

Capacity building: the making of a curry

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Introduction

As Charles Handy once said, 'Life is understood backwards, but unfortunately, it has to be lived forwards'.¹ Much the same can be said for the capacity of a development organisation. When we look backwards in time, there are often significant events that indicate success and achievement – periods when things seemed to have worked well. We look back and see that, yes, there were times when the organisation's 'capacity' was high, or at least higher than at other times. In reflecting on this, we may be able to uncover some of the reasons why.

When we approach the *area* of capacity building, however, we approach something that suggests a thinking and looking forward. That is not to say that we do not make plans without reference to some *looking around* – reflecting on what other organisations have learned, their experiences, their 'best practices'. Nor is it to be taken that we approach capacity building without being shaped by past organisational experience and events.

But, as this paper sets out to show, there is an insufficient amount of *looking backwards* and *looking within* when it comes time to discussing plans by which to enhance a given organisation's capacity. There seems to be a disjuncture between an understanding of the lessons learned from the life of one's own organisation, and the plans we set in place to make organisational life more vibrant, more sustainable, and more sustaining.

To paraphrase Charles Handy, this is unfortunate. Even more so since this can serve as a detriment to good capacity building. There is much to be gained, learned, affirmed, and celebrated when we draw upon moments of organisational experience within which members felt personal satisfaction, high levels of commitment, and excitement

because of their role in the organisation's work. When we do stop and reflect upon good things that have already happened in our organisation, we may very well uncover some powerful ingredients that can move us forward, in our planning, our doing, and even our defining of where we wish to go.

This paper describes a brief journey experienced by one organisation in seeking to come to a better understanding of capacity-building, and to be better equipped in assisting other partner organisations in building their capacity. With the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC), a small US NGO, has been undertaking a review of its organisational capacity-building measurement tools and methods, drawing upon innovative action-research methods as developed at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) at Cleveland, Ohio.

The review over the 1994–1997 period has taken place at more or less the same time as a corporate initiative on CRWRC's part to re-allocate a larger share of its resources from sectoral areas of functional education, primary health care (PHC), agriculture and income-generation, to strengthening management and board functions, lending assistance in areas of policy and procedure development, monitoring and evaluation, grant-writing, resource development, and financial management. Such an attempt at re-allocation is not dissimilar from initiatives of other Northern development agencies² and reflects, among other factors, greater acknowledgement of sectoral skills already resident in developing countries, as well as the concerns of many in the development community for institutional viability and an embedding of transparent and effective policies and practices.

Historically, in its work with Southern partners, CRWRC has emphasised the importance of regularly assessing financial, technical, networking, resource development, and governance skills. Questions and a numerical sliding-scale system were used. Questions would ask, for example, about the levels of functionality, ownership, and transparency of a governing board and a Constitution, and about job descriptions, a training calendar, a clear book-keeping system, and so on. These series of questions would be asked every six months, with targets set for the following six-month period. The assessment and target-setting would form the basis for support by CRWRC to a Southern partner.

With the purpose of reviewing this system and suggesting possible changes, ‘listening workshops’ were arranged over a three-year period (1994–1997) in all four regions where CRWRC works (West Africa, East Africa, Latin America, and Asia). Over 120 national NGOs have now participated in about 50 different workshops, each of which lasted an average of two to three days. Workshops were framed so as to give space and significance to listening to one another and exploring dimensions of positive past experiences, which were shared through stories, songs, poems, and pictures. This, as well as the participation of a wide array of organisational members – Board and funding agency representatives and programme participants as well as staff – allowed for discussion to flow across a rich blend of interests and professional vocations including business persons, religious and community leaders, teachers, researchers, lawyers, and doctors.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

An Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework was used to guide the proceedings and frame the listening and review process. Appreciative Inquiry is a philosophy or an approach to organisational learning and analysis that seeks to evolve the vision and will of a collectivity, and to value and amplify the best of what already is practised.³

The inquiry dimension of AI affirms human beings’ symbolic capacities of imagination and their social capacities for conscious choice and continuous willing. The ‘appreciative’ dimension seeks to celebrate and affirm that which works and has gone well. It seeks to locate and illuminate the reasons behind moments when, for example, commitment was exceptionally high; and to discover the factors and forces which allowed for that to be so.

Appreciative Inquiry suggests that any inquiry into the ‘art of the possible’ in organisational life needs to begin with an appreciation for those exceptional moments which have given life to the organisational system and activated members’ competencies and energies. These resources – those actual, lived, personally satisfying moments when commitment and excitement were high – are powerful seeds and momentum-builders by which an organisation can grow and develop.

An AI approach suggests that organisations are made and imagined – not constructed in hard and fast ways. Organisations can be re-configured according to the wishes and hopes of their members. Habitual styles of thought and background assumptions by which we come to define our organisations in a particular way serve to constrain

our imagination. Since organisations are human constructions, they are responsive to positive thought. Unlike a problem-solving approach whereby key problems are identified and prioritised, and solutions and an action plan developed to eliminate those problems, AI says that when there exists a foundation of mutual affirmation and organisation-wide appreciation, it will be that much easier to work towards a mutually desired future.

Moreover, when an organisation experiments with the conscious evolution of positive imagery and derives such an image for itself, organisational 'problems' will lose their daunting edge, and conditions will be much more amenable to resolving these problems. Organisations do not need 'fixing' but, rather, constant re-affirmation. Because organisations are socially constructed, patterns of action within them are also open to alteration. The largest obstacle in the way of organisational well-being is the absence of a positive image, an affirmative projection which would guide the organisation and draw it in the direction of the image of that future.

AI and capacity building

An AI framework adapts well to objectives of a clearer and more contextual understanding of organisational capacity. Appreciative Inquiry methods, and what I shall call 'traditional' capacity-building plans, both seek and envision a better future. Whereas AI methods suggest that a future organisational state will draw upon the learnings and momentum of positive present and past experiences, most current capacity-building initiatives set out to follow well-considered and well-sequenced plans. Neither AI methods nor traditional capacity-building plans lay out a future on the basis of fancy whims or lofty hopes; rather, future hopes are earthed to real and firm ground – actual experiences in the case of AI, and clarity and sequence in the case of traditional capacity-building. Finally, AI methods profess openness and flexibility to varying symbolic and local media through which sharing and discovery can take place; this parallels the desire even in the most 'logically' developed capacity-building plan to give further value to culture and indigenous context.

The chorus of capacity-building enthusiasts is growing with each passing year. The World Bank recently announced a new and significant capacity-building thrust in Sub-Saharan Africa, one that would help to 'nurture the building and rational utilization of capacity' on the continent.⁴ The Washington Microcredit Summit Declaration

and Plan of Action, adopted in February 1997, noted that the single biggest constraint to expanding microcredit to 100 million of the world's poorest families – even more than mobilising support and seed funds – is the need to build local institutional capacity in communities around the world.⁵ The International Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) has noted that, for an assortment of reasons, NGO capacity building, too, has moved to the 'top of the development agenda'.⁶

Appreciative Inquiry, meanwhile, is still a small and emergent stream among the many action-research and organisational transformation approaches. None the less, it has served to facilitate several significant learnings around capacity building.

Learnings

Originally, back in 1994, we in CRWRC hoped that listening tours and appreciative methods would allow us to discern the real fundamentals – the nuts and bolts – of capacity. Southern partner perspectives. Attention to local culture. Being more attuned to local realities. Developmentally correct. With these, we thought, our understanding of capacity would become clearer.

Yet, if anything, our understanding of capacity and the issues around building capacity-building has become less crisp. Capacity, we are learning, is much more than the presence of good systems, well-trained staff, marketability, and resource-drawing capability. For example, we are learning that an organisation, in spite of demonstrating what is traditionally understood as capacity, may not have the wherewithal to weather crisis periods or assure that the working environment is encouraging and attractive enough to retain high-quality staff. Even in what may be perceived to be a 'high-capacity' organisation, it may be difficult when capable staff do leave, or there is a sudden shortfall in revenue, or a serious case of misappropriation, for example, to know whether the organisation will be able to bring in new people, pull itself together, and continue delivering services in a similarly satisfactory manner. Indeed, many developing countries face civil strife, and many national NGOs in the South operate in situations of resource constraints and high staff turnover.

Organisations with stellar management systems can fold rather quickly in the face of civil conflict or an abrupt funding cutback from donors. Others, for example, at the time of civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s and Sierra Leone in 1995, although admittedly weak in financial management and other technical skills, were able to bond

closer together, hold fast, and serve as leavening influences among people in distress. Although they had not yet evolved good overall management systems, they were able to show empathy, and impart to local people significant messages of peace, solidarity, and reconciliation while also continuing – albeit at a temporarily reduced level – with health and education work.

We are also learning that there are important limitations in traditional capacity-assessment methods. Firstly, we have seen that although an ideal may very well be for an organisation to assemble every six months and assess its capacity, the process – a question-and-answer format for the most part, with varying degrees of discussion about what number from one to five to give, and what future numerical target to set – may not be a *significant* organisational event; and may not be sufficient to attract board members and staff to participate fully, enjoy what they are doing, or see it as important for their organisation or embrace the results in such a way as to build greater organisational commitment towards making their work more effective.

A second limitation is that traditional methods serve to set apart or demarcate capacity shortfalls or capacity gaps. By highlighting deficiencies and systematically setting out to eliminate weaknesses, traditional assessment methods can dampen or even extinguish joys that may have been ignited by successes in having attained new plateaux of, for example, resource development capacity, or a process by which a training programme has been put in place, or a Constitution amended. ‘Capacity deficit reduction’ does not necessarily arise out of malice or bad intent, but it can none the less dampen learnings and joys that, were they affirmed and celebrated, could motivate and energise an organisation towards further growth.

A third limitation is that traditional methods of planning and assessing capacity can reflect a Western conception of what an ideal organisation should be. A Western and uniform model may be a poor fit in the very heterogeneous cultures of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Donor-required, pre-determined sets of assessment questions can serve to marginalise organisational qualities that are intrinsically desirable and valued by its members, and move such qualities out of the lived discourse of an organisation’s reality – to the point where these are understood as being inessential to the viability and effectiveness of its work. Capacity-assessment questions have usually not sought to learn about levels of compassion, commitment, staff relationships, or shared hopes for the future. Although highly relevant,

these values seem to be important outside the traditional boundaries and description of capacity.

Moreover, we are learning that good organisational capacity in one area of the world may be quite different from that in another region: a Cambodian organisation sees capacity as prioritising political awareness and advocacy among staff and board, while one from India sees empathy and solidarity with the Dalits as being most integral to their organisation's capacity, while yet another, in Mali, may value environmental justice and the building of vibrant communities as being of the highest importance. Over time, too, an understanding of capacity may evolve with a change in the working environment (say, a period of civil strife has come to an end) or a change in an organisation's maturity or mandate.

Organisation as a car

An organisation has often been portrayed as a car. Invest an outlay of cash, add gas and oil, and out comes mileage: you move from point A to point B. You take good care of the car, ensure that it looks nice on the outside, and do preventive-type things – careful driving, and regular tune-ups and servicing – to make sure that the vehicle runs as well and for as long as possible. There will no doubt be maintenance work: new shock-absorbers, new tyres, changed gaskets. And the occasional accident may require body-work, putting the vehicle in the garage for a few days, perhaps a new windshield. But the car would get back on the road eventually and continue to run. Our definition of a good organisation, one with capacity, was that of a well-oiled machine, a smooth-riding car, one in which system inputs could be processed and transformed into system outputs.

A machine or vehicle metaphor of an organisation with capacity is valid up to a certain point, although it seems to suggest that capacity is fixed. Our use of a sliding scale, with a maximum number of five, seemed to suggest the same. Perhaps the terminology related to 'capacity', in the sense of industrial capacity or daily processing capacity of an oil refinery, for example, also encourages us to borrow factory analogies and apply fixed-type thinking into our understanding of capacity.

But organisational capacity is very different from industrial capacity. Whereas the daily processing capacity of an oil refinery can increase with more machinery or new and more efficient machinery, we are learning that organisational capacity is not proportionately linked to

numbers of staff, or the quantities or even the qualities of trainings and policies in place. Organisational capacity incorporates quantity, quality, and efficiency dimensions – as would the oil refinery – but also more value-based, life-centric dimensions. Perhaps this is because development NGOs are service-oriented and people-focused. Both process and product are important.

Capacity as ... capacity includes ...

Rather than wrangle over words and terminology about what capacity means – itself often a frustrating process when different languages are being used – more generative and enjoyable workshop time was spent telling stories, drawing pictures, and dreaming about what a good organisation is. Dom Helder Camara, the priest who laboured among the very poorest of the people of Brazil, once said that while dreaming alone may be a human reaction to tough day-to-day realities, dreaming together creates an unbreakable bond of commitment and a real hope that a better tomorrow will actually come. Appreciative Inquiry methods take his words one step further: when dreams are grounded on the already-lived and experienced ‘ingredients’ – as identified and affirmed from stories of an organisation’s members – and shared out in full-system settings, they can become irresistible images of the future.

An AI approach suggests that organisations are essentially heliotropic, in that organisational actions have a largely automatic tendency to move in the direction of images of the future, much like a flower that grows towards its source of life or light. Organisations are drawn to images of the future that they themselves have chosen. The energy created in the process of constructing an image releases greater commitment and hope among those working towards it. Like the sunshine on a foggy morning, shared hope can dissolve rancour and burn away differences or apathy that, like the fog, hang over and impair even a short-term vision.

- Capacity includes commitment, compassion, connectedness. Members of an organisation in Bangladesh, when asked to give a metaphor for when they felt most satisfied and most committed to their work, chose almost matter-of-factly that of a family.
- A partner in the Dominican Republic shared a picture of a healthy organisation as a healthy human being in whom all the many miles of nerves and blood vessels are connected to such an extent that

when one part of the body feels sensation of any sort, it is communicated instantaneously to the rest of the body and, in the event of pain in one part of the body, the rest of the body mobilises quickly to heal the part experiencing such weakness or pain.

- An Indonesian organisation pictured a coconut tree growing on the banks of a river as being a true symbol of themselves. The tree yields a harvest of coconuts each year, some of which are eaten, others of which fall into the river, only to be carried to another place, where the seeds will cause a new tree to come forth and continue the cycle of life and life-giving.
- A Honduran organisation suggested that a good organisation is not a smooth-running machine, but a winding river. It is a river that starts small and allows for other smaller streams to join with it. It develops strength along the way. The river gives nutrition, generates life, carries and deposits nutrients. It facilitates the regular acts of life, but is not the owner of them. Because the river accepts streams of water that have their origin elsewhere, it grows in strength. And because it grows in strength, it is able to nourish and carry life and joy to ever more people.

Like the river, growth in organisational capacity is not a straight path ‘as the crow flies’. Capacity happens in fits and starts. A river meanders and winds with the lie of the land and the contours of the topography. Organisational capacity – happening at its best – may be two steps forward, one step back, perhaps not at all incrementally or in any sequential fashion, and perhaps in a timeframe that begs patience. ‘Hardly a cut and dried affair’, said one East African partner, ‘building capacity can be a messy, up and down type business’.

Unlike the smooth-running vehicle, then, an organisation’s life cycle is not linear, and its life not finite. There does not necessarily have to come a time when the costs of keeping the organisation going outweigh the benefits, where the inputs outweigh the outputs. Depreciation costs do not need to accumulate to the point where the vehicle – or the organisation – is written off.

Capacity as a festive curry meal?

Today, capacity building seems ‘a slippery concept’, in description and in practice.⁷ There are questions of semantics (to what extent does capacity-building overlap with institutional development?) and of definitional boundaries (can we talk about building the capacity of

community groups, industries, sectors, and talk of extra-sectoral capacity building, *without* incurring some blurriness?). There may be an extra layer of slipperiness in seeking to carry out capacity building in the political unpredictability of those regions of the world where a range of contingencies and assumptions need to be factored in.

Trying to define capacity, we are learning, can become quite ‘windy’ when we seek to describe it and incorporate all its many angles. In a sense, capacity is like the wind. When we talk about wind, we talk about direction, velocity, consistency, a production of energy. It is essential and refreshing. Without wind, the air is stagnant. Yet, somewhat like the wind, organisational capacity is something that we will not be able to fully grasp, understand or predict.

There is an unfortunate disjuncture between *capacity building* and what Edwards has referred to as *institutional learning*: ‘the process by which an organisation identifies key lessons of experience and uses them to improve the quality of its work’. Capacity building may be so programmed towards the attainment of an improved future that it unwittingly forgets key, past learnings. On the other hand, there may be a need to re-orient ourselves to how we perceive institutional learning: from a lessons-learned exercise to one of corporate valuation, validation, and appreciation of moments when satisfaction was personally felt; and where the reasons for this, when publicly shared, can ignite imagination and build momentum.

An organisation that reflects good capacity is somewhat like a festive curry meal. Making the meal requires skills, dedication, fresh ingredients, and good timing. There are staple ingredients that are understood as being essential – transparent management systems, clear communication, participatory work approaches – but there are also specific ingredients and spices that can only be selected by the people of that place. And, in the end, it is only they who will be able to put all the ingredients together in a recipe, select just the right cooking utensils, and make a curry that will truly reflect what they and their communities enjoy most.

Our listening has moved us to think through menu-driven approaches to capacity building and to adapt more inductive process templates that allow for flexibility, creativity, and learning. This aligns comfortably with an organisational shift away from grassroots implementation to a role of support and enabling – presenting partners with a menu of capacity areas (leadership development, human resources, gender participation, to name a few) from which they choose and within

which they develop indicators that are meaningful to them and that are grounded in their own organisational experience and collective hopes.

One further avenue of exploration is to visualise a capacity-measurement tool as one of the growth-monitoring and promotion devices that are used in child health and survival. The idea originated from a discussion that took place in a village in Bangladesh, where several women participants, when asked about the 'capacity' of their community group, immediately compared it to their children's weight-for-age 'Road to Health' cards. They talked about their group's 'weight' – *shangstar ojone* – as increasing as the group became healthier over time, as they together learned new skills and, because of savings and profits earned, developed greater purchasing power. Table 1 develops the comparison between a proposed Road to Capacity card with the familiar Road to Health card.

Table 1: Organisational capacity assessment compared with the monitoring of child development

Features of a Road to Health card	Features of a Road to Capacity card
<p>The growth or weight of the child is seen as a proxy indicator of the overall nutritional adequacy and the health of the child. Faltering growth - usually over two to three cycles of measurement - is the most sensitive indicator that all is not well with a child.</p>	<p>The capacity of an organisation is a measurement of its overall health and vitality. If 'capacity' swings downwards for any reason, this is not seen as a real concern, unless the downward swing persists over a longer period of time.</p>
<p>Weighing of under-5s is done regularly (monthly), and the child's weight is not compared with the weight or progress of other children. It is the child's own weight that is important.</p>	<p>Organisational capacity assessment is carried out regularly, but only in reference to itself and its own unique development and progress.</p>
<p>The parents can see (visualise) progress in a way that is simple but helpful. The mother or father usually weighs the child, records the weight, and draws the line from previous markings on the 'road to health' card. The card is designed to be used and fully and quickly understood by the parents and kept by them at home. The mother or father monitors and the field trainer or health worker observes and guides, if necessary.</p>	<p>Board members and all staff can visualise change and progress in an easily understood manner. Indeed, members of the organisation are the ones who carry out the assessment and the scoring.</p>
<p><i>continued ...</i></p>	

Table 1 continued

Features of a Road to Health card

Health workers or field trainers respond to each parent and child based on conversations with the parent and on the unique circumstances of that child. A key communication strategy in growth monitoring and promotion is listening and not talking, and giving prompt feedback that is easy to understand and implement. There is lots of learning in the interaction between the health worker and the parent. The health worker learns about the context and community, about what a particular set of parents have tried to do with a given child, what worked and what did not. There may be other social or economic factors that have affected or prevented growth from happening in a given couple of months. By using growth monitoring and promotion methods, the health worker becomes more productive and efficient.

Growth monitoring and promotion is a preventative strategy, in that it seeks to identify problems before malnutrition occurs. It also promotes good nutritional health. For the child, it seeks to achieve and maintain a state of nourishment. The preventative and promotional aspects need to begin within the first few months of the first year.

A child's growth is indicative of well-nourishment but also overall community well-being (quality of the physical environment, economic opportunities, income distribution, community education).

Growth monitoring and promotion is not one of many health-related interventions but is rather a basket into which all interventions can be put (immunisations, vitamin A treatment, oral-rehydration therapy, breastfeeding, etc.) and taken out as needed or required. The intervention used in given contexts (say, iodine supplements or Vitamin E) can vary, but the desired result is the same: growth. Growth monitoring and promotion is a framework, an operational strategy for the entire range of PHC and educational inputs.

Features of a Road to Capacity card

The emphasis on the input of a partner organisation is to listen, learn, discern the broader and deeper circumstances, and be ready to offer prompt feedback. Such feedback requires a thorough knowledge and background experience. Moreover, there needs to be a good working relationship within which discussion takes place and any advice is offered.

Mapping that is carried out on a Road to Capacity card is done with both prevention and promotion in mind, with the goal being overall organisational health and growth, and a receptiveness to learn and embrace new ideas, through which further growth and continued good health can be assured.

Organisational capacity needs to be understood in relation to the organisational environment and the development of civil society.

Organisational capacity-building is an over-arching and all-encompassing framework within which work is carried out. It includes many things, but depending on context and situation, responsiveness (which ingredient to use) can vary.

There is an undoubted need to build capacity, embed effective policies and practices, and work towards goals where streams of benefits do not dry up once external support comes to an end but, rather, continue to flow, nourish, and sustain. However, as we have learned, there is a similarly pressing need to see the methods and tools of capacity building capture the imagination of an organisation's members, lending focus to their dreams, and building energy and momentum for seeing these dreams realised.

Notes

- 1 Charles Handy (1995), interview by Joel Kurtzman with Charles Handy, *Strategy and Business*, 4th Quarter, p. 5.
- 2 Overseas Development Institute (1996): 'The Impact of Development Projects', Briefing Paper 2. Presenting a review of policy shifts in Norwegian, Danish, and US official aid allocations, the ODI paper concludes that there appears to be a 'recent shift in debate, and in some cases, in practice away from funding projects for the poor to work involving capacity building and support for processes of democratization'.
- 3 The discussion of Appreciative Inquiry draws on material produced by the Department of Organisational Behaviour, the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve, Cleveland, Ohio, and in particular, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Constructive Approach to Organisation Capacity Building* (1993) by Jim Ludema, Charlie Pratt, Suresh Srivastva, and Craig Wishart.
- 4 World Bank Press Release, World Bank Supports New Partnership for Capacity Building in Africa, 28 September 1996.
- 5 Article 13.1 in the Declaration.
- 6 *ON-TRAC*, the newsletter of the International Training and Research Centre, No. 2, March 1995, p. 4.
- 7 J. Bossuyt (1994) *Capacity Development: How Can Donors Do It Better?*, Policy Management Brief No. 5, Maastricht, European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), p. 2. Bossuyt's comments about a 'slippery concept' actually apply to what he called 'capacity development'. Capacity development, he noted, 'remains a rather obscure concept. It lacks an agreed definition, a clear analytical framework, and related *modus operandi*. This is reflected, for instance, in the indiscriminate use of similar concepts such as "institution-building", "institutional development", and "capacity building".'
- 8 Michael Edwards (1994): 'NGOs in the age of information', *IDS Bulletin* 25/2, p. 119.