# Capacity building: shifting the paradigms of practice

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*' ... development must start in somebody's sense; development is not about things you see ... , it is about the way somebody is developed in their thinking'.*(Rural fieldworker, cited in Oliver 1996)

So here we are again, once more pursuing the elusive concept of capacity building with a dogged relentlessness which would be amusing, were it not charged with such a sense of responsibility and commitment. There is an image which comes to mind: the concept of capacity building as a captured member of a foreign people (perhaps called Development), about whom we would like to know more but who remain a strange and elusive tribe, forever beyond the borders of our realm. We have captured this one member called Capacity Building, we have thrown him into prison, interrogated him, starved and beaten and isolated him, cursed and abused and threatened him to find out what he knows; but he looks back at us, silent and resentful and unforthcoming. In his silence he remains beyond our abilities to bully, and the very flailings of our desperation seem to build rather than sap the strength of his resolve and the ramparts of his defence. He may lie naked and bleeding in the corner of his cell, but the very silence of his presence mocks and belittles us. After so much battering at the doors of his knowledge, still we seem to have gleaned very little.

What if we were to change tack, to alter our approach? What if we were to treat him with respect, even deference? What if we were to give him his freedom, to demand nothing from him, to release him from the burden of our despair and simply allow him to live among us, and to come and go as he would choose? Perhaps friendship and trust would allow his real

self to emerge. Perhaps he might even allow us to walk beside him when he went back to visit his people. Perhaps, under these circumstances, a simple question would elicit an honest answer. And we might even discover that the answer was obvious from the beginning, that in fact it had been staring us in the face all the time, but that we had been unable to see it, because we had obscured our own vision through our desperate battering of the messenger. Is it possible that we are pushing the answers that we seek ever deeper into obscurity through the frantic complexity of our search? In our attempts to unravel the knot, are we in danger of drawing it ever tighter?

Is it possible that capacity building demands such a radically new form of practice, such a radically new form of thinking, that our current approaches are doomed to failure – not because we lack adequate models or 'technologies', but because our very approach to the issue is inadequate? The image presented above, of course, is pure fantasy, but the questions that it prompts are not. This paper is an attempt to outline some of the fundamental shifts that such a new form of approach would entail. It is an attempt to look honestly at the phenomena as they present themselves to us, without presupposition or assumption.

In a previous paper (CDRA 1995) the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) described organisations as open systems, comprising a number of interlinking and interdependent elements. We noted that these elements form a hierarchy of importance, and that therefore certain elements are more central than others in the attainment of organisational capacity. Thus we noted the following.

# Elements of organisational life

## *A conceptual framework*

The first requirement for an organisation with capacity, the 'prerequisite' on which all other capacity is built, is the development of a conceptual framework which reflects the organisation's understanding of the world. This is a coherent frame of reference, a set of concepts which allows the organisation to make sense of the world around it, to locate itself within that world, and to make decisions in relation to it. This framework is not a particular ideology or theory, it is not necessarily correct, and it is not impervious to criticism and change. It is not a precious, fragile thing, but a robust attempt to keep pace conceptually with the (organisational and contextual) developments and challenges facing the organisation. The organisation which does not have a competent working

understanding of its world can be said to be incapacitated, regardless of how many other skills and competencies it may have.

## Organisational 'attitude'

The second element concerns organisational 'attitude'. An organisation needs to build its confidence to act in and on the world in a way that it believes can be effective and have an impact. Put another way, it has to shift from 'playing the victim' to exerting some control, to believing in its own capacity to affect its circumstances. Another aspect of 'attitude' is accepting responsibility for the social and physical conditions 'out there', whatever the organisation faces in the world. This implies a shift from the politics of demand and protest to a more inclusive acceptance of the responsibilities which go with the recognition of human rights.

Whatever the history of oppression, marginalisation, or simply nasty circumstances that an individual or organisation has had to suffer, these 'attitudes' are the basis for effective action in the world. This is not a question of morality, or of fairness or justice; it is simply the way things work.

## Vision and strategy

With clarity of understanding and a sense of confidence and responsibility comes the possibility of developing organisational vision and strategy. Understanding and responsibility lead to a sense of purpose in which the organisation does not lurch from one problem to the next, but manages to plan and implement a programme of action, and is able to adapt this programme in a rational and considered manner.

## Organisational structure

Although these elements are not gained entirely sequentially, we may say that, once organisational aims and strategy are clear, it becomes possible to structure the organisation in such a way that roles and functions are clearly defined and differentiated, lines of communication and accountability untangled, and decision-making procedures transparent and functional. Put slightly differently, 'form follows function'; if one tries to do this the other way round, the organisation becomes incapacitated.

## Acquisition of skills

The next step in the march towards organisational capacity, in terms of priority and sequence, is the growth and extension of individual skills, abilities, and competencies — the traditional terrain of training courses. Of course, skills also feature earlier; they can, in and of themselves, generate confidence and a sense of control. Development cannot be viewed simplistically; these phases overlap. Yet what emerges clearly from extensive experience is that there is a sequence, a hierarchy, an order. Unless organisational capacity has been developed sufficiently to harness training and the acquisition of new skills, training courses do not 'take', and skills do not adhere. The organisation which does not know where it is going and why, which has a poorly developed sense of responsibility for itself, and which is inadequately structured cannot make use of training courses and skills-acquisition programmes.

## Material resources

Finally, an organisation needs material resources: finances, equipment, office space, and so on. Without an appropriate level of these, the organisation will always remain, in an important sense, incapacitated.

This perspective on what constitutes a capacitated organisation has been developed through years of reflection on the interventions that we have made to assist organisations, and through years of reflecting on the differences between those organisations which appear in some measure capable, and those which do not, or which appear less capable. But the most important insight it offers for capacity building is not simply a list of indicators which we can use as a framework for understanding capacity. Rather, it yields two far more radical insights with far-reaching consequences for practice.

# First paradigm shift: from the tangible to the intangible

If you look towards the bottom of the hierarchy, you will see those things which are quantifiable, measureable, elements of organisational life which can easily be grasped and worked with. Material and financial resources, skills, organisational structures and systems — all these are easily assessed and quantified. In a word, they belong to the realm of material and visible things. If, however, we turn our attention to the top

of the hierarchy, we enter immediately an entirely different realm: the realm of the invisible. Sure, organisations may have written statements of vision, of strategy, and of value, but these written statements do not in any sense indicate whether an organisation actually has a working understanding of its world. They do not indicate the extent to which an organisation feels responsible for its circumstances, or capable of having an effect on them, or the degree to which an organisation is really striving to become a learning organisation, or to what extent it is developing its staff, or manifesting a team spirit or endeavour. Furthermore, they do not indicate the extent to which an organisation is reflective, non-defensive, and self-critical. In short, the elements at the top of the hierarchy of elements of organisational life are ephemeral, transitory, not easily assessed or weighed. They are observable only through the effects that they have, and largely invisible to the organisation itself as well as to those practitioners who would intervene to build organisational capacity.

We are saying, then, that the most important elements in organisational life, those which largely determine the functioning of the organisation, are of a nature which make them more or less impervious to conventional approaches to capacity building. Consider this from two angles.

First, from the point of view of the organisation itself. If you interview organisations which suffer from a lack of capacity, you will find that they complain readily about lack of resources, lack of skills, inappropriate structures, an unfavourable history or an impossible context. In other words, they place the blame for their circumstances 'out there', on others or on their situation which is beyond their control, and specifically on those visible elements which lie at the bottom of the hierarchy. But, as Stephen Covey once said, 'For those who think their problems are "out there", that thinking is the problem'. Interview organisations which have developed a certain strength, robustness, or resilience, and you will discover that they generally take responsibility for their lack of capacity, that they attribute it to their own struggles with organisational culture and value, with lack of vision, lack of leadership and management, and so on. In other words, they manifest self-understanding. Capacitated organisations will manifest both stronger invisible elements and an ability to reflect on these elements — which is itself a feature of these stronger invisible elements situated at the top of the hierarchy.

Second, from the point of view of the capacity builder. If we examine honestly the kinds of intervention that we perform, either as donors or as development practitioners, we have to recognise that most of these are

concentrated on the lower end of the hierarchy. Mainly, our efforts consist in providing resources or training courses. These are sometimes accompanied by, or preceded by, 'needs assessments', or even 'audits', which themselves concentrate on the visible, more tangible, elements which have little impact if the top elements of the hierarchy are undeveloped. We also engage in advice-giving more than in facilitation; we try to get organisations to make changes which we think will be good for them, which in itself can diminish the robustness of those elements at the top, rather than strengthen them through a form of facilitation which enables organisations to come to grips with their own issues, thus developing those top elements. Finally, and more recently, we have begun to help organisations with 'strategic planning'. This in itself would be a step in the right direction, were we to include the conceptual construction of the organisation's world, as well as forays into organisational culture, in the process. Unfortunately many strategic-planning exercises consist of piecemeal attempts (that is, unrelated to other elements) which comprise the setting of goals and objectives, the 'material aspects' of planning, leaving the organisation pretty much as incapacitated as before, with a 'plan of action' but without the ability to innovate, reflect on, and adapt the plan as circumstances and time progress. (These latter abilities are what really constitute capacity, but — at the risk of repetition — they are 'invisible').

In other words, organisational life ranges from the visible, more tangible aspects to those which are less visible, more intangible. It is these latter aspects which by and large determine organisational functioning, yet it is on the former aspects that so-called capacity-building interventions tend to focus. To anyone who works intensively with organisations, this assertion should appear obvious, even 'common sense', or at the very least clearly observable. Why then do we not shift the focus of our interventions?

The answer is as obvious as the dilemma itself: because we do not see — have not been trained or conditioned to see — things in this way. Because it presents a radical challenge to our customary ways of seeing the world. Because our conventional packages and products, our short-term *ad hoc* responses and interventions, are what we have, are what we use, and we will resist the move away from them for as long as possible. Because we take comfort in what we can provide, rather than in what may be really necessary. Because these kinds of intervention are sanctioned by donors. Because organisations have learned to ask for them. Because they are tangible and quantifiable. Because they can be delivered.

Because their delivery and assessment can be easily managed and monitored. Because our fieldworkers can be (relatively easily) trained to deliver them. Because they are hard-edged, unambiguous, and certain. Because they do not embroil us in the hazy shifting sands, in the uncertain worlds of fog and mirages which characterise the reality of organisational change processes. Because they do not challenge our certainties with the hazardous obstacles of organisational contradiction. Because they do not fundamentally challenge us.

Organisational change processes are contradictory, ambiguous, and obtuse. They are long-term and not easily observed. Most of all, they are unpredictable. Therefore, while they can be influenced, they lie forever beyond our control. The world of practice in the realm of the intangibles at the top of the organisational hierarchy of complexity is a world which is itself fraught with complexity. It demands constant self-reflection, reflection on practice, if practice is to be improved. It demands the exercise of facilitation skills which are labelled 'soft' but which are the most difficult, demanding, and challenging skills to master: skills of observation and listening, the ability to ask the right question, the holding of ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradiction, the ability to draw enthusiasm out of exhaustion and cynicism, overcoming resistance to change, empathy, and the tenacity to work over long periods with little direct product to show for it – to name but a few. In other words, it demands developmental skills; and, although we talk a lot about the development of capacity, we tend to concentrate on the delivery of 'product'. In short, we do not practise what the situation demands; rather, we produce what can most easily be delivered.

The paradigm shift that is demanded by the above argument is more than radical: it should shatter our complacency and throw the entire edifice of current development practice into doubt. Yet the ability to work with intangibles is only the first of the two paradigm shifts which loom across the boundaries of our practice. The second goes something like this.

## Second paradigm shift: from static model to developmental reading

While it may be true that organisations can be seen as systems of interlocking elements, arranged in a hierarchy of complexity from those which are less tangible to those which are more so, this perspective is not always real. It is not always the case that capacity-building interventions

should begin with the intangible before they move on to the more visible. The reality is far more complex than any one theory or model can contain. It all depends on where a particular organisation is at a particular time, and on what kind of organisation it is.

A small, new NGO has a different level of impact and 'sophistication' from a large NGO which is established and effective. The larger NGO has more need of 'sophisticated organisational conditions', because development and growth in capacity implies greater sophistication of organisational processes, functions, and structures. While the new NGO will need clarity of vision, it may not yet have the problems which often accompany organisational vision-building activities within the older NGO. The needs of individual staff members in terms of skills — and therefore training courses — will differ at different stages of the organisation's life, as will material-resource constraints and assets. Similarly, with respect to structure, organisations will have different needs at different stages of their lives. At times, an increasingly complex structure will be called for; at other times, 'destructuring' will be required.

Or, for example, with regard to community-based organisations (CBOs), these can grow to become highly sophisticated organisations, but generally in southern Africa at present they are far less developed and sophisticated, in organisation terms, than their NGO counterparts. And within the organisational form of the CBO itself, a wide range of different capacities and competencies exists. There are communities which lack any organisational representation at all. There are embryonic CBOs, consisting of little more than a (theoretically) rotating committee, without a thought-through strategy, resources, or clarity of roles and functions. Then there is the CBO with employees, differentiated strategies, and office space and equipment.

All of these different stages of organisational development, from no organisation through organisation building through organisational differentiation to highly sophisticated national NGOs with mega-budgets, (theoretically) represent increasing capacity. And each of the elements of organisational life mentioned above recur — with their different intervention demands — at different stages in the capacity-building game.

A CBO might be struggling with the transition in 'attitude' from resistance to responsibility, while an NGO is dealing with attitudinal issues which it refers to as organisational culture – issues of meaning, principle, and motivation. An NGO in its early phases may function

healthily with a flat, informal structure; later, in order to maintain the same level of health, a more hierarchical structure may be called for. A CBO may have achieved greater organisational clarity through clarifying its constitutional or membership structures, only to discover that it degenerates into chaos and conflict when it begins to employ staff without clarifying the relationship between its operational structure (staff) and its constitutional structure.

The point is that, although there is a basic order in which competency in the elements is attained, and in which organisational capacity building occurs, needs change with respect to all these elements as the organisation develops. Even more importantly, although intervention or work done on any one of these elements will not prove effective unless sufficient work has been done on the preceding elements in the hierarchy — for example, training will not 'take' when organisational vision, culture, and structure are unresolved, and it does not help to secure resources when the organisation is not equipped to carry out its tasks — even so, these elements are interdependent, and one may have to work on a number of levels simultaneously in certain situations in order to be effective. And even more importantly — and perhaps paradoxically — while the concept of a hierarchy provides us with a guide, there are many times when one has to work on lower elements in the hierarchy in order to have an effect on higher elements. For example, there are times when the acquisition of an appropriate structure will have a beneficial effect on organisational culture where work on that culture alone has proved ineffective. Such organisational examples abound throughout the hierarchy.

What this means, in essence, is that although one may have an explanatory and sensible model of what constitutes organisational health, competence, and capacity, there are two aspects of organisational reality which confound simplistic attempts to impose this model on specific situations. The first is that, while every organisation may share similar features, nevertheless each is unique, both in itself and in terms of its stage of development, and this uniqueness demands unique, singular, and specifically different responses. Second, while the model may adequately describe the elements of organisational capacity and even the order of their acquisition, it cannot predict or determine organisational change processes, which are complex, ambiguous, and often contradictory. And organisational change, rather than a static model describing organisational elements, is the essence of capacity building.

In other words, being equipped with a perspective on how organisations function, while it is a prerequisite for effective capacity building, is no substitute for direct observation of particular organisational realities in which one is wishing to intervene. One needs the intelligence, acuity, mobility, and penetrating perception to be able to 'read' the particular nature of a specific situation if one hopes to be effective in organisational capacity building. It is all too easy to presume, to make judgements, to impose one's understanding, to compare one organisational situation with another. It is all too easy to base one's interventions on a theoretical model rather than on an accurate assessment of the situation at hand. It is all too easy to design general capacity-building interventions in the office, rather than make specific and individual interventions based on observations in the field. It is all too easy to design general capacity-building interventions for mass delivery, rather than individually specific and nuanced interventions. Once again, general capacity-building interventions, programmes, courses, mass-based delivery vehicles: all these are easy to manage, easy to quantify, to raise money for, to fund, to control. But they are all inadequate.

There are too few NGOs, too few donors, too few development practitioners, who take the time to read specific situations in order to design appropriate and necessarily transitory interventions based on an intelligent reading. (They are necessarily transitory, because the organisation being worked on will develop beyond a particular intervention as a result of the effectiveness of that intervention.) The radical nature of the paradigm shift we are suggesting here is that development practitioners are normally trained to deliver interventions — or packages or programmes — rather than to read the developmental phase at which a particular organisation may be and then to devise a response appropriate to that organisation at that particular time and to nothing else. The ability to read a developmental situation requires a background theory — which few practitioners employ — but it also requires an understanding of development; the ability to observe closely without judgement; sensitivity; empathy; an ability to penetrate to the essence of a situation, to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak; the ability to create an atmosphere of trust out of which an organisation may yield up the secrets that it will normally hold back (even from itself) in defensive reaction; the ability really to hear and listen and see; the ability to resist the short sharp expert response which is usually more gratifying to the practitioner than to the organisation;

and then, out of an accurate reading, to bring (or arrange for) the appropriate response, one which may not even be within the ambit of the NGO's normal services.

This is a paradigm shift, a radically different approach, a far cry from the normal delivery mechanisms of NGOs, donors, and governments who hope to build capacity. It embraces the real meaning of 'people-centred development', to which we pay lip-service in terms of policy but hardly ever think through to its consequences in terms of practice. Perhaps such a paradigm shift deserves the coining of a new cliché: 'organisation-centred capacity building'. Yet it is precisely such phrases which confuse the issue: we are specifically saying that an adequate response to capacity building, albeit a complex one which turns all of our most cherished attitudes into disarray, is one which concentrates on the actual practice of the development practitioner, rather than on policy statements or well-worded programmes or well-designed courses.

## Some consequences

What are the skills which we normally think of as associated with development practice and capacity building? Whatever they are in specific detail, the generic sense of these skills is captured by the one phrase, the one concept, which always arises when talking about these issues — namely, 'train the trainers'. This is our conventional response when confronted with the demand for capacity-building skills. A wealth of implied meaning underlies this phrase. That what we require for capacity building is trainers. That these trainers can be trained — which implies that they are to 'deliver' specific and fixed 'products' (perhaps courses or programmes). And generally, training implies that the trainee is to learn the skills which are to be 'imparted' by the trainer; also that replication at an exponential rate is both desirable and attainable.

This is one response. The other is to concentrate on the setting up of structures or policies which create an environment through which capacity may be built. We know what is needed, and we must thus set the conditions in place that will allow its realisation.

Both of the above responses are valid and important, but they are not always appropriate, and we may undermine their effectiveness by the very strength of our focus on them. Besides, their danger lies in the fact that they are clearly a response which we can master relatively easily, and therefore they may ensnare us in the seduction of their appeal to our abilities, rather than challenge us by the relevance of their application.

They are conventional responses, and their very conventionality should make us suspicious, because the success of our capacity-building efforts to date has been minimal.

The more radical response is to consider ourselves 'artists of the invisible', continually having to deal with ambiguity and paradox, uncertainty in the turbulence of change, new and unique situations coming to us from out of a future of which we have had as yet little experience. This more radical response would imply that we need to develop a resourcefulness out of which we can respond, rather than being trained in past solutions, in fixed mindsets, and trained behaviours which replicate particular patterns and understandings, instead of freeing us to respond uniquely to unique situations.

From the perspective of this paradigm shift there are new abilities which we as development practitioners need to develop — note, *abilities which we need to develop*, not skills in which we need to be trained. Some of these abilities may include the following:

- The ability to find the right question which may enable an organisation to take the next step on its path of development, and to hold a question so that it functions as a stimulus to exploration, rather than demanding an immediate solution, and to help organisations to do the same.
- The ability to hold the tension generated by ambiguity and uncertainty, rather than seek immediate resolution.
- The ability to observe accurately and objectively, to listen deeply, so that invisible realities of the organisation become manifest.
- The ability to use metaphor and imagination to overcome the resistance to change, to enable an organisation to see itself afresh, and to stimulate creativity.
- The ability to help others to overcome cynicism and despair and to kindle enthusiasm.
- Integrity, and the ability to generate the trust that will allow the organisation and its members to really 'speak' and reveal themselves.
- The ability to reflect honestly on one's own interventions, and to enable others to do the same.
- The ability to 'feel' into the 'essence' of a situation.
- The ability to empathise (not sympathise), so that both compassion and confrontation can be used with integrity in helping an organisation to become unstuck.
- The ability to conceptualise, and thus to analyse strategy with intelligence.

The list can go on, but such lists carry in themselves the dangers of new answers which become set routines and received methodologies. The true import of the paradigm shifts described in this paper is that we must remain awake, full of interest and wonder and awe, open and vulnerable, if we hope to find the resilience to respond to the diverse array of situations which challenge us as capacity builders. Above all, answers dampen our edge. It is living with questions that maintains the charge of our attention, and more than anything else we are called on to pay attention.

So, to conclude on a very open note, we include some questions which emerge for us if the perspective presented above is recognised as valid.

• With respect to government-sponsored, nationwide development initiatives which need to 'deliver' in the short term (and similar initiatives in the non-government sector): what needs to be in place so that they can really contribute to local-level capacity building?

• What are the implications for the way in which funding for capacity-building interventions is currently provided, and what needs to change in funding practice?

• What are the implications in respect of the current vogue for outcomes-based project planning, logical framework strategic documents, and 'business planning'?

• And what then are the implications for development management and leadership, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and the concept of the discrete 'development' project itself?

• Can the tendering process, with its rigid frames of reference, have any place in developmental interventions? Can it be adapted?

• Which kinds of organisations— with respect to both organisational type and organisational functioning — are capable of effectively deploying capacity-building practitioners?

• Who, of the organisations we know at present, is taking responsibility for developmental capacity-building interventions as described above? Who and where are the capacity builders?

- Who is, who could be, who should be performing developmental capacity building? And how would organisational conditions have to shift to allow them to perform effectively?

## Acknowledgement

## References

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