

Comprehensive Capacity Development: Moving Beyond Training as the Default

Journal of Peacebuilding
& Development

1-5

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DOI: 10.1177/1542316619871231

journals.sagepub.com/home/jpd

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Capacity development was for many years understood as the technical process involving individuals, organisations, and societies obtaining and sharing skills in order to achieve development objectives. Capacity development was considered synonymous with training as knowledge transfer. As early as 2006, OECD/DAC,¹ the World Bank,² and others raised the argument that this approach, whilst having positive effects, also had serious shortcomings. These included, for example, at times a lack of relevance of general skills and information to specific contexts, the ad hoc nature of trainings (as opposed to a longer term capacity development process), and a lack of cultural sensitivity. Nevertheless, that debate led to little real change and has subsided post 2012 as evidenced by a significantly reduced volume of publications on the topic.

Whilst the traditional approach to and utilisation of training as capacity development interventions has been called into question, in practice, training is often still the standard response to various capacity development needs of organisations in the peacebuilding, stabilisation, conflict prevention, and development sectors. This is based on the assumption that equipping individuals with the adequate skills will be enough to ensure a given capacity is effectively acquired at the individual, project, and organisational level.

Why Training Is Not Sufficient

But skilled individuals are just one of the elements necessary for the development, absorption, and application of new capacities and practices in any institutional setting. Problems or blockages for effective capacity development might reside at different levels—the individual, its institutional context, or the overall sociopolitical context in which they operate. Engaging in individual skills training as the sole response to a capacity development challenge, without understanding and addressing other critical factors at the individual, institutional or sociopolitical level, will prevent capacity gains at the individual skills level from effectively and sufficiently transforming practice.

Rather, capacity development interventions should be carefully selected and designed based on an assessment of the capacity development gaps and opportunities in a given setting and the definition of a mutually agreed goal for the intervention. If such an assessment identifies a lack of sufficient awareness, ways of thinking that inhibit certain actions or changes, or a lack of incentives and/or motivation to act differently, then capacity development would focus on raising awareness, increasing knowledge, shifting ways of thinking,

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or promoting different values. If individuals have the necessary awareness, knowledge, and motivation, but lack the specific skills to carry out certain actions or change, then capacity development would entail more conventional training approaches to build or strengthen the required skills.

Capacity development gaps and opportunities may also lie at the organisational level. If individuals have the required awareness, knowledge, motivation, and skills, but a change is not materialising, then an assessment may reveal that the blockage lies in the organisation or system in which the individuals operate. At this level, capacity development gaps and opportunities may lie in structures, mechanisms, or processes. Then, capacity development would focus on strengthening institutional capacities (e.g., policies, procedures, decision-making, resource allocation).

Gaps and opportunities at the organisational level may also be identified in relation to organisational culture, power structures, relationships between different stakeholders, and so on, that are essential to moving an agenda forward. If this turns out to be the case in a capacity assessment, then a capacity development intervention would focus on promoting a different organisational culture, shifting patterns of interactions and relationships between individuals and groups. In the experience of Interpeace's International Peacebuilding Advisory Team (IPAT), most capacity development assessments reveal a combination of gaps and opportunities of different types and at different levels. During the design of a capacity development intervention, different activities will be selected and sequenced in a suitable way to address all needs in a comprehensive way. To illustrate what this means in practice, the lessons of two different interventions of IPAT are shared, which have been applying such a comprehensive approach to capacity development.

Building Institutional Capacities for Conflict Sensitive Programming

The first case is the development of tailored approaches towards strengthening institutional capacity for conflict sensitive programming.³ IPAT has worked with a United Nations (UN)

peacekeeping mission and a technical UN agency with the goal of strengthening their capacities for conflict sensitive programming. At the outset of each engagement, IPAT conducted an assessment through a series of key informant interviews to gauge where the gaps and opportunities for enhancing capacities for conflict sensitive programming lay. This included understanding project design, approval, and implementation processes—including the roles of different stakeholders as well as procedures—to assess where conflict sensitivity practices already exist and where levers are to strengthen them.

In each case, the assessment showed that for the capacity development intervention to achieve the desired change, it would need to address individuals' awareness and the organisations' systems, processes, and culture in addition to delivering training to build individual skills, as was originally requested by the partners.

When working with the technical UN agency, IPAT started to focus on organisational systems and processes in the initial phase, based on the goal agreed with the partner that organisational practices on conflict sensitive programming were to be transformed. During the assessment, potential challenges identified included low levels of awareness and a culture focused on the agency's technical work, with limited attention to the conflict dynamics in which some of the work takes place. Whilst starting to work on how to integrate mechanisms and steps to render programmes more conflict sensitive in relevant systems and processes, the intervention therefore also involved awareness-raising workshops, understanding concerns, and mapping and deliberately building upon existing documents and practices that were compatible with conflict sensitive programming to lower resistance to introducing new tools and practices.

The first phase of the intervention culminated in the development of a draft tool for integrating conflict sensitivity in programme design processes. The goal of the second phase was to test and refine this tool whilst starting to strengthen individual capacities and continuing to enhance organisational and individual awareness. This

was achieved by running a series of pilot workshops in countries in which the agency operates, working with those designing, and implementing programmes as well as, at times, implementing partners on the ground.

These workshops were successful in demonstrating to staff that integrating conflict sensitivity into their programmes was not only necessary from a peacebuilding perspective but also useful for achieving technical programme objectives. Importantly, it was also feasible—thanks to a set of tools adapted to the operational and resource/capacity constraints they face. Approaching staff with a set of draft tools that were open to further adaptation based on their experience of working with them was also key to gaining further buy-in from individuals and country offices.

IPAT and its partner are now entering the third phase of the intervention, which is aimed at consolidating the tools and developing a plan for scaling up their application across the organisation, based on the experience in the country test cases undertaken in Phase 2. The scale-up process will again follow a comprehensive capacity development approach. Key vectors for driving institutional change in terms of systems, processes, and culture will be identified (e.g., regional or thematic hubs), in which individual skills will then be strengthened to undertake the necessary steps to promote change.

The key challenge in this phase will be to ensure that the tools that were developed to enable conflict sensitive programming will not become yet another checkbox to tick in addition to many others. Rather, these tools should be a means to an end—the end being that programming in conflict affected areas is undertaken in a different way where technical outputs help catalyse a reduction of tensions. Not only will programmes meet the particular needs targeted, they will do so in a way that contributes to lowering tensions in the context. The awareness and culture shifts at individual and organisational levels that the intervention is targeting are therefore all the more important to the success of this capacity development endeavour.

Equipping Advisers to Carry Out Comprehensive Capacity Development

The second case is a training on Effective Advising in Peacebuilding Contexts (EAC). This course was developed by IPAT based on the assessment that many technical advisors deployed through international assistance programmes are well equipped with the technical know-how corresponding to the expertise they shall provide to the recipients. However, few are versed in the required soft skills and in dealing with the complexities that come with working in conflict-afflicted and polarised contexts. Under these circumstances, training was identified as an appropriate capacity development intervention. However, it would present a comprehensive approach to capacity development, so that the advisers would be in a position to apply such a frame in the advising (and capacity development) activities they carry out.

The Effective Advising Course is based on the assumption that in order to perform their role effectively, technical experts need to navigate three levels: the (inter-)personal, the organisational, and the broader sociopolitical context.

At the individual level, the course explores the range of advisory roles that experts can take on. The roles differ depending on whether the advisor is responsible for the advisee's growth or whether they need to provide a concrete project result. In all cases, the advisor needs to be able to apply a high level of self-care, particularly in conflict-affected contexts. This self-care will allow the adviser not only to steer themselves but also be responsive to the real needs of the counterpart. To this end, the course works with a set of practical tools and exercises based on the concept of emotional intelligence adapted for peacebuilding contexts. Further, the course also elaborates on the values that impact the expert's advising approach. Participants also develop an understanding of the different dimensions of culture and what it takes to work respectfully, knowledgeably, and effectively engage across cultures.

In peacebuilding contexts, a further complexity arises from the fact that the advisors usually find themselves operating in weak systems. Based on the assumption that most of the experts are sent to work in a unit, organisation, or system, the question arises as to whether, and in how far, the adviser's mandate includes capacity development goals targeting those dimensions. Explicitly or implicitly, the advisors regularly deal with the question of what capacities are needed in a particular system to perform effectively. Course participants learn concepts on how the capacities of an organisation can be assessed and enhanced, be it the adviser's own organisation or the target organisation where the advisee works.

Finally, the advisers learn to understand their particular contribution to a specific technical field as part of a broader process of social transformation, enabling societies to escape cycles of polarisation and violence. This peacebuilding journey encompasses a variety of change initiatives undertaken by different actors in state and in society along two basic axes: strengthening performative capacities needed to more effectively address development gaps, needs, and opportunities; and fostering the relational capacities underpinning collaborative and harmonious state–society relations. The course underlines that the particular change initiatives (of the adviser) and change strategies (of the organisation) are part of a wider array of change processes taking place in any social–political context, which need to be taken into consideration for effective planning and implementation of the advisory function. The course works on how technical advisors can more consciously and effectively adapt their function to the specific requirements of the particular context in which they operate, helping to steer change processes that simultaneously address performative and relational capacities, whilst anchoring them in strong and legitimate local leadership and ownership through the use of inclusive governance strategies and participatory methodologies. Participants build the reflex to see the impact that each intervention has on all different levels.

IPAT has developed and refined this innovative approach over six editions of the Effective

Advising Course to date, taking a holistic perspective, through which participants engage with the substantive and relational dimensions of their role and apply the awareness they gain to managing themselves, managing their organisation and relating to their advisees, whilst also consciously steering themselves within the complex context of peacebuilding.

Translating Theory Into Practice

At times, capacity development will mean or include training, but it should not be equated with training automatically. If a training is undertaken as a capacity development intervention, it should be done in response to an assessment of capacity development gaps and opportunities that can suitably be met through training. If those gaps and opportunities lie in other areas, for example, in individuals' awareness and mindsets or at the organisational level, then a capacity development intervention needs to be designed differently—with training only being a component of it, if at all. The guiding question determining the design of a capacity development intervention is as follows: What lever will be the most effective in achieving the desired capacity gains and overall change?

Whilst this may be accepted in theory by a majority of policymakers and practitioners in the peacebuilding, stabilisation, conflict prevention, and development sectors, capacity development practice is still all too often stuck in the old ways of treating it as synonymous with training. Thus, the key question concerns how to better translate the theory of comprehensive capacity development, which is widely supported, into reality.

One of the reasons why training is still frequently resorted to, even if it may not always be an appropriate capacity development intervention, is that it is relatively easy to undertake. More complex capacity development and change processes that engage different dimensions and levels of capacity development are more challenging to undertake and therefore require higher level support, more time, and resources.

As capacity development practitioners, we are called upon to question whether a training is indeed the most effective intervention when we receive a training request. Recommendations to help translate comprehensive capacity development approaches into practice include (1) engaging an actor requesting a training in a dialogue about what the real capacity gaps and opportunities that they are trying to address are and, based on that understanding, what would be the best suited interventions to do so; (2) carve out time and resources at the beginning of a capacity development intervention for a comprehensive assessment of where the capacity gaps and opportunities lie with regard to the desired changes and improvements; (3) propose and negotiate the resources and space for comprehensive capacity development interventions that may include but are not be limited to training; (4) document and share evidence on which capacity development interventions are effective under which circumstances; (5) when training is undertaken, whenever possible, embed it in a wider capacity development process including other dimensions (e.g., organisational processes and culture); (6) when training is undertaken, raise the participants' awareness of other change processes they could help foster to maximise the impact of the training.

Authors' Note

This briefing was developed in consultation with Philip Thomas and Jan Ubels.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. OECD. (2006). The challenge of capacity development, working toward good practice. Retrieved from http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/capacitybuilding/pdf/DAC_paper_final.pdf
2. World Bank Institute. (2009). The capacity development results framework: A strategic and results-oriented approach to learning for capacity development. Retrieved from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/CSO/Resources/228716-1369241545034/The_Capacity_Development_Results_Framework.pdf
3. To tailor these interventions, International Peacebuilding Advisory Team has used the framework "Building Capacities: A Four-Quadrant Perspective" by Philip Thomas, which includes capacity development gaps and opportunities in four areas: individual motivation, individual performance, institutional relations and culture, and institutional systems and processes (see <http://d3associates.net/services-we-offer/training-capacity-development>).

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