

Building Individual and Institutional Capacity in  
Educational Research and Development  
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The concept of "capacity-building" has more and more frequently become an important component of international aid programmes during the last ten years. When applied to the field of education, "capacity-building" has become a distinct objective of many such programmes, usually associated with the training of individuals, the building of institutions, and the developing of an effective and efficient infrastructure for educational research and planning. Building this capacity has come to mean a more or less systematic process of strengthening an individual's or an institution's ability to identify problems, assess needs, establish priorities for action, design and implement programmes, and evaluate their effects.

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This particular understanding of the concept of capacity-building serves as the basis for the development strategies of many donor agencies and governments from both developed and developing nations. At the same time, it provides them with a rationale for maintaining and implementing particular strategies of modernization. Thus, "increasing indigenous capacity" for educational research through international assistance helps to legitimize the relationships between developed and developing nations, and it is seen as a viable mechanism through which greater economic development can ultimately be achieved. The assumption in this regard is that because education is one of the key factors in the process of modernization, improvement of local capacity to do educational research and planning will lead to better education and thus to a more modern and productive society.

But experiences in most developing regions of the world tend to indicate that even if the educational sector of a society is strengthened (i.e., its capacity to absorb the demand for education, deliver required services, and develop the human and technical resources for research and planning is increased), development and modernization do not necessarily follow.

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Strengthening particular components of the complex development dynamic in developing societies, without ameliorating conditions of social inequality and dependency, only rarely produces the results expected by development strategists. One of the questions which needs to be faced by governments in both developed and developing countries and by the members of the international community of donors, therefore, is how the concept and practice of "capacity-building" should be re-defined in order to generate the conditions in each developing society to achieve greater social equality, reduce dependence, and increase self-reliance. If this question is to be addressed in the field of education, it is necessary to review the current strategies applied in building educational capacities, the assumptions behind them, and their implications for development.

In a broad sense, there have been two main approaches to the problem of capacity-building in education over the last twenty years. The first can be characterized as the large-scale, comprehensive efforts usually undertaken by governments, large donors, and development banks. This approach, commonly applied during the 1960's and early 1970's, included broad-ranging interventions directly into education systems and attempts at institution-building, usually at the level of major universities or technical government departments. The main assumption behind this type of initiative was that by introducing substantial amounts of financial and technical resources into key parts of the socio-economic structure of a developing society, the basic needs of a greater number of individuals would be met, the efficiency and productivity of the economic system would improve, and growth and development would be generated. When applied to education, this approach focussed on such activities as the universalization of primary education, the expansion of secondary and higher education, the massive production of textbooks and audio-visual materials, the accelerated training of teachers, the construction of new universities (especially faculties of agriculture, economics, and medicine), and the training of a new generation of technical and scientific personnel, usually in higher education centres in the developed world. It was these new personnel who were meant to build locally the capacity to maintain and further improve this expanded education system.

Seldom, however, were the development expectations which inspired these activities attained. The quantitative expansion of education systems has not necessarily resulted in greater equality or better quality. The implementation of complex and massive reforms has created administrative nightmares which have seriously affected the quality of outputs, the productivity of

technical management, and the capacity to generate the necessary resources to keep the new mechanisms working. And the dependence upon external technical and financial resources which has usually come as a result of these initiatives has contributed many times to the political instability and economic deterioration which have ultimately weakened the institutions and capacity so expensively created.

An equally unhappy situation has often affected the new cadres of highly trained experts and technical personnel. Newly trained brains are drained into bureaucratic positions in government or leave their countries looking for markets where their qualifications are better priced. Those who remain behind often become heavily involved in the international community, often at the expense of their responsiveness to local needs and realities.

In spite of this complex variety of results and the qualitatively low impact on development of this particular kind of large-scale capacity-building, donor organizations as the main agents in the process of international aid, and developing country governments as the main recipients of foreign assistance, continue to implement such attempts to build capacity as a means to reach higher levels of development and modernization. With certain variations from the style characteristic in the 1960's and 1970's, donor agencies continue to embark on new, more comprehensive, and sometimes even more expensive attempts to build or re-build educational research and planning capacities in the developing world.

These new modalities include attempts to develop international consortia controlled by donors that will channel and administer large amounts of aid funds, the creation of new planning and administrative mechanisms in the education system, and the dramatic increase of graduate programmes in local universities at the masters and doctorate level. These efforts continue to pursue the development of a "capacity" that can provide the educational services which are demanded in society, of a critical mass of trained personnel to take command of the development process, and of a proven set of competencies and skills that can permit developing countries to better assess their needs and to create and adapt the mechanisms to satisfy them.

The assumption at the center of these efforts continues to be that if enough people are trained in technical areas and to high academic degrees, that if sufficiently advanced and sophisticated

methods of planning and research are transmitted to the leading cadres of society, that if sufficiently rigorous training materials are prepared and widely disseminated to lower levels of researchers and planners, and that if properly selected technical assistance and technology are provided from the North to the South, then capacity will be built, in education and in the society at large, and development will occur.

The dilemma is, however, that these expected outcomes will likely not occur, and little evidence exists to prove that they might. This large-scale, expensive approach to capacity-building for development most often results in the creation of pockets of modernization in developing societies. The individuals who benefit are usually those who belong to the political and economic elite of the local society, or who have already reached the top of the indigenous academic or bureaucratic ladder. In many cases, those who receive M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s, the funds to implement research projects, or the consultancy contracts belong to a technical and intellectual elite which operates close to the international community of donors and sources of assistance. The institutions which benefit as a result of this process of capacity-building are also, in many cases, those that appear as more reliable to the international donors, because of the capacities and infrastructure that they already have, than those weaker and newer institutions which are operating in areas which are less conventional and perhaps more politically conflictive. Thus, local and foreign funding, new technologies and facilities, and the security to operate at least on the basis of medium-term plans are received by those individuals and institutions which in practice need them least.

The technical and scientific knowledge that is transmitted and generated as a result of this elitist approach to capacity-building--and the paradigm upon which it is based--are those which are considered appropriate to the roles of individuals and institutions involved in planning and research by those who are delivering the package of assistance: inculcation to positivism as a tool for the interpretation of socio-political phenomena, empirical, "scientific" research methods which have been accepted as the norm in the context of developed countries, rational planning techniques, and the values of system productivity and efficiency. These are all seen as ideologically neutral and therefore detached from the problems of social, economic, political and cultural inequality which permeate these societies.

As a whole, therefore, it is possible to argue that under these macro approaches to capacity-building, capacity is built and modernization is produced. But it is built among groups which are already advantaged and are quite cut off from the basic development problems and dynamics of their societies, and it results in skills more useful in the academic and bureaucratic environment of the North than in the villages and slums of the South.

The second type of approach to capacity-building--a more popular approach--is designed to address the issues of development from the bottom up and at a smaller scale. Its purpose is not to produce comprehensive changes or reforms in the macro systems of society but to facilitate in-depth interventions by private rather than government institutions, focussed on local rather than national centres for action, and oriented to the identification and understanding of the contextual factors affecting the development process at the micro-level rather than to experimentation with solutions at the macro level. In this regard the micro-approach to capacity-building is directed toward diagnostic rather than experimental research, to training young and inexperienced researchers, and to encouraging nonformal initiatives through action research, participatory planning, and community development.

Applied to the field of education, this approach leads to the search for educational alternatives, both inside and outside the formal system, to serve the needs of marginal groups and the poor; to incorporate as active educational agents groups which traditionally have not been seen as capable of playing educational roles in society; to build self-help organizations which have stronger links and a greater impact with popular groups; and to train local leaders who can play an effective role in the cultural and political education of those sectors not primarily served by traditional education mechanisms.

Although from a different perspective and through quite different practice, this approach to capacity-building is also full of unproven assumptions, overly ambitious, and not always successful. As the macro approach is affected by its own magnitude and complexity, the micro approach is vulnerable to its sometimes vague and optimistic understanding of the role of social movements in development, to its lack of access to and impact on the power structures of society, and to its high dependence both on charismatic and often unstable leadership and on fluctuations in the political environment. In spite of this situation, this micro approach to capacity building continues to

be widely accepted in many developing regions of the world as an appropriate means to respond to the real problems and needs of the developing societies, rather than merely to the perception of these problems by the local political structure or by the external donor agency.

Many private centres, community groups, NGO's, independent intellectuals, political parties, unions, and cooperatives are now becoming more active in both the actual delivery of educational services and in the diagnosis and analysis of problems which before were the exclusive territory of formal researchers and educators. Although on a smaller scale, there are also more and more donor organizations which quite suddenly are attracted to such types of indigenous, community based initiatives; to ideas that may lead to an increase in the scope and frequency of local participation in decision-making; to the development of locally generated training materials and methods; and to the implementation of small-scale educational and extension programmes designed by and directed towards poorer socio-economic groups.

These type of initiatives have their own set of assumptions which connect the concept of capacity-building and development. In many of these cases, there is the belief that if through these strategies enough people can be aroused; if sufficiently sensitive and self-motivating methods of participation, research and action are implemented and developed; and if sufficiently simple training materials are disseminated widely enough among the poorest sectors of the society, indigenous capacity from the bottom up can be built, and development--at least among marginal groups where it is needed the most--will occur.

The difficulties that have been faced by those pursuing this popular approach are also complex, although different in nature to those which have affected more elitist efforts in capacity-building. Usually the impact of small-scale strategies for building capacity in education tends not to be large enough to generate substantive changes at the level of the society as a whole. The scope of these initiatives at the micro level is not comprehensive enough to have an effect on the increasing marginalization of large sectors of the population or on the deterioration of the economy which affects most developing societies. The outcome of such enterprises is often localized and limited to particular popular organizations, individual institutions, or discrete groups with little influence on the decision-making structure. The possibilities of implementation and potential replication of capacity-building at the micro level

are often conditioned by political instability at that level, and are highly susceptible to political censorship and repression.

Thus, while the knowledge and skills which are generated are perhaps useful in solving particular problems and satisfying very concrete needs, they are neither necessarily effective in improving the overall conditions of development of the society at large nor easily transferred to other contexts of poverty. And because of their ideological implications and their tendency to search for alternatives to the established and politically accepted system, the possibility for support--political and financial--for this type of activity is often very limited. In this regard, popular capacity-building is not the most preferred strategy of large donors in achieving their objectives of promoting development and modernization in the South--though more and more are assisting NGO's in their various activities. Support to small groups, independent institutions, and community-based organizations does not provide donors with the financial confidence, visible impact, and political reliability which are usually conditions sine qua non for their investments.

Based on past experience, it seems that neither elitist nor popular approaches to capacity-building hold out much hope for effectively contributing to the development process in the South. Success stories do occur, of course. New technologies and educational practices are implemented successfully; new, popular, grass-roots movements do emerge to play an active role in development; innovative methods of popular participation are, in fact, developed and have some influence on the design and implementation of policies. The gains, however, are always limited in scope and are hardly equal to the funds or efforts expended on "capacity-building."

The question with which those interested in development and the elimination of inequality in developing societies are still faced is how to contribute to these societies' development processes in a way that builds skills appropriate to genuinely indigenous development and at the same time transmits these skills to individuals and institutions at levels of society powerful enough to effect some change upon the national development process. While it seems possible to build capacity in education at a powerful stratum of society where important political decisions concerning the development process are made, many times this is capacity in the "wrong" skills and in behalf of the "wrong" people. And while it also seems possible to build capacity in the "right" skills and for the "right" people, this seems inevitably to be at a relatively small scale and at a

relatively powerless level of the society. Does this mean, therefore, that those interested in building capacity for development are facing a dead end?

There must be something in the training of development educators, particularly in the mixture of educational practice and interdisciplinary social science inquiry characteristic of the SIDEC program, which would permit us to answer this question on a somewhat more optimistic note. We should be able to say something about how to train researchers and planners in skills sensitive and appropriate both to the complex process of development and to the simple needs of the poorest sectors of developing nations--and then to guarantee that these skills do not become the sole possession of these nations' elite.

The response that the Education Program of IDRC tries to give to this question, no doubt in some way conditioned by the SIDEC training of some of its staff, is by no means a totally satisfying one. Our resources, unlike those of the larger donors of the developed world, do not permit us to undertake activities of the same magnitude or with the same potential national impact as those of larger-scale development programs. This situation, however, may be a positive one. It permits us the luxury of seeing development not as an abstract macro-political process in which the amount of funds put in equals the magnitude of outcomes produced, but rather, using various methods and paradigms of the social sciences, as the complex, context-specific process that it is. It forces us to take more into account the perspectives and needs of the South and enables us, if we are willing, to focus more on popular, rather than elite capacity-building, while permitting us to assess across societies and nations how such capacity-building might have greater impact at a more powerful level of the development bureaucracy. And it allows us to operate on the basis of what we believe is a more pragmatic approach, in the sense that we are obliged to operate in a closer relation with those who are actually building capacity for development rather than with those who are only administering it.

These various activities, however, leave other questions in our minds. Are we simply doing more of the same, justified only by a different rhetoric? Will anything we do, influenced or not by our training, lead out of what might be called the dead end of most traditional capacity-building activities? And what are these different activities or processes which might create a different and ultimately more effective means of building capacity in educational research and planning?