settings for what mixes etc. and how these various approaches to capacity building and the activities used can be linked to results. To date, there is relatively little in the literature on established or acceptable ways to measure capacity building results (see sidebar).

The GEF is involved in a major attempt to classify results of their capacity building work. This conceptual exercise has identified over 300 potential results areas.

Much of the experience in the evaluation of the effectiveness of capacity building interventions is relatively recent. As a result, methodological frameworks and tools are still evolving, thus reflecting the complexity of capacity building processes, the challenging tasks of measuring impact and linking capacity interventions, with change and performance (The African Capacity Building Foundation).

The loosely formulated definitions of capacity development are useful for apprehending the process as a complex one, but they leave us in the dark in terms of how to assess achievements of capacity development (UNICEF).

IDRC supplies, among other things, funding and technical assistance to researchers in developing countries to carry out applied research on the problems and issues that southern researchers and policymakers have identified as crucial to their communities. To operationalize this mission, and fundamental to its approach for development, one of the Centre's strategic goals is to "*strengthen and help mobilize the local research capacity of developing countries...*"³.

¹ Universal Management Group (UMG), Ltd, is a Canadian management consulting firm that specializes in (i) carrying out monitoring and evaluation assignments; (ii) working with clients to strengthen their M&E capacities and; (iii) implementing and managing complex development projects. For more information see www.universalia.com

² For more discussion on this issue see, for example, Lusthaus, Charles, Adrien, Marie-Hélène, Anderson, Gary, Carden, Fred, Montelvan, George. (2002). *Organizational Assessment: A Framework for Improving Performance*, Inter-American Development Bank, Washington DC and IDRC, Ottawa Canada; Lusthaus, C., Adrien, M., Anderson, G., and Carden, F. (1999). *Enhancing Organizational Performance: A Toolbox for Self-Assessment*, IDRC, Ottawa; Lusthaus, C., Anderson, G., and Murphy, E. (1995). *Institutional Assessment: A Framework for Strengthening Organizational Capacity for IDRC's Research Partners*, IDRC, Ottawa.

³IDRC 2005. Corporate Strategy and Program Framework 2005-2010, p.16

IDRC has three broad programming areas⁴ which are operationalized through 12 Programming Initiatives that provide the technical support and funding for applied research in Africa, Asia and Latin America⁵.

In 2004, IDRC initiated a strategic evaluation to gain a deeper understanding of what the Centre means by “capacity building”, and to examine the capacity results it has achieved, what works, what doesn’t work, and what work remains to be done. In early 2005, IDRC commissioned UMG to carry out three key pieces of this strategic evaluation. At the time of this writing, UMG had completed the first piece, which was an investigation into how IDRC staff and managers understand capacity building and how they operationalize that understanding in their work. The focus of this article is to use our recent experience with IDRC to explore the issues around finding the right mix of activities and approaches to capacity building, and how we can link these to results.

Three primary targets or outcome areas of capacity building are discussed in the literature: individual, organizational and systems level. Data from our interviews also suggest that IDRC primarily talks about these three targets or outcome areas; but the interview data as well as data from document reviews also suggest that interventions occur through networks, as well as by the state and by society. This means then, that there are essentially five target or outcome areas: individuals, organizations, networks, state, and societal (i.e., the users of the research). Using these five levels of capacity targets or outcome areas may provide donors and others alike a way to more fully and systematically describe and reflect on who or in what area they are trying to effect change.

2. Capacity Building and the Dominant Approaches

Most donors have a wide array of modalities they use to engage in capacity building activities to build research capacities⁶. The type of approach used seems to be determined by the set of circumstances linked to the context, needs, donor, project designers and prevailing ideology. Some donors focus on themes and thus utilize approaches that can provide resources that are linked to help individuals, agencies, and networks improve the capabilities of those working on the theme. Others focus on organizations or institutions and thus their major approaches are related to organizational and institutional development. Approaches come in and out of favour as well. For example, a number of years back some donors stopped funding scholarships to their country because they felt it contributed to the so-called “brain drain”. Also a few years ago, donors preferred twinning arrangements between and among research centers as a mode to build capacity. While funders might have investment patterns, we have not located any evidence that provides insight on what types of approaches work in what setting. The lessons thus far tend to be quite context specific. The following table presents a list of capacity building activities we have found in the literature.

⁴ At the time this portion of the study was carried out, IDRC had three broad programming areas: Social and Economic Policy, Environment and Natural Resource Management, and Information and Communication Technologies for Development. In April 2005 a fourth programming area was added: Innovation, Policy and Science.

⁵ IDRC works in the following six regions: Eastern & Southern Africa, Western and & Central Africa, Middle East & North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

⁶ Universalialia. (2005). “*Capacity Building at IDRC: Some Preliminary Thoughts*”. Paper prepared for IDRC’s Evaluation Unit, Ottawa, Canada; Whyte, Anne. (2004). “*Landscape Analysis of Donor Trends in International Development*”. Paper prepared for Human and Institutional Capacity Building: A Rockefeller Foundation Series, Issue 2, New York, New York.

Approaches Used for Capacity Building Activities

APPROACH	COMMENT
Technical Assistance	This is the most common and involves long- and short-term experts imparting knowledge and skills on site through consulting, coaching and training activities.
Mentoring and “Apprenticeship”	These are capacity building approaches where senior staff members take on junior staff to improve their capabilities and/or counsel them in their careers.
Training Programs	The concept of a training program is used for both long- and short-term learning activities. It includes everything from a workshop to a degree program. With respect to skill or capabilities it involves the subject and management competencies. Training can be classroom-based, field based, laboratory based etc. It covers a wide spectrum of activities.
Workshops	Workshops are a special type of training that is usually short-term (under six months).
Conferences	Conferences and meetings are gatherings for people to discuss issues, research findings and to personally network. These are normally topic driven.
Study Tours	These are one of many experiential learning activities being used today. In study tours, participants are able to see in action the things they want to implement in their own setting.
Institutional linkages, partnerships, and/or twinning arrangements	These are normally organizational relationships aimed at improving the capabilities of the institution. They normally involve a wide variety of exchanges, learning activities, training events, etc. Mutual benefit is usually a key component of such arrangements.
E-courses and programs	This is a recent attempt to utilize technology to improve processes of capacity building.
Networks	Recently, donors have been supporting groups of individuals groups of individuals and organizations to engage in capability development. This involves new forms of relationships and interactions and usually involves e-technology as well as face-to-face meetings.
Infrastructure support	This is capital infrastructure needed in any research/development endeavour. Normally, infrastructure support requires the organization to have some sort of maintenance budget or system. If not, it will not last. Infrastructure support could include buildings, libraries, utilities and the internet.
Base budget support	Unlike infrastructure, base budget support is a capacity intervention aimed at sustaining the on-going recurrent costs of an organization.
Awards, scholarships, fellowships, internships	A wide assortment of incentives used to encourage individuals to engage in capacity building. These awards can be given for local or international activities. They can be given to those who have done exceptional work or who have the potential to do exceptional work.
Publications and publication resource support	This too is a wide array of capacity building tools that help disseminate research work.

Each of these capacity building activities can be either successful or unsuccessful on their own, or in combination; much of the success depends on how well the project or program is planned, implemented, managed, monitored and so forth. The question for us here is which activity to use, when, targeting what level or outcome area, in what setting?

3. IDRC and Capacity Building

IDRC's Theory of Action

IDRC focuses on capacity building at all five levels (i.e., individual, organizational, network, state, societal, or users of the research). But the entry point or theory of change, for these outcome areas is the individual: they affect change through individual researchers, with the expectation that these “champions” will go on to affect change within their organization, network, etc. For example, in some of the Environment and Natural Resource Management projects carried out in Latin America, the emphasis tends to be more on the organization, since many of the partner organizations IDRC works with in that particular region are considered to be quite “mature”. However, even though the outcome area is at the organizational level, the actual focus of the capacity building intervention is often at the individual level. As such, IDRC focuses most of its investments on activities that support building their individual capacities to carry out high quality research and evaluation that can be used by others, including policy and/or decision makers (both inside and outside government, at various levels of government), by business and other private sector actors, by lobbyists and advocates, and by other researchers. It is through this individual work that IDRC expects to get at those capacities found in the other target or outcome areas.

IDRC's Activities to Affect Change with Individuals

When we spoke to people at IDRC, most identified a wide array of activities they use to build capacity; yet the activities they choose as part of the intervention process are often quite random or “ad hoc”: they select the activities that they know and are comfortable with, but our study reveals that those choices are not necessarily theory-driven. Consistent with what we found in the literature, few people talked about a process (i.e., diagnosis-prescription-reflection), or how they mixed and matched activities into a specific approach for helping to build research capacities. Instead, most talked about their approach to capacity building as being a mixed bag of activities, often a combination of training coupled with hands on experience.

Another key aspect to capacity building at IDRC has been its focus on formal training programs and awards, including Masters and PhD level training. During the 1990s, however, much of this programming was dismantled due to the international aid cutbacks that most donors and aid agencies had to endure. In our interviews, however, the need to re-establish a formal training program at IDRC was mentioned frequently. Many of these respondents mentioned this as a key bottleneck with their partners in Latin America, with a particular emphasis on PhD level training on natural resource management and gender issues and analysis.

Activities Used by IDRC to Build Capacity

- Small grants funding
- Training courses (research and evaluation methodologies and approaches)
- One-on-one exchanges
- Study exchanges, visits
- Conferences, workshops and other professional public venues or forums
- Networks and networking
- Award programs (Agropolis, EcoHealth Award)
- Learning by doing
- Linking senior researchers with junior researchers
- Having recipients work with experts
- Writing experiences (manuscripts, theses, articles for peer-reviewed journals)
- Sustained mentoring
- Centres of Excellence

The issue in Latin America, however, is not so much on building basic research skills, but rather the need to strengthen researchers' abilities to contribute to IDRC's development results (for example, influencing public policy) by strengthening their capacity to be policy relevant, to be close to the policy process and to articulate policy relevant research. To do this requires a different set of activities to be put in place than for those projects where the researchers need to build their capacity in basic research skills, or carrying out research projects.

Concluding Remarks

For IDRC, as for most donors, the difficulty lies in creating a deeper understanding of how to use the various tools and activities to create approaches for capacity building that are robust and sustainable for the context within which they are operating. There is now a strong interest at IDRC to explore the idea of carrying out research on different approaches to capacity building and how these approaches can be linked to results.

This will require an in-depth inquiry to explore and examine what are the actual approaches to capacity building that are being used – how are they being implemented and monitored? What mix of activities works, or doesn't work, and what is the likelihood that certain combinations will work in specific settings? As we look towards the future of what capacity building interventions work or don't work, these are some of the most burning questions that we will need to explore further.