



Against the odds – capacity development of fragile state institutions

November 2013

There are no quick fix solutions, but there are examples of successful capacity development of state institutions in fragile situations. What are the reasons behind their promising results?

Birgitte Lind Petersen, blp@diis.dk

The need to support central state institutions in fragile situations by prioritising capacity development has recently been elevated to a shared global concern as a result of the New Deal developed through the forum of the International Dialogue for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding. Peacebuilding and statebuilding are perceived as the most important aims of aid, and capacity development is central to achieving these. The emphasis on a country-led process indicates the need to develop capacities to lead such processes. Also, the commitment to joint development of a plan, support to political dialogue and leadership, transparency, risk sharing, strengthening of country systems along with the strengthening of capacities, all depend on or encompass strong elements of capacity development. This policy brief elaborates some major issues to be considered by donors supporting capacity development of central state institutions in fragile situations.

The brief is based on a recent report on capacity development made as part of the programme called ReCom – Research and Communication on Foreign Aid. It analyses five relatively successful examples of aid supported capacity development in various fragile contexts: Education in Afghanistan, Revenue authority in Rwanda, Diaspora and senior experts in state institutions in Liberia, Police reform in Sierra Leone and South-South capacity development in South Sudan. These examples show that there are rarely uniform best practices. Rather, there are interventions which *fit well*

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Donors should:

- *Build on existing good relations with a recipient country.* Donors need to be present. Trust and long-term cooperation facilitates flexibility and change.
- *Base support on commitment, motivation and leadership.* Capacity development is a human process and depends on motivation and committed leadership.
- *Support ad hoc planning on a long-term basis and ensure initial, bold changes.* Allow time and phase-wise definition of needs based on motivation and opportunities, and be sure to initiate changes that break with past ways of doing things.
- *Pay specific attention to the external environment.* Support an institution's linkages to the external environment and promote change in the public perception of the institution.
- *Prioritise regional South–South capacity development.* Regional interests, ownership and cultural affinity can facilitate change.



to the given situation and context (donor, sector, conflict etc.). This does not imply conforming to powerful local actors. In some cases, the initiative which seems to fit the need, context and situation, may be one that finds a window of opportunity to confront the specific technical-rational and not least political aspects of the context.

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT: START FROM OPPORTUNITIES AND MOTIVATION

There are good reasons to continue the strong focus on capacity development of state institutions when supporting fragile states. Many of these countries themselves emphasise capacity development as a top priority, and there are examples showing that some things do work (which is not the same as saying that there are no challenges):

First, successful capacity development have started from ***strong motivation and commitment by either the political leadership or key persons in state institutions.*** As such, it is a demand-driven process. Strong leadership and commitment are crucial factors for capacity development. In Afghanistan it was the Minister of Education and, after the advisor-driven formulation of the first National Education Strategy Plan, also senior management staff who were motivated to take over the process themselves. In Sierra Leone and Liberia there were direct support and a mandate from the Presidents. When donors align with and stand behind the recipient country's own policies and plans, motivation among the leadership may evolve, as has been the case with the Ministry of Education in Afghanistan where, for example, Danida's flexible support has been highly appreciated. At another level motivation can be created when committed people are posted in key positions. For example, senior professionals brought into Liberian state institutions have shown great commitment to their work, have acted in close alliance with the President, and have been able to create institutional changes.

Secondly, ***quickly initiated changes that break with past ways of doing things have created remarkable results.*** These changes then need to be supported in the long term to avoid setbacks. This conclusion deviates from the present agenda of capacity development where pre-assessment and slow, locally initiated changes are emphasised. This is not to argue against incremental processes, but several cases show that changes with great real and symbolic value (for example a massive clean-up of staff), sometimes externally initiated (but with strong local backing) have pushed institutions into a momentum where incremental changes then start to occur. This was the case with the Rwandan Revenue Authority and with capacity development initiatives in state institutions of Liberia. Also quick visible changes such as new uniforms and equipment can have important symbolic value of indicating change and getting public support as was the case with the police in Sierra Leone.

Thirdly, ***positive changes have occurred, but not necessarily as results of a grand plan.*** The cases of the Rwandan revenue authority and Sierra Leone police reform show that the most remarkable changes have occurred without following a grand plan. Capacity is often developed through numerous incremental, small and meticulous actions and rarely as a large, designed process. Much is about momentum and finding pockets of specific needs and motivated people within an organisation. In other words, capacity develops on an ad hoc basis. Sudden and context specific windows of opportunity occur and, when supported, have produced great results. Clearly, there needs to be a balance between having certain plans and long-term objectives and then flexibility to change these when sudden opportunities arise. Partnerships based on trust between the donor and recipient government/organisation (e.g. DfID in Rwanda, UK in Sierra Leone, UNDP in Liberia) have enabled such flexibility.

Capacity development can enhance state legitimacy

A few things have been documented to enhance state legitimacy and strengthen or (re)establish public trust in the state:

- Working to change the public image of institutions through campaigns and active institutional engagement with the public, as was the case with the Rwandan Revenue Authority in Rwanda and the police in Sierra Leone.
- Making significant, visible and symbolically significant changes such as building schools and enrolling girls, as has been the case in Afghanistan, or by installing culturally accepted personnel to indicate a sincere effort at creating change across the range of state institutions, as in the regional programme in South Sudan.

As a fourth point, ***successful capacity development of central state institutions has been connected to the external environment.*** State institutions are open systems and as such they can be influenced by and also influence the public. This is rarely considered in capacity development initiatives. The Rwanda Revenue Authority is an example of an institution that acknowledged this relation, and attempted to 'brand' itself in the public and thereby enhance its capacity by being perceived as a leading employer and thus attracting qualified staff. Similarly, the strong focus on creating public support through the 'Local Needs Policing', as part of the reform of the Sierra Leonean Police, increased

public trust in the police and thus the motivation to perform among some staff.

Fifth, ***context assessment is important, and has fruitfully been based on people who have inside knowledge***, people who are already there. Fragile countries and those affected by conflict are often characterised by mistrust, corruption and various malpractices in the state administration. Therefore, analysis of needs, of existing systems and capacities, of informal power relations and hierarchies are pivotal for capacity development to succeed. Such analysis is not always best done by external teams coming in and making large-scale assessments, but rather by people – external or internal – who have intimate knowledge of what goes on. The British Inspector General of Police for example, had been in Sierra Leone for several years before he was chosen to lead the reform process. In Rwanda, a full-time project manager served as the link between DfID and the RRA management and helped ensure that decisions on what to support were guided by assessments of need and commitment as perceived by RRA management.

CAPACITY IS DEVELOPED BY PEOPLE AND WITH PEOPLE – WHAT WORKS WHEN POSTING EXPERTS?

Advisors and various experts are the most applied means to initiate, facilitate and, in some cases, run the capacity development process. In Afghanistan the Ministry of Education received a large number of international and national advisors; in Rwanda, technical expertise played a main role in reforming the revenue authorities; in Sierra Leone, an external expert led the process; in South Sudan, regional twins (employees from state institutions in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda) are being posted to work alongside South Sudanese staff; and in Liberia posting and appointing of diaspora professionals and national experts from various walks of life constituted one of the backbones of post-war capacity development. The following elements seem to have worked when using expert personnel:

Gap filling may strengthen the system considerably and be fundamental for capacity development and institutional change, especially if it makes alterations to internal politics. Deployment of Technical Advisors (TAs), although often criticised as unsustainable in terms of capacity development, has actually in some cases built capacity. TAs do not develop staff capacity unless there is direct guidance, mentoring and measures to do so. However, TAs have been central in changing some systems, in formal functional-rational terms as well as challenging political hierarchies and practices. In Liberia, there has been a conscious strategy to recruit and appoint senior national professionals in key positions in various state institutions, and this gap filling has yielded important results in terms of output of the institutions as well as of the sections within the institutions where

Room for capacity development after conflict

In fragile states that have come out of a violent conflict there is special room for capacity development. In the immediate period after a conflict former elites are weakened, vested interest challenged and a new status quo yet to be established. If donors ***act fast*** to support capacity development where need and opportunity is felt at the ground level and where staff and leadership is motivated large change can occur over a short time.

This was the case in Sierra Leone where the British support spurred fundamental changes in the police within the first few years after the conflict. Also, in Rwanda, revenue collection rose markedly within a few years due to a massive clean-up of staff and capacity development leading to entirely new ways of working. In both cases, the end of conflict made it possible to change ingrained mal practices, because hierarchies and internal politics were challenged.

these experts have been posted. Being internal, but with years of experience outside state institutions, several of the senior professionals have been able to question vested interests and internal politics. In Sierra Leone, the highly UK-driven process changed fundamental procedures and policies, for example by introducing ‘Local Needs Policing’, which was unlikely to have been initiated without the influence of someone intertwined in the local cultural and political systems. It is a balance, however, because external experts can also create local resentment and jealousy, and build up systems that collapse when they leave.

Salaries are important for staff motivation for capacity development. Not only is there a need to pay attention to salary differences between TAs and local staff to avoid demotivation, the Rwanda case also shows that prioritising a competitive salary may change the public image and standing of an institution and thus attract capable staff that push further changes along. It is worth considering whether it may in some instances be worthwhile prioritising higher salaries and fewer personnel to increase the overall capacity of an institution.

Cultural affinity and professional expertise both play a role when deployment of TAs results in capacity development. Some sort of cultural affinity, as is the case with diaspora nationals, national experts and regional advisors, enables a better understanding of the challenges and potentials on the part of the advisor, and creates greater trust and acceptance among civil servants. Nonetheless, cultural affinity has also created challenges. When advisors



(whether diaspora or from a neighbouring country) and civil servants feel culturally similar, differences in payment, for example, have sometimes appeared provocative. Moreover, shared nationality may be overshadowed by vast differences between different ethnic groups or between groups who stayed and those who fled during conflict. Thus, affinity cannot straightforwardly be assumed. Lastly, cultural affinity cannot stand alone; advisors and experts are expected to bring in professional expertise and some fresh external eyes as well. They have to be able to challenge the status quo.

It seems that ***regional South–South cooperation may be the way forward.*** Succinctly put, it is cheaper, and of equal professional standard to post expertise from neighbouring countries. In addition such seconded officers are aware of the governance challenges and corruption problems and have experience with similar internal politics. Still, they have an outsiders' position. This is often combined with a 'sense of brotherhood' and thus motivation and commitment on both sides. It is argued that advisors are used to corruption in their own countries, and some may thus be more pragmatic about it and thereby manage to make things work when posted in a fragile setting. In South Sudan the programme is still new and capacity development output accordingly small. But the programme counters many of the usual errors when deploying personnel, and in this way it creates motivation and ownership among the South Sudanese employees, which are prerequisite for capacity development.

CHANGE OF SYSTEMS VERSUS INTERNAL POLITICS

In all cases there were ***attempts to challenge internal institutional politics through the changing of systems and procedures.*** What seems to have been of great importance in

several cases (Afghanistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Liberia) has been the use of large-scale clean-ups of staffing and ranking systems, to rid organisations of shadow employees and to challenge vested interests through systemic change.

Donor aided capacity development in fragile situations has always had a strong focus on the technical and rational aspects of an organisation. In recent years there has also been a strong focus on the political aspects, the need to pay close attention to altering the informal systems and hierarchies existing within organisations, especially in fragile situations. Sometimes externally supported change of fundamental procedures, if backed by committed leadership, can spur capacity development and changes in internal politics.

A strong need for better empirical documentation

Much has been written about capacity development, but still there is little thorough empirical documentation of capacity development processes. Good evidence is the fundament for good development work. Donors are strongly recommended to prioritise, and support, the collection of thorough empirical evidence.

The research carried out on the South-South driven capacity development in South Sudan is an exception (see Felix da Costa et.al 2013. Friends in need are friends indeed: triangular co-operation and twinning for capacity development in South Sudan. Report June 2013. Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre).

FURTHER READING

Petersen, B.L and L. Engberg-Pedersen (2013): Capacity development of central state institutions in fragile situations. DIIS Report 2013:27

The opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Danish Institute for International Studies.