

THROWING WATER ON SAND

'Throwing water on sand' a Burmese saying for wasted effort

By Jenny Pearson

The analysis and ideas set out in the OECD document *'The Challenge of Capacity Development: working towards good practice'* prove that a lot is known about what constitutes good practice for CD. Yet in the majority of cases the reality of implementation remains far too much like throwing water on sand. Temporarily something can be seen as the project activities take place, but very shortly afterwards there is no sign that anything ever happened. Yet we keep doing the same things, time and time again. The first big question that needs to be answered is why? The answers are numerous and woven throughout the massive complexity that is the aid and development system. Some of the more obvious threads in this web are:

- Funding cycles that restrict responses to short and medium-term activities for something that requires long-term processes
- The heavy reliance on technical inputs and training instead of focusing more on organic and iterative learning
- The lack of any really clear analysis or articulation of the theories of change on which CD approaches are being built, if in fact they exist
- The discomfort with, and therefore tendency to avoid, acknowledging the elephant in the room: power and whether or not there is political will for change

All of those issues notwithstanding, one of the fundamental flaws at the heart of CD is that there is no clear discipline for the practice of CD. Is it not astonishing that all the resources and initiatives that go into CD worldwide every year still do not fall under any national or international mechanism of regulation or accreditation? Where is the professional rigour that is applied to other disciplines where people's wellbeing is at stake? Of the many assumptions behind this deficiency, possibly the most significant is the assumption that because someone is an expert in, for example, rice production, they are automatically able to develop the capacity of others in rice production, whereas nothing could be further from the truth. CD is a skill in and of its own right and does not automatically go with any other set of knowledge and skills. Similarly many very clever and well intentioned people still believe that jetting in, doing a one-week training workshop and jetting out again is CD. From my perspective interventions of this nature are simply more buckets of water thrown on the sand. The second major assumption is that what has meaning and is helpful in one culture must therefore be of similar relevance and use in others, whereas again the reality is very different. Until something is done to introduce regulation and accreditation of CD practice these assumptions will continue to dominate and the current unsatisfactory situation will continue.

The introduction of professional standards for CD practitioners would draw on multiple disciplines and schools of knowledge, within two main groupings, in addition to the array of required technical disciplines. The first group of subjects would be concerned with analysis and understanding of different cultural constructs of capacity, learning and change; how to identify and understand existing capacity in any given situation; contextual factors supporting or blocking change; how to analyse the success and failure of, and learning from, previous initiatives; theories of change; and relevant disciplines of psychology. The second group would focus on the practitioners themselves, their skills, attitudes, values and beliefs, and the tools and techniques they use. Only when some discipline of this nature is applied at the pivotal point of implementation is there any chance of moving away from 'business as usual' and all the resources and hard work that currently go into CD resulting in sustainable long-term change for the better.

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