Book Review

« Capacity Development in Practice », Edited by Jan Ubels, Naa-Aku Acquaye-Baddoo
and Alan Fowler, 2010
and lessons taken

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Although already 5 years old, this book remains remarkably refreshing lecture for anyone involved in 'Capacity development (or building)' in development cooperation. Its 330 pages plus are somewhat intimidating. However I managed reading through it during several weeks when I had a moment free, and I kept continuing reading it because it is a wealth of information and it offers interesting insights spread over 24 chapters, locked in five larger parts, and spiked with 'recommended readings'. It is a gentle mix of empirical and case-based studies and personal opinion from experienced practitioners from SNV and other organisations. It is the proof that a large NGO can produce interesting content based on an aggregation of own and external experience. That means taking time to reflect back on own interventions and programmes, their success and failure, hence applying the main message of this book: self-reflection, explicitly discussed in Ch. 20. The main editor, Jan Ubels, senior strategist at SNV, explained during his presentation of a new book at a recent BTC workshop in Brussels that pinning down 'capacity development (or CD)' is like 'nailing down a multi-coloured jellyfish against a wall'. I love this comparison, implicitly hoping that this metaphorical jellyfish does not experience pain in the process.

Although there is a wealth of information I could summarise as being very relevant, I restrained myself to some chapters and some one-liners, which I cited in 'quotes', which appealed particularly to my own experience in university cooperation and biodiversity capacity building. The working definition of capacity in the book (Introduction) is: 'Capacity is the ability of a human system to perform, sustain itself and self-renew'. The book deliberately adopts a non-dogmatic 'living' view on capacity (hence the jellyfish?), which renders it with concrete results and impacts relational, political, open-ended and is inviting for new approaches. It cites (Ch. 1) the Netherlands-based European Centre for Development policy Management (ECDPM) which defines on the basis of 16 in-depth case-studies five 'core capabilities' that seem to be present across all situations where effective capacity is displayed: the capacity to (1) act and self-organise, (2) to generate development results, (3) to relate, (4) to adapt and self-renew and (5) to achieve coherence. As a practitioner I would then say, 'when our own institutional cooperation shows some of these characteristics, then the chances are high that we are on the right track'.

The book devotes many pages on stakeholders' interactions and macro-meso-micro linkages (Ch. 2, 3), which are – rightly- seen as the condition sine qua non for success. When the capacities are really 'owned' by the beneficiaries (often called 'clients' in the book, which rather reflects a certain perspective), then the chances are higher that it is sustainable in time and that the actors in the south perform their own interventions with stamina, enthusiasm and a feeling of self-esteem and confidence, as part of their normal job. 'Dialogue processes can enhance shared and collectively owned vision, purpose and direction, as well as role clarity, and the ability to take decisions, thus releasing energy to perform.' I personally have the greatest satisfaction in my job from participative formulation workshops with our partners, be it e.g. in Benin, Burundi or Vietnam. Taking the LFA as a framework, it allows all stakeholders to 'feel where the wind blows', to bring 'all noses in the same directions', to identify or clarify some political economy tensions and constraints. An optimal preparation of a project is accountable for 50 % of its success I would say.

I completely agree with the different critical ingredients to the success of any dialogue intervention (Ch. 10): 'clarity of purpose, alignment of purpose, people and process, good questions (essential in my view), safe space (especially across hierarchies), competent, helpful and empowering facilitation (skilled persons from North and South)'. So-called 'dialogic tools' include: 'appreciative enquiry, change lab, circle, deep democracy, dialogue interviewing, dynamic facilitation, future search, open space, scenario development, story dialogue and world café'. All these terms reflect the endless variations of possible human interactions in a collective dialogue. Although it forms in reality more like a continuum of interaction mechanisms in several dimensions, these technocratic terms each highlight certain aspects of it.

Looking back at my experience with world café in Ethiopia and Belgium, I admit I found its short description not covering the whole power of the method, but that is really a minor comment. The power or 'transcendent effect' lies in the fact that all participants of a workshop contribute to answering certain thematic questions in a rotating manner, hence contributing to an accumulated knowledge, managed by the 3 or 4 'table hosts or coordinators' (each table represents one theme with questions throughout the world café), and that the groups are each time reformed in a spontaneous way at each new round, having a different group composition, hence promoting interactions throughout the whole group. Further, 'appreciative enquiry' should be an in-born reflex when dealing with workshops, engaging in 'possibility thinking' rather than 'deficit thinking'.

Assessing power imbalances, the different roles of stakeholders are a necessary part of any serious LFA process, in order to create a framework recognised by all, a space in which the project can be articulated 'in safety'. This is especially true as we evolve in 'a context of powerful, multiple and conflicting interests', as well as 'the more subtle patterns of institutional norms and values in which organizations and people are embedded' (Ch. 11), where even the best professional may lose focus and capacity to perform its intended capacity development intervention. Change is only possible if people are convinced, can see 'their advantage or the advantage for their organisation'.

The schematic diagram displayed at pg. 147 shows the classical linear change theory sequence from left to right: inputs to capacity of organisations (with 'governance' on top of it), to outputs, to outcome, to impact. On top of that is drawn a box depicting the 'contextual factors within influence', surrounding all boxes except a part of the inputs, the outcomes, and the impact. Drawn from my own experience, this box could be actually smaller, leaving part of the capacity of organisations, the governance and even the outputs outside of possible influence. In other terms, our 'feasibility paradigm or 'belief' is often overblown. We are in effect firm believers in this linear cause-effect chain (see also Ch. 17), because we tend to oversimplify complex human changes in order to remain in an easy to accept and understandable accountability logics. This planned or 'result based Management (RBM)' approach to CD works best in circumstances where 'the target organization and the stakeholders are clearly demanding a CD intervention, with clear support from leadership' (Ch. 17).

However, large organizations such as IUCN are experimenting with another approach, called 'Complex adaptive systems approaches' or CAS (Ch. 18). CAS is more based on mentoring, learning along the way, re-thinking or re-fashioning. Of course, I am convinced the CAS approach can be nested in the RBM approach as both approaches certainly do not exclude each other. In fact they have much in common: both need addressing 'clear goals, empowerment by the leadership, self-assessment and learning' (through monitoring and evaluation), or individual skills (see above). The shift from RBM to other approaches such as e.g. CAS or 'Most Significant Change Methodology' amongst major donors or players (e.g. IUCN, GIZ) illustrates the current dynamics in the world of ODA and CD.

The chapter about 'Public accountancy' (Ch. 12) points to the tendency of CD to be 'supply-driven', shaped by – no doubt- well-meaning actors in government, donor agencies or NGOs. The presumption is that the 'targets' (this term is rather impersonal in my view) of their CD interventions are keen to perform their roles. I find this a very pertinent remark, and the only solution to this is to come into

contact with the 'targets' (stakeholders, farmers, rangers, scientists, cooperatives, village associations...), listen to them, remain in contact, and do things together which make sense for them and for us, in fact to switch to a demand-driven logics, not only North-South, but also in the South-South context, to cultivate trust, proximity and personal interactions. If this is not enough the case, CD often falls into the trappings of offering all kinds of incentives to participate in efforts to build their own capacity. And indeed, 'enormous efforts is expended in negotiations about benefits, and in this sense, by offering 'easy money', and goading people into unproductive work, CD initiatives can have a corrupting effect'.

The macro-micro gap, explained in Ch. 13, points to the fact that 'CD is often 'more of the same', reflected in dominant development thinking, maintaining a top-down, funding driven, central government-centred and technocratic approach'. The challenging question is indeed 'how can national policies and programmes better respond to and create space for local solutions and innovations, rather than follow global prescriptions?' Factors contributing to this micro-macro gap are listed and are controversial I must say: 'the focus on public sector actors only, hence neglecting civil and private sectors (controversial and often ideological!), the assumption that decentralization is always better (this is a challenging one!), vulnerability to spending pressures and demands for quick results (well-known phenomenon), reliance on centrally formulated performance frameworks and standardized notions of CD, tendency to strengthen donor rather than domestic accountability and inability to address power issues within the existing service delivery systems'. One way to try to circumvent these types of intrinsic mechanisms is to introduce an action research component in a programme, where the definition of 'action research' can be taken in the large sense, as a learning process between stakeholders to understand the problems at stake, each other's roles, the policies and mandates and the access to information. This can contribute to a better linkage between different types of actors and levels.

One main observation is that key individuals make the project stay or fall, and I can only fully agree with that. The success of the 'planning fetishism' and the 'institutional cooperation' is based on such 'champions' who are able to cope with a complex multiple donor environment, which is actually requiring a very high level of competency and flexibility. The other side of the medal is that programmes become very dependent on the existence and maintenance of such exceptional persons. It questions also their ability or willingness to delegate and to train their environment to acquire these competencies, hence diluting their present power base without experiencing it as a threat to their career and privileged relationship with the donors. In that sense, effective leadership is crucial for effective CD (Ch. 16). Some characteristics of such leadership include i.e. 'keeping learning and guiding others, have cross-cultural understanding (North-South, but also amongst different social classes in own country), having vision, inspiration, fine antennae for discrimination and minorities, and going beyond self-interest'.

Ch. 19 explains SNVs primary CD process called 'triple AAA'. In short, this model takes three mutually interactive time cycles and processes into account, being the strategy cycle (3 years or more), the client engagement cycle (1-3 years) and the assignment cycle (few weeks to months). This reflects quite well the practitioner's reality. Maybe one can add (or differentiate from the first cycle) a 'global policy cycle', which represents the different conventions and strategies, programmes, action plans at the level of the United Nation (e.g. CBD), the EU and the regional and national policies, beyond the donor's own logics which is or should be influenced and governed by this higher level.

Finally, the self-reflection discussed in Ch. 20, is for example illustrated in the LFA process. This participative method actually forces all parties to reflect together on general and specific objectives, expected results, indicators etc...However, the reality of the implementation of the logframe is often another story, because human behaviour is not just following a given linear path of causes and effects, and also, to my own experience, actually few logframes are really well-designed. The indicators may

be not SMART enough, or sabotage was not identified as a political economy factor or logframes do not integrate lessons learned from the problem/solutions trees or the stakeholder's analysis.

This book actually carries the message that 'the unpredictability and fluid nature of CD can be viewed not as failure of planning but as an indication of the need for adaptability and an opportunity to learning'. 'Experience-based learning processes such as shadowing, coaching and action-learning are powerful methods for practitioners to deepen their mastery of CD', especially in monitoring processes, involving 'examining work records, holding meetings, interviews' etc. In evaluation processes, often the output can be easily measured (number of papers, workshops, participants...), but the outcome remains frustratingly vague. A tool such as Organizational Assessment (OA), can help to overcome this, although it still has its limits as to the capability to understand the causes for certain outcomes (cited). Indeed, this aspect remains a big challenge for any capacity development programme. If monitoring and evaluation would be more perceived as supportive than controlling, I guess their effects would be more tangible, with more potential for self-development and generating less defensive reflexes (Ch. 20). 'Reflective practice' (Ch. 20) should be part of M&E processes and is based on six steps: experience with a 'critical incident', appraisal of that experience, analyse it, discover new realizations or deeply held beliefs from that experience, explore alternatives and re-think future action, and informed action (take action with new intent). In reality, not all organizations are capable to create such an empowering context. In that case, self-reliance should be seen as an important capacity as well. Drawing a 'rich picture' or keeping a journal are other simple methods in developing a personal action learning system (Ch. 20).

In Ch. 21 this citation very pertinently expresses the mechanisms commonly occurring in CD processes: 'Official policies that profess the importance of learning are often contradicted by bureaucratic protocols and accounting systems which demand proof of results against pre-set targets. In the process, data are distorted (or obtained with much pain) and learning is aborted', or 'proof of deliverables becomes the heart of development effectiveness'. Even though staff may have learned what is feasible and effective, 'they may be punished for not achieving original agreed objectives'. The 'one-size-fits-all approach' often leads to an oversimplified understanding of the reality.

Finally in the three last chapters (Ch. 22, 23, 24), some key characteristics are summarized for a practitioner profile, a functioning capacity development approach, with the emphasis on multi-actor processes, the connections between actors, social change and the emerging 'market' of 'local capacity developers (LCDs).