

Gender Equality & Public Sector Capacity Development

Tipsheet #8: Designing support to NWMs – what have we learned?

This tipsheet reviews some points to be considered in designing initiatives that aim to support increased public sector capacity on gender equality through strengthening national women's machineries (NWMs).

A major input into the tipsheet was a review of experience with a small sample of three projects with NWMs in Asia Branch. The support took somewhat different forms in the three countries, reflecting differences in the environment for implementation in the three countries as well as differences in project approach. The combined experience provides insights into the many challenges of providing external support to strengthen government capacity and some implications for project design, rather than blueprints for use in different circumstances.

Another input into this tipsheet was the growing literature on donor support to capacity development. Recent reviews of experience provide a reminder of the complexity of capacity development and the experimental nature of efforts to strengthen the capacity of developing country partners – with all public sector agencies, not only NWMs. However, a great deal of analytical energy is now being devoted to developing a better understanding of these concerns. This effort is undertaken in the context of reflections on aid effectiveness and the reorientations required to achieve substantive and sustainable change.

The box to the right presents a summary of the conclusions of a one broad study. Notably, this is in the form of a set of principles rather than a blueprint. These principles are consistent with the conclusions drawn by participants and evaluators of CIDA's projects with NWMs in Asia.

This tipsheet refers to several other recent publications from the growing literature on capacity development, including several works-in-progress and informative websites. For those working with NWM projects, these publications are a rich resource for strengthening the quality of project design, oversight and evaluation.

Basic Principles for Capacity Development

From Carlos Lopes & Thomas Theisohn, *Ownership, Leadership and Transformation*. UNDP: 2003.

(www.capacity.undp.org/, follow links to policy and practice / reforming technical cooperation)

- *Don't rush.* Capacity development is a long-term process. It is not amenable to delivery pressures, quick fixes, and short-term results seeking.
- *Respect the value systems and foster self-esteem.* The imposition of alien values can undermine confidence. Capacity development builds upon respect and self-esteem.
- *Scan locally and globally; reinvent locally.* There are no blueprints. Capacity development draws on voluntary learning, with genuine commitment and interest. Knowledge cannot be transferred; it needs to be acquired.
- *Challenge mind-sets and power differentials.* Capacity development is not power neutral and challenging mind-sets and vested interests is difficult. Frank dialogue and a collective culture of transparency are essential steps.
- *Think and act in terms of sustainable capacity outcomes.* Capacity is at the core of development. Any course of action needs to promote this end.
- *Establish positive incentives.* Motives and incentives need to be aligned with the objective of capacity development, including through governance systems that respect fundamental rights.
- *Integrate external inputs into national priorities, processes, and systems.* External inputs need to correspond to real demand and need to be flexible to respond effectively to national needs and agendas. Where national systems are not strong enough, they should be reformed and strengthened, not bypassed.
- *Build on existing capacities rather than creating new ones.* This implies the primary use of national expertise, resuscitation and strengthening of national institutions, as well as protection of social and cultural capital.
- *Stay engaged under difficult circumstances.* The weaker the capacity, the greater the need. Low capacities are not an argument for withdrawal or for driving external agendas.
- *Remain accountable to ultimate beneficiaries.* Where governance is unsatisfactory, it is even more important to anchor development firmly in stakeholder participation and to maintain pressure points for an inclusive accountability system.

Gender Equality & Public Sector Capacity Development: Tipsheet #8: Designing support to NWMs – what have we learned?

Selected references from the capacity development literature:

- ▶ DAC Network on Governance, *The Challenge of Capacity Development: Working towards good practice*. DCD/DAC/GOVNET(2005)5/REV1 (February 2006). www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/36/36326495.pdf
- ▶ ADB Governance Brief 12: *Strengthening Capacity for Increased Aid Effectiveness*. (2005). Useful 4-page overview of implications of 2005 Paris Declaration and recent good practice analyses for capacity development. www.adb.org (search function for governance brief)
- ▶ Nils Boesen, Ole Therkildsen (May 2004). *Between Naivety and Cynicism: A Pragmatic Approach to Donor Support for Public Sector Capacity Development*. Prepared for Danida, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Available through www.um.dk (search capacity development)
- ▶ Nils Boesen, Ole Therkildsen (February 2005). *Results-oriented approach to capacity change*. (Shorter version of the above.) www.um.dk (search capacity development)
- ▶ Carlos Lopes & Thomas Theisohn (2003). *Ownership, Leadership and Transformation: Can We Do Better for Capacity Development?* UNDP. Executive Summary & full report www.capacity.undp.org/ (follow links to policy and practice / reforming technical cooperation)
- ▶ Peter Morgan, Tony Land, and Heather Baser (January 2005). *Study on Capacity, Change and Performance. Interim Report*. European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM). www.ecdpm.org (follow links to “what we do”/ “capacity, capacity development and performance”)

Key websites:

- ▶ Capacity.Org: www.capacity.org/ web-magazine and a gateway on capacity development issues
- ▶ Capacity Development Network: www.capacitywhoiswho.net/ networking site, with discussion forums, library, case studies, etc
- ▶ CIDA CD Extranet: <http://remote4.acdi-cida.gc.ca/cd>

▶ The quality of analyses of capacity & change processes is very important

An important task in formulating an NWM capacity development project is to further assess capacity needs and gaps of the NWM in relation to its mandate. Clearly, if a project is contemplated, the existence of problems or capacity gaps already been

identified. The challenge is to achieve a more in-depth understanding of the partner’s situation and the potential for change, and whether/how this can be facilitated by external support.

This analysis must start with some basic questions – in particular, capacity for what? – and must seek a better understanding of the organization and its environment. A number of analytic frameworks and tools are available to assist in structuring thinking about these issues (see resources noted in box to the left). Current work on capacity development draws on theoretical and empirical work in various fields, including organizational development, change management, public administration and community development. Insights from this work could considerably enrich thinking about how best to support NWMs in a particular context.

Several of CIDA’s capacity development projects with NWMs were initiated when fewer analytical tools and resources were available, so project planners and implementers found themselves “building the boat while sailing.” All capacity development projects need to do this to some extent as innovation and response to changing circumstances is always required. However, the problems of working without some explicit and considered framework could include:

- a tendency toward seeing managing the initiative as a list of tasks and activities, rather than as process of organizational change;
- lack of a clear or explicit view on the relation between interventions and the outcomes envisaged to guide implementation strategies (lack of a ‘theory of the project’);
- limited perspective on the multiple dimensions of organizational capacity and change (individual / organizational / systems levels; technical / political dimensions);
- loss of momentum in implementation as time is devoted to sorting out what to do and why.

There are a range of capacity development frameworks that could be used – the intent here is not to advocate use of a particular framework, but to suggest that use of any of the tested frameworks would serve to increase the transparency and legitimacy of the analysis. Greater clarity about capacity development concepts is also necessary for constructive discussions with partners.

Importance of focused and coherent approaches and a common agenda

“If systemic and sustainable change is to result, institutional change and capacity development initiatives have to be placed within a coherent and timely framework as opposed to being implemented as a series of ad hoc interventions. For maximum impact capacity building needs to be focused and targeted. This however is not easy in the face of widespread adversity to change and expressed resistance to capacity building efforts that compete with a whole series of other priority demands and agendas.

“A clear lesson learned was that an understanding of capacity building has to be negotiated upfront and consensus built as a common capacity building agenda cannot be assumed. The challenge lies with the donor and the CEA to present and package capacity building tools and the language used to talk about it, in ways which are welcomed by the host government and not perceived as derogatory or highlighting inadequacies. There is a real need to be sensitive around such issues in order to bring about the desired development results.”

End of Project Report. Prepared by Cowater International Inc., March 2003. (CEA for PLAGE and PLAGE-II)

▶ **Local leadership, ownership and momentum are key to constructive partnerships for capacity development**

The first box in this tipsheet (page 1) states a set of basic principles for capacity development. The last box (page 5) outlines a set of conditions that have been conducive to capacity development and another set of conditions under which it has proved difficult. The two boxes represent findings from a review of a variety of public sector capacity development initiatives. An important theme throughout is one that is also key to recent discussions of aid effectiveness – the need for local leadership, local ownership, and local impetus.

The importance of this theme is borne out by CIDA’s experience with NWM projects, which were implemented under a range of different conditions. One project partner had strong capabilities, a good base of support from key stakeholders, creative leadership, and cohesive and highly-motivated staff complement. It was also developing its own analysis of institutional capacities for effective gender mainstreaming

strategies as a basis for working with its own partners in government. This partner worked closely with CIDA in designing the project. It then managed project inputs and activities without a CEA (Canadian executing agency), which itself contributed to capacity strengthening. Much innovative work and useful results were achieved through partnership under these circumstances.

Other projects where these elements were weaker or absent faced much higher barriers to achieving results. Further, where externally-led capacity development investments need to devote considerable effort on creating momentum, the likelihood of sustainable results is questionable.

CIDA’s experience with more than one project also suggests that there is a danger of relying too heavily on a dynamic leader or a limited number of committed individuals. These elements are necessary but are not sufficient as a basis for partnership to achieve sustainable capacity improvements. Reliance on a limited base puts an initiative at the hazard of changes occasioned by the electoral cycle or civil service deployment practices. What is needed is a broader base, a critical mass of staff and elements, that can sustain an ongoing process of capacity development both during and after an external intervention.

The box on page 5 provides some guidance in assessing whether the conditions exist for a constructive relationship and the achievement of results. In sum, this suggests that the task is not to develop the capacity of others – but rather to assist others in developing their own capacity.

▶ **Questioning our own assumptions about how things work is a key part of developing appropriate approaches**

While there is an understandable tendency to understand structures, processes, possibilities, etc. through the filter of experiences in our own country, this can be an unreliable basis for judging what is realistic and feasible in a project that is to be implemented in another institutional environment. What may seem rational or desirable or normal in the Canadian context but not be in another. Consider for example:

- the implications of different political systems – presidential vs. parliamentary – for policy and

Gender Equality & Public Sector Capacity Development: Tipsheet #8: Designing support to NWMs – what have we learned?

legislative decision-making processes, and thus for the way a NWM functions;

- the implications of different approaches to civil service management – centralized control vs. recruitment/deployment by individual agencies – for an NWM’s ability to select appropriate staff and reward performance;
- the implications of different organizational cultures – the degree to which there is flexibility, openness to innovation, allowance for error – for the degree to which staff at different levels will experiment and take risks

A major challenge in questioning and verifying the validity of implicit assumptions is to first identify that they are being made. But this is a challenge that must be taken up in order to have constructive discussions with partners and to collaborate with them to formulate appropriate project strategies.

Capacity development strategies must be anchored in the specific institutional context

“How can governmental policy, planning and monitoring mechanisms be harnessed to promote gender equality? This question has no generic answer – it depends almost entirely on local circumstances. One of the first steps for WSP-II was to gain a clear understanding of how the Indonesia government and the institutions that constitute it worked – before developing strategies to build capacity for gender mainstreaming.”

End-of-Project Report. Prepared by Agriteam Consulting, January 2002. (CEA for WSP-II)

▶ Changes in the partner’s environment are to be expected, and can in some cases be better anticipated

Public sector organizations such as NWMs do not operate in a static environment. They are as parts of a dynamic system interacting with others and affected by developments with the system and by external forces. A partner in a capacity development initiative could need to cope with major developments affecting the whole of government, such as a regional financial crisis, public pressures for democratic reform, or a natural disaster. Or it may need to adjust to changes in leadership or policy that follow an election.

Some of these changes can be anticipated. Elections cycles are predictable, and the extent of personnel changes associated with changes in political leadership or administration follows standard practices in the country. Anticipation of these types of changes should be part of the project design.

Changes in the economic and political context are less predictable in their specific implications. However, what can be predicted is that there will be a need for flexibility –the potential to change project activities, emphases, implementation schedules, for example – and for management skills on the part of a CEA to manage such processes creatively. But experience also suggests that while such changes may disrupt plans and schedules, they can also serve to offer new opportunities or scope for action when there is creative leadership.

▶ “Piloting” approaches need to be strategically designed from the outset

“Pilots” may have more limited follow-up and impact than anticipated because of loose use of the term. A theme reiterated in many CIDA project assessments (related to others agencies as well as NWMs) is that to add value:

- a pilot should be conceived as part of a broader strategy that indicates who would follow-up and how, should the pilot be judged successful;
- a project that includes pilot components should build in time and resources for reflection on lessons, success and appropriate follow-up.

Clearly, a piloting strategy can only be successful if designed collaboratively with the partner.

Such challenging projects require strong management (by CEA & CIDA)

“Complex and innovative projects such as WSP-II require strong management at the field level to maintain a coherent vision of the project, to build consensus among staff and partners, and to ensure linkages among components. They also require continuity of management and oversight by CIDA officers of sufficient experience to provide timely guidance. Attention to both forms of management is an important aspect of risk management of such projects by CIDA.”

End-of-Project / Forward Looking Review Report. Prepared for CIDA by Lucie Belle-Isle, Angela Patterson, Yulfita Rahajo, March 2001.

Findings from experience to consider in identifying risks & monitoring implementation

Source: Nils Boesen, Ole Therkildsen (May 2004). *Between Naivety and Cynicism: A Pragmatic Approach to Donor Support for Public Sector Capacity Development*. Prepared for Danida, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (Findings drawn from a range of sources cited by Boesen & Therkildsen.) Available through www.um.dk

Most capacity improvements in organisations occurred where several of the following conditions prevailed:

- ▶ Strong demand-side pressures for improvements are exerted from outside the organisation (from clients/customers, political owners, supervisory bodies, competitors or quasi-competitors etc.)
- ▶ Top management provides visible leadership for change, promotes a clear sense of mission, encourages participation, establishes explicit expectations about performance, and rewards well performing staff (recognition, pay, promotion based on merit, etc)
- ▶ Change is approached in an integrated manner, stimulating fertilisation and exchange across the boundaries of segments, units and professions.
- ▶ A critical mass of staff members, including front line staff, are eventually involved in and committed to the change process - motivated to change existing ways of doing things
- ▶ Organisational innovations are embraced, tested and adapted (e.g. better operational and strategic planning, improved mechanisms for beneficiary involvement, better monitoring, etc)
- ▶ Quick wins that deepen commitment for change are visible early in the process
- ▶ The scope of change (type and depth) is commensurate with internal and external commitment as well as the organisation's capacity to manage the change process
- ▶ Resources for developing capacities and implementing change (e.g. time dedicated by key staff members; and budgets for training, facilitation, information dissemination, etc) are prioritised, maintaining of daily business does not override change objectives
- ▶ Top management and change agents manage the changes process strategically and proactively, including both internal and external aspects of the change process (communication, sequencing, timing, feedback loops, celebration of victories, recognition of problems etc).

Conditions under which capacity development in individual public sector organisations proved difficult

- ▶ Civil unrest and conflicts
- ▶ Unstable macro-economic situation, high inflation and poor fiscal management, rapidly decreasing revenues.
- ▶ Fragmented government, with poor overall public financial management capacity
- ▶ Non-credible and/or rapidly changing government policies, overload of reform and change initiatives
- ▶ Unpredictable, unbalanced or inflexible funding and staffing
- ▶ Salary levels incompatible with living standard expectations of public officials; history of flight of qualified staff to other countries, private sector or donor funded positions; high rotation levels at key positions; weak middle layers of competency between a few highly qualified and a majority of staff with low skill levels.
- ▶ Entrenched corruption (political and administrative) in core government organisations (president's office, ministry of finance, civil service commission, central ministries, audit agencies, the judiciary)
- ▶ Entrenched and widespread clientelism and patrimonialism weakening the pursuit of formal tasks of organisations
- ▶ Intrusive donor involvement in key national programmes (by-passing recipient organisations and institutions, forcing/buying policy/structural changes (which are often frequent), distorting resource allocations and incentives)
- ▶ Substantial dependency on fragmented and unpredictable donor support
- ▶ Segmented and compartmentalised organisations where centralism, strict hierarchy, authoritarian management and/or excessive power struggles impede that information and ideas reach decision makers
- ▶ Only formal commitment to a performance oriented culture, no sanctions for non-performance, no rewards for performance (material or non-material).

**Support to capacity development
remains a complex endeavour**

As stated in the “good practice note” prepared by the OECD Network on Governance: *

“What has been learned about capacity development over the past 40 years does not suggest a simple message on ‘how to do it’. Moving on to better practice on the ground calls for a focus on specific objectives, followed by flexible and imaginative thinking about the methods that are right for the circumstances. The concepts of capacity and capacity development are so all-encompassing that practitioners have often found it difficult to make operational sense of them. It is important, therefore, for practitioners to begin by asking the question ‘capacity for what?’ and focus on the specific capacities needed to accomplish clearly defined goals.... What is then needed is an active search for approaches that achieve a *best fit* with the particular circumstances of the country, sector or organisation that is under consideration. This implies a highly flexible search for appropriate ways of supporting capacity development.”

* DAC (2005), *The Challenge of Capacity Development: Working towards good practice*. DCD/DAC/GOVNET(2005)5/REV1, February 2006). www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/36/36326495.pdf