

Measuring Capacity Development

Assessing progress and achievements in capacity development is a challenge. The drive for accountability is pushing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of capacity development, and development in general, in two different directions that a practitioner needs to be aware of. One reflects a traditional results-based, log-frame approach to intentional change. The other relies on an open systems way of thinking, and the related interactive M&E methods.

In this chapter, David Watson acknowledges the merits of conventional results-based approaches but outlines their limitations when applied to more complex situations and to the multi-faceted nature of capacity itself. With extensive references to literature and cases available, he goes on to review examples of successful and innovative M&E methods and shows how these combine 'the best of two worlds'. The range of insights, clues and references provided can help the reader to think through their present or improved M&E logics and practices.

Combining the 'Best of Two Worlds' in Monitoring and Evaluation of Capacity Development

David Watson

Introduction

The term 'monitoring and evaluation' (M&E) tends to conjure up the immediate impression that it is 'something which donors want done'. This chapter attempts to demystify the term and argues that this function needs a broader interpretation and can be seen as an integral process in all effective organizations or systems.

The European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) conducted a Study of Capacity Change and Performance (Baser and Morgan,

2008) based on 18 detailed case studies as well as a comprehensive literature review. These cases illustrate different motives for undertaking M&E in general, and of M&E of capacity development in particular. On the one hand development cooperation agencies strive to demonstrate the effectiveness of their funding. On the other hand, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other development practitioners emphasize participation in learning from experience as a means of self-improvement. The approaches to M&E of capacity development in the ECDPM sample also differed significantly. Donors tended to use logical frameworks or project frameworks for programme planning and monitoring. Those NGOs in the cases which had developed a degree of independence of donor funding tended to use approaches encouraging interaction between stakeholders, using ‘stories’ to illustrate important changes and to inform debate on the best way ahead.

These distinctions throw into sharp relief the various notions of, and ways of thinking about, ‘capacity’. Donors tend to seek primarily ‘performance improvement’ and view it virtually as a proxy for ‘capacity’. ‘Performance’ in this context is seen as the ‘delivery’ of predefined results (outputs). However, the insights from the ECDPM study identified other important features of ‘capacity’. These are summarized in what the study calls five ‘core capabilities’. In addition to the ability to produce development results, these are: the ability to create ‘operating space’ and sound relationships; the ability to self-organize and act; the ability to create coherence and direction, and the ability to learn and adapt to changing circumstances over time (see also Chapter 1).

This chapter starts with a brief discussion of planned or ‘reductionist’ thinking, compared to ‘complex adaptive systems’ notions of capacity and capacity development. Several case studies in appropriate application of each approach are presented, partly to illustrate how they complement each other. We then introduce some innovative approaches to M&E of capacity development.¹ The important notion of accountability is addressed by suggesting two distinct categories of accountability: ‘exogenous’ (accountability to donors), and ‘endogenous’ (accountability to domestic stakeholders and service users). Finally, Box 18.2 illustrates how at least some donors are beginning to change their practices of M&E of capacity development from ‘planned’ towards more flexible pragmatic approaches. It must be noted that the chapter’s case studies are deliberately biased towards positive experiences, on the grounds that any reader who has dwelt upon the subject of M&E for long needs every encouragement possible.

Notions of capacity: ‘Reductionism’ to ‘systems thinking’

Behind any discussion of ‘M&E of capacity’ is the challenge that ‘capacity’ is an ill-understood concept. It is not yet a well-defined area of practice. Nor is there a generally accepted definition of ‘capacity’ in the literature. Those in doubt are encouraged to refer to the accompanying volume of a recent discussion of capacity development (Taylor and Clarke, 2008) which lists definitions of ‘capacity’ and ‘capacity development’ used by various agencies.

The recent study by ECDPM referred to above has defined ‘capacity’ as ‘that emergent combination of attributes, assets, capabilities and relationships that enables a human system to perform, survive and self-renew’. Based on 18 case studies of organizations and networks around the world, the study concludes that there are *multiple* dimensions of ‘capacity’: the five ‘core capabilities’. The clear implication is that we need to recognize and acknowledge *all* of these dimensions in capacity development efforts, and to cater for them in approaches to the M&E of capacity.

However, the dominant capacity ‘paradigm’ adopted by donors to date posits a ‘linear’ connection between the various aspects of capacity development initiatives: from the provision of inputs (technical assistance and equipment, for example) to the delivery of outputs (e.g. more able, competent individuals or service units). Based on certain assumptions, these inputs and outputs are expected to lead to better ‘performance’ (for example ‘improved health service delivery’) and ultimately achievement of development goals (improved health in a population). The ‘project framework or logical framework’ enshrines this logic of ‘cause and effect’ relationships between inputs, outputs, performance and development goals, and is often used to focus on ‘delivery’ of pre-defined outputs. This is also the basis of the ‘results based management’ approach. This methodological tool is often used to assess the need for, to design in detail, and to monitor progress of development programmes.

Achieving improvements in public sector organizational performance is often a major priority objective for donors. Indeed, ‘performance’ tends to be seen as a proxy for ‘capacity’ (if an organization is by some measure performing better, it is assumed to have improved its ‘capacity’). These approaches have been termed ‘technocratic’ and ‘reductionist’ (i.e. they see organizations as ‘machines’, amenable to discrete ‘fixes’; they ‘reduce’ complex problems and systems to their constituent components). The project framework’s indicators of progress in relation to objectives become the yardsticks for the purposes of monitoring over time.

But the ECDPM study further concluded that, given the multi-dimensional nature of ‘capacity’, efforts to enhance organizational capacities were not amenable to ‘linear’ and neat ‘if this, then that’ thinking. The nature of the organizations studied was more akin to that of living organisms. This perspective has been conceptualized in a body of management literature known as ‘complex adaptive systems (CAS) thinking’. This ‘school’ of thought sees capacity as being associated with multiple causes, solutions and effects, some of them unintended. Interaction between stakeholders over time matters a lot: yet these dynamics are often not necessarily controllable and potentially quite unpredictable. Detailed performance- (or capacity-) improvement plans are less easy to make, seen from this perspective. The study observed that capacity tends to ‘emerge’ over time, affected by many factors. Thus in the (plentiful!) jargon – it is an ‘emergent’ property. Critics of the planning- and control-oriented ‘reductionist’ approaches also argue that preoccupation with monitoring progress in relation to pre-determined ‘indicators’ detracts attention from less tangible and more relational/attitudinal dimensions of capacity and from broader learning from experience. In many cases unanticipated results or insights may prove more important to development effectiveness than what was ‘planned’.²

Case study evidence of where different approaches to M&E have worked best

It is important to stress that evaluations of capacity development experience do not point unambiguously towards one or other of the above ‘schools’ of thought as being ‘better’ than the other. The cases reviewed in the ECDPM Capacity Study – and others mentioned below – indicate that both have their merits and uses, depending on circumstances, and the reason for embarking on some form of organizational development initiative. Indeed, there are several cases which illustrate complementarities between the different approaches. See, for example, the Ceja Andina programme case study in Ambrose’s article in the September 2006 edition of *Capacity.org* referred to in the ‘recommended readings’ section.

Planned approaches to capacity development

Carefully planned ‘reductionist’ approaches to monitoring capacity tend to work best in circumstances where:

- an organization ‘signs up’ voluntarily to accept capacity development support;
- stakeholders themselves are willing and able to assess the capacities they need;
- the abilities required can be defined precisely and unambiguously (from the author’s experience this is often ‘easier said than done’ in the public sector);
- there are incentives to improve performance; and
- leadership of the organization is firmly behind the capacity-improvement programme and thus there is unambiguous ‘ownership’.

A number of cases discussed in the ECDPM study, such as those of the Rwanda Revenue Authority (see www.ecdpm.org/dp57d, accessed September 2009) and the Philippines–Canada Local Government Support Programme (www.ecdpm.org/dp57n, accessed September 2009), offer positive examples of where these factors prevailed, and contributed to successful capacity development outcomes using a project framework-based, results-based management logic. See Box 18.1 for another example that concerns municipal government capacity development in Pakistan.

Complex adaptive systems approaches

Other cases in the ECDPM study illustrate circumstances where a CAS approach to organizational development and monitoring proved effective. These include the Environmental Action Programme (ENACT) programme in Jamaica (www.ecdpm.org/dp57j, accessed September 2009) and the regional organization International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Asia (www.ecdpm.org/dp57m, accessed September 2009). They provide important and encouraging insights with regard to monitoring. They illustrate how positive impacts on capacity were achieved when the organizations were encouraged to learn lessons from their own experiences, and evolved approaches to developing their own

Box 18.1 Supporting capacity development in Faisalabad, Pakistan

Faisalabad City District Government (CDGF), serving nearly 7 million people, was supported for just four years by a largely national-staffed technical assistance team. Three factors allowed its project framework-based design and monitoring indicators to contribute to its success. First, flexibility of the donor, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) permitted a lengthy consensus-building process to define the mission of the CDGF and disseminate it throughout the organization. This took six months, led by the Strategic Policy Unit (staffed by key CDGF staff and consultants). The second factor was the close collaboration between staff and consultants in analysing the current situation, and defining together Strategic Operational Plans for all key departments. These became the basis for regular monitoring of progress and problems by the newly-constituted top management team. The case illustrates how regular internal reporting on, and close collective monitoring of, progress by top management sitting together (in meetings unprecedented before the start of the project) was crucial in changing the 'culture' of communication, co-operation and learning in the organization. The third major 'success' factor in the case was the early introduction of custom-designed management information systems to aid collection and analysis of basic data (for the first time, CDGF knew how many staff it employed, and the size of its financial deficit). Thus top management meetings knew the facts and 'how their departments, and CDGF, were doing'. The case illustrates how a 'hard' M&E tool was used in an organization with a clear, formally-agreed mandate to drive a process of change in management style and culture. How and why change happened in CDGF is accessibly documented in a series of 22 well-illustrated case studies at www.spu.com.pk/short_cs.htm, accessed November 2009.

capacity accordingly. These cases also note how donors can be supportive of the organizations in ways that responded to the uncertainties they faced, by demonstrating flexibility.

In the ENACT case, the donor, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) abandoned a project framework-based monitoring system in favour of a more process-oriented approach to monitoring progress and capacity development. In the IUCN case, its funders allowed it to experiment and maintain a spirit of innovation and creativity. Staff exchanges between some donor organizations and IUCN have taken place, providing insights for them into how each other's organizations work, and enhancing mutual trust. The Director of IUCN created an 'enabling environment' for creative team formation, based on shared values, and continuous re-thinking and re-fashioning. 'I do not have a road map, only a goal (which can change)' she acknowledged. While formal training has contributed to individuals' development, the predominant training modes are experiential, and include mentoring.

Common features across both approaches

Common themes relevant for monitoring represented in the ECDPM cases which illustrate CAS approaches yet are also features of the most successful ‘results-based management’ cases (such as the CDGF case cited above) include:

- identifying clear overall goals and organizational mission – and awareness of these throughout the organization – with an emphasis on commonly shared values that should be reflected in achieving these goals;
- leadership: especially empowerment by the leader of principal staff to encourage experimentation, changes in team structures and approaches, and defining what resources were needed and when;
- providing regular opportunities for learning from experience, self-assessment, and the identification of ‘stories’ involving positive examples or experiences, significant changes or errors;
- emphasizing on-the-job development of individuals’ skills, though participative, face-to-face and ‘hands-on’ approaches;
- adopting functional M&E systems that were responsive to the needs of staff or clients, which enabled them to learn from their collective experience.

Recent innovations in M&E methodology and applications: The way forward?

In the last ten years, several innovative approaches to monitoring and evaluation in capacity development programmes have been developed and refined. These include ‘Most Significant Change’ developed by Jessica Dart and Rick Davies (see the recommended readings section); the Accountability, Learning and Planning System in ActionAid (Guijt, 2004), and Outcome Mapping (Earl et al, 2001).³

Common characteristics of these innovative approaches – tending to ‘resonate’ with CAS approaches – are that:

- they involve structured interactions among stakeholders based on day-to-day experiences using ‘work stories’ as a means of ‘making sense’ out of what changes are happening, and why;
- they are not exclusively concerned with quantitative measurement but with creating consensus on what constitutes qualitative improvements that will contribute to the broad goals of the systems involved;
- they tend to demystify ‘M&E’ and allow even the most vulnerable stakeholders or beneficiaries to have a voice in periodic reflection. The capacities of beneficiaries for critical analysis, debate and decision taking are thereby improved.

The accountability issue: Exogenous and endogenous

There is evidence that donors face accountability pressures from their domestic ‘constituencies’ (ministers, parliaments, audit bodies, press and indeed public opinion). They must accordingly demonstrate ‘results’ from development programmes they fund. The project framework (or close variants on it) is virtually universally adopted as a programme planning, design and monitoring tool, being deemed the most suitable basis for monitoring and (sometimes) evaluating progress. The majority of international NGOs (INGOs) – which tend to depend on donors for significant proportions of their funding – tend therefore to use this approach as well (see HLM Consult, 2008, for a recent account of M&E practices among Danish INGOs). In this context, the NGO cases featured in the ECDPM study are therefore unusual in moving away from, or never having used, such approaches.

However, if we reflect on the CAS cases cited above, in these accountability is also an important driver. Yet the stress appears different. In these cases the systems or organizations are accountable to their own clients, local politicians, members, or users of its services. This might be called ‘endogenous’ accountability. At this point, it may be helpful to draw a distinction between ‘endogenous’ and ‘exogenous’ accountability. ‘Exogenous’ accountability applies to ‘recipients’ – be they sovereign governments, consultant contractors or NGOs – having to account to donors for the use of funds.

The evidence from the ECDPM study appears to indicate that innovative (informal) monitoring mechanisms, based on CAS thinking, tend to be more supportive of ‘endogenous’ accountability. In turn, these mechanisms are often more effective in encouraging better performance and greater ‘ownership’ than the results-based management monitoring mechanisms that are applied by donors.

In cases where national governments’ own resources are used to establish and manage development programmes, there may be the opportunities for ‘endogenous’ accountability to encourage innovation, and ‘learning-by-doing’. Several of the successful service-delivery cases identified in a recent Asian Development Bank (ADB) study conducted in Pakistan (EAD/ADB, 2008) illustrate conspicuous improvements in service delivery, in the absence of detailed plans, *with* ‘protection’ of, and accountability to, a politically-influential patron (in what is a notoriously problematic public sector environment). See in particular the Sindh National Water Course Upgrading programme, and National Highways and Motorways Police as encouraging examples of where clear endogenous accountability in a permissive (but protected) environment produced extraordinary results.

How M&E can contribute to effective capacity development

A recent contribution to the debate illustrates how M&E might (better) contribute to capacity development processes. Alfredo Ortiz and Peter Taylor of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, ask the question ‘what would

we want from learning approaches to M&E of capacity development that donor ‘accounting’ approaches are unable to deliver?’ (Ortiz and Taylor, 2008a, p19). They argue for more encouragement of ‘stories’ from key players about how they think change and development are happening. In this way, they envisage not just invoking energy and better interpretation of the meaning of what has changed on the part of key players, but a better application of ‘strategic thinking’: ‘an intangible that is difficult to capture with indicators, but which is clearly important to long-term performance’. They argue that ‘observation and study, learning, abstract framing, adaptive management and agility in changing plans and putting learning into practice are more important than rigorous tracking of outputs that ultimately do not reflect at all the reality of the situation they are describing’ (Ortiz and Taylor, 2008a, pp20–21). Thus they appear to agree that the more informal approaches to M&E, where endogenous accountability is served, tend to encourage ownership of the capacity development process and strategic thinking. Both are essential factors for better performance. The Faisalabad case mentioned above illustrates how a formal approach to monitoring, serving endogenous accountability, also contributed strongly to capacity development and better organizational performance.

Conclusions for practitioners: Building capacities to deliver

So how can we boil the above account down to basics, for operational purposes? We can conclude that the evidence from the cases cited demonstrate that both approaches to M&E have their merits. The case studies of successful organizations illustrate how in fact they tend to combine elements of both. Given the multi-dimensional nature of ‘capacity’, CAS thinking is undoubtedly relevant in selecting M&E approaches. There are several innovative, yet tried-and-tested methods and approaches to M&E that have been proved to contribute to capacity development. It is no coincidence that they tend to strengthen ‘endogenous’ accountability, and ownership of the capacity development process. There is evidence that some bilateral donors are moving away from strict ‘control’-oriented planning and monitoring, towards more nuanced approaches which reflect not only the complexity of partner organizations and service delivery systems, but also the challenges of sustainably developing their capacities.

Box 18.2 Examples of changes in donor practices in M&E of capacity development

In preparing this chapter, the author contacted several bilateral donors that had been involved in capacity development-related projects connected to the ECDPM study on Capacity Change and Performance to find out if and how recent M&E of capacity development practices had changed. Both the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development Cooperation (BMZ) reported that they had abandoned logical frameworks in planning programmes. BMZ now uses 'results chains' (sketching how change is envisaged); only outcome targets and indicators are pre-determined. AusAID also only sets objectives, and broad parameters. In both cases, details of implementation (inputs, activities and outputs) are to be worked out by the implementing teams and their partners. These can and should be adjusted over time according to conditions and changes in needs.

In AusAID an Independent Monitoring Group usually assesses progress up to twice a year, which includes a review of the detailed work-plans and progress against them. The approach to M&E in BMZ has reportedly not yet captured fully the implications of this more flexible approach to planning and programming. This challenge is recognized, and is currently being tackled.

Piloting of monitoring of progress in the 'five capabilities' inherent in the definition of capacity hypothesized in the ECDPM approach is ongoing in a major AusAID-supported law and justice reform programme in Papua New Guinea. 'Most Significant Change' methodology has been used on occasions by AusAID through its managing contractors. Most effort is devoted to assessing whether there is any improvement in development outcomes: capacity development per se is often implicitly a 'means to an end' in these cases. However, greater stress is being put on monitoring and evaluating capacity development and capacity development processes themselves. An example is in the Solomon Islands, where government expectations for more development of the capacities of counterparts to technical advisers have been instrumental in closer scrutiny of, and pressures for, more attention to individual and organizational capacity development. Nevertheless, AusAID is still coming to grips with the M&E of capacity development and capacity development processes, noting that this is still a relatively new field and that methodologies must not burden partner agencies and staff, and must be seen as relevant to them.

Notes

- 1 The basic sources for this chapter are:
ECDPM Discussion Paper 58B, available from www.ecdpm.org/dp58b (accessed on 7 September 2009), which reviews some of the literature on the topic; distils the M&E-related features and issues raised in the ECDPM study cases; synthesizes contributions from champions of systems thinking; and summarizes some innovative approaches including those mentioned in this chapter.

The Pelican Initiative (Platform for Evidence-Based Learning and Communications for Social Change) is an internet-based discussion forum addressing the question ‘How can we learn more from what we do while having the biggest impact on the social change processes in which we engage?’ The group is moderated by Niels Keijzer in ECDPM (nk@ecdpm.org). Pelican archives are accessible via inserting pelican@dgroups.org in your browser. The forum regularly addresses M&E of capacity development.

- 2 Readers who wish to pursue this in more detail are advised first to read ECDPM Policy Management Brief No. 22 ([www.ecdpm.org/Web_ECDPM/Web/Content/Download.nsf/0/5E619EA3431DE022C12575990029E824/\\$FILE/PMB22_e_CDapproaches-capacitystudy.pdf](http://www.ecdpm.org/Web_ECDPM/Web/Content/Download.nsf/0/5E619EA3431DE022C12575990029E824/$FILE/PMB22_e_CDapproaches-capacitystudy.pdf), accessed September 2009) on the results of the study, which provides a useful tabulation illustrating distinctions in terms and perspective between the two ‘schools’.
- 3 Appendix 2 of the Theme Paper on M&E of capacity prepared for the ECDPM study describes these approaches in more detail.

References

- EAD/ADB (2008) *Scoping Study on Capacity Building for Service Delivery & Aid Effectiveness in Pakistan*, Economic Affairs Division, Asian Development Bank, Manila, Philippines. Currently available as *Effective Technical Cooperation for Capacity Development – Pakistan Country Case Study*, JICA Joint Study on Effective TC for Capacity Development, www.jica.go.jp/cdstudy/about/output/pdf/Pakistan.pdf, accessed September 2009
- Earl, S., Carden, F. and Smutylo, T. (2001) *Outcome Mapping: The Challenges of Assessing Development Impacts: Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programmes*, IDRC, Ottawa
- Engel, P., Land, A. and Keijzer, N. (2006) ‘A balanced approach to the M&E of capacity and performance’, ECDPM Discussion Paper No. 58E, Maastricht
- Guijt, I. (2004) *ALPS in Action: A Review of the Shifts in ActionAid towards a New Accountability, Learning and Planning System*, ActionAid International, London
- HLM Consult (2008) *Mapping of Monitoring and Evaluation Practices of Danish NGOs*, Danida, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Evaluation Department, Copenhagen
- Land, A., Hauck, V. and Baser, H. (2009) *Capacity Development: Between Planned Interventions and Emergent Processes: Implications for Development Co-operation*, ECDPM Policy Management Brief No. 22, March 2009. Maastricht
- Ortiz, A. and Taylor, P. (2008a) ‘Learning purposefully in capacity development: Why, when and what to measure?’, Opinion Paper for IIEP, Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton, Sussex. This can be accessed via www.mande.co.uk or www.impactalliance.org/ev_en.php?ID=47298_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC, accessed September 2009
- Taylor, P. and Clarke, P. (2008) ‘Capacity for a change’, a document based on outcomes of a ‘Capacity Collective’ workshop, IDS, Brighton, Sussex

Recommended readings

This chapter links to and is complemented by several other chapters. ECDPM's 'five core capabilities' (5C's) model is more extensively introduced in Chapter 1, while Chapter 11 discusses how CD efforts take place within the setting of multi-actor relations, institutions and politics. Chapter 12 discusses ways in which public accountability can be used to stimulate performance. And finally, Chapter 21 further explores the perceived opposition between results-orientation and learning and, in line with this chapter, shows that they can actually be combined well.

For further reading it is suggested you also look at the list of references above, which does not purport to be exhaustive, but represents a distillation of some of the most accessible and (actually or potentially) influential literature relevant to the M&E of capacity development, from both 'schools' mentioned in the chapter, together with a small selection of donor-generated materials, including positive cases from Pakistan. For additional insights we suggest the following resources relating specifically to the application of M&E methodologies, and Systems Thinking and Complexity approaches.

The Theme Paper Monitoring and Evaluation of Capacity Development, ECDPM Discussion Paper 58B, available from www.ecdpm.org/dp58b (accessed 7 September 2009). See especially Section 3 on 'Emerging Approaches to the M&E of Capacity Issues' in Chapter 8.

Ambrose, M. (2006) 'Enhancing learning in the M&E process; Outcome Mapping in Ecuador', *Capacity.org*, Issue 29, pp.12–13, illustrates how a range of stakeholders in community-based natural resource management were engaged in M&E which satisfied both imperatives: accountability and learning, using Outcome Mapping as a complement to Logical Framework approaches. The article is available online at www.capacity.org/en/journal/practice_reports/enhancing_learning_in_the_m_e_process, accessed September 2009.

Dart, J. and Davies, R. (2003) 'A dialogical story-based evaluation tool: The most significant change technique', *American Journal of Evaluation*, vol 24, no 2.

The article outlines the origins, philosophy and practicalities of this innovative technique for M&E of capacity development and change processes. It is available on a very useful website www.mande.co.uk under 'Rick's Methods' (accessed on 7 September 2009). Managed by Rick Davies, the site is dedicated to providing news of M&E methods relevant to development programmes with social development objectives.

Complexity Thinking and Social Development: Connecting the Dots, by Alan Fowler in (web-based) *The Broker: Connecting Worlds of Knowledge*, 7 April 2008, via www.thebrokeronline.eu/en, accessed September 2009, is one of the more accessible sources making the case for introducing more complexity-based frameworks into the capacity-related development field.

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