



United Nations Environment Programme

برنامج الأمم المتحدة للبيئة · 联合国环境规划署
PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT · PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE
ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

Ways to Increase the Effectiveness of Capacity Building for Sustainable Development

Discussion Paper presented at the
Concurrent Session 18.1 The Marrakech Action Plan and Follow-up,
2006 IAIA Annual Conference, Stavanger, Norway

by

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
Division of Technology, Industry and Economics (DTIE)
Economics and Trade Branch (ETB)

(May 2006)

1. Introduction

International calls emphasizing the importance of capacity building for sustainable development have been numerous and a great deal of attention has been drawn to the specific capacity building needs in developing countries and countries with economies in transition.¹ Capacity building has been embedded in the objectives and programmes of work of many international organizations and they offer a wide range of capacity building activities.²

To support work in this area, the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) adopted the Marrakech Declaration on Capacity Development at the 2003 Annual Conference in Marrakech, and developed a Plan of Action putting strong emphasis on developing capacity for impact assessment, including environmental impact assessment (EIA), health impact assessment, social assessment, strategic environmental assessment, and environmental management.

UNEP has recently strengthened its international commitment for capacity building by providing a strategic framework to the programme's capacity building activities. In 2005, UNEP's Governing Council adopted the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building requesting to *"enhance delivery by UNEP of technology support and capacity building to developing countries and countries with economies in transition, including through mainstreaming technology support and capacity building throughout UNEP activities."*³

While there seems to be international consensus that capacity building is key to promoting sustainable development, more attention needs to be drawn to the way to go about it. Are the current approaches to capacity building of international organizations actually effective? Are the right means being used to achieve the objective of capacity building for sustainable development? What needs to be done to actually build a critical mass of people with the right capacity to manage the environment and natural resources in a sustainable manner?

To address these questions, this paper will start with a very brief recapitulation of the definition of capacity building, point out some of the current challenges, and at the same time present a few ideas for ways to increase the effectiveness of capacity building activities offered by international organizations and the donor community.⁴

2. Definition of Capacity Building for Sustainable Development

The definition of capacity building as a means to promoting sustainable development is broad and can encompass a multitude of activities. In its publication "Capacity Building for Sustainable Development"⁵ UNEP described capacity building as building abilities, relationships and values that will enable organizations, groups and individuals to improve their performance and achieve their development objectives. Capacity building was also described as initiating and sustaining a process of individual and organizational change that can equally refer to change within a state, civil society or the private sector, as well as a change in processes that enhance cooperation between different groups of society. This definition puts emphasis on three aspects: (a) capacity building as the catalyst and constant fuel for a process of change, (b) the importance of building institutional capacity, and the (c) involvement of a wide range of different groups in society.

3. Ways to Improve the Effectiveness of Capacity Building

¹ For those relating to the work of UNEP-ETB, please see: Agenda 21 (Paragraph 8.12); Rio+5 Resolution (Decision 8/6, paragraph 29); World Summit on Sustainable Development Plan of Implementation, (Paragraph 91d and Paragraph 137); WTO Ministerial Declaration from Doha (Paragraph 33); UNEP Governing Council (GC) 21/14.

² Examples include: the Capacity Development Programme of the United Nations University, the UNEP-UNCTAD Capacity Building Task Force for Trade, Environment and Development, the Bali Strategic Plan for Capacity Building and Technology Support of UNEP, the Capacity 2015 initiative of UNDP, etc.

³ For reference see: UNEP GC 23/1/1

⁴ This short paper builds on the ideas of a UNEP paper: Enhancing Capacity Building for Integrated Policy Design and Implementation for Sustainable Development, version September 2005, which is available online at (<http://www.unep.ch/etb/areas/pdf/Capacity%20Building%20Paper%20-%20Sep%202005.pdf>)

⁵ Please see Capacity Building for Sustainable Development: An Overview of UNEP Environmental Capacity Development Activities, UNEP 2002, page 11.

3.1 Identifying needs and building on existing capacities

Carefully performed needs assessments are critical to priority setting and programme design and are essential if the capacity building programmes are to reflect the specific conditions and priorities of beneficiary countries. Capacity building will be most efficient when beneficiary countries take the lead in conducting such needs assessments. A needs assessment, initiated by an external organisation, raises expectations, and should only be done with a clear long-term strategy for how the identified needs will be prioritized and addressed. With international organizations facing budgetary constraints, a needs assessment may be a tempting first step, as it leads to fast results with limited funds involved. But nothing has actually been achieved when funds come to an end, just when the needs assessment is completed.

A step equally important to needs assessment is the assessment of already existing capacity in a country. Capacity assessment will help to identify the already existing basis that new capacity building activities can build on as well as the national institutions and local experts that could be involved in the design and implementation of the activities. This requires a careful insight into previous work done in a country, existing structures and institutional settings. Even countries that already received extensive support in a certain area may still request more capacity activities on the same issues. Why should one not ask for more in the view of an externally funded programme that can bring some benefits? To avoid such situations, careful evaluation of the impact and lessons learned of past and ongoing capacity building programmes in a country as well as close coordination of activities by international organizations and donor agencies is essential. To increase the effectiveness of capacity building, one should carefully consider what is already available and let local institutions and professionals take the lead in the delivery of capacity building activities.

3.2 Being clear about the objectives

There is a need for a clear understanding of the objectives of capacity building between providers and beneficiaries. Above all, any capacity building programme should make a clear contribution to achieving sustainable development, whatever the focus of the programme is (i.e. water, climate, trade, impact assessment, etc.). In addition, questions such as: “What capacities should be built, for whom, on what topics, and to what end?” need to be addressed carefully. A clearer set of objectives, mutually agreed among beneficiaries and providers, will help to effectively target activities, reduce redundancy, improve synergies and ensure that capacity building genuinely meets the needs of countries.

It also needs to be considered that capacity building can have three different dimensions: building awareness, building analytical capacity and building decision-making capacity, as well as different targets: human capacities and institutional capacities. Each one is equally important, but may involve different stakeholder groups and require a different strategy. A lot of activities that are currently offered through workshops, seminars, and conferences remain at an awareness raising level. It is, however, the analytical and decision-making capacities that are needed to sustain a constant process of change. Whereas human capacities are surely important, institutional capacities that remain in place as humans move on are essential for a process of organizational change. Analytical, decision-making and institutional capacities are more difficult to develop and monitor and will need holistic programmes using a wide range of capacity building approaches.

3.3 Using a wide range of capacity building approaches

A wide range of approaches is available to build capacities, including training, formal education, capacity building projects, networking and others. Which approach will be most effective strongly depends on the specific objective to be achieved. A training workshop usually can go as far as building human capacities at an awareness raising level. If specifically designed, training may also succeed in building analytical capacity. However, there is a tendency to call a wide range of activities ‘capacity building’, which rather are policy dialogues, discussion workshops, regional meetings, etc. For those activities usually no clear capacity building objectives are defined and no capacity building methodologies are used. It takes much more for an adult to acquire new knowledge and skills than listening to a power point presentation in a workshop. In addition to seeing and listening adults usually need real life experiences to acquire new abilities. Thus, any

workshop which is held with a capacity building objective needs to be carefully designed, moving as much as possible from the presentation-discussion style into an interactive workshop style, using exercises, case studies, field visits and other elements of experiential learning to actually build capacities. The effectiveness of training activities could be further increased, if workshops would not just be one-off events but be embedded in long-term programmes, comprising a series of workshops that reflect beneficiary countries' priorities, and using a range of capacity building approaches in parallel.

To go one step further and actually build decision-making and institutional capacity, in addition to training stronger emphasis needs to be put on learning-by-doing as well as formal education. Country projects, focused on an issue of priority in a country, and comprising a set of different activities, are a promising option for effective capacity building including all dimensions and targets mentioned above. An essential feature of this approach would be that a team of professionals from different institutions in a country is put in charge to complete a project - for example to assess a policy - receiving targeted financial and technical assistance. This will provide individuals and institutions with an opportunity - through a learning-by-doing experience - to develop their managerial and analytical skills in the course of the project, while additional training can be provided where necessary.

Eventually, whereas the current generation of decision-makers is the most obvious target group for capacity building activities, even greater opportunities lie with the future decision makers, the students, pupils and children. There are tremendous opportunities to build capacity by bringing topics related to sustainable development into the curricula of schools and universities.

3.4 Target the right people to build a critical mass

Capacity building activities of international organizations often put strong emphasis on training key players in government, such as senior officials that actually take decisions. This can lead to a situation where a fairly limited group of people, who usually already received a comparably good education, is involved in all sorts of capacity building activities. While senior officials are definitely an important target group, more emphasis needs to be put on building the capacities of other groups in society. One major constraint of developing country administrations is often the capacity to implement reforms. While - as in the case of EIA - most countries have drafted necessary legislation, problems arise in the implementation. Implementation, however, is not merely the task of senior officials at national level, but involves different levels of governments, usually putting a lot of responsibility into hands of provincial or local officials. There is tremendous need to build capacity at these levels, but the attention for those groups is comparatively low.

Similarly important is capacity building for other stakeholders groups outside the government to eventually build a critical mass of people that can initiate and sustain a process of change. Any capacity building activity, including training workshops and country projects, should make an effort to build capacity of stakeholders from different groups of society, and provide a platform for these groups to interact with each other.

Researchers, civil society groups, companies, associations and unions are important groups to push and redirect government decisions or initiate processes of change outside the government sphere through new business ideas or social trends. To build a critical mass of people pursuing the ideas of sustainable development, these groups need as much attention as government officials. For any policy decision that a government is taking the support or opposition of major stakeholder groups will be key to the success of the reform. If, however, these groups lack knowledge about the issues at stake as well as the capacity to sufficiently analyze the situation, decisions going against sustainability may pass without attention, whereas decisions that actually support sustainable development may face strong opposition.

Considering all the different groups mentioned, the number of individuals and institutions that need to be targeted by capacity building activities becomes fairly large. Just dealing with senior officials - assuming that there would be 100 developing countries and 50 key officials in each country - 5000 thousand people need to be targeted. Assuming each country has 5 provinces and

another 50 key people at provincial level should be involved, this will be an additional 25,000 people. Including the local level and other stakeholder groups, numbers will rise quickly. This obviously goes beyond the scope of the human and financial resources of international organizations. To actually build a critical mass of people that can sustain a process of change towards sustainable development a fundamental change in the approach to capacity building is needed.

3.5 Making the training-of-trainers approach work

One approach frequently promoted for multiplication is the training-of-trainers approach, meaning that trainings offered by international agencies focus on training a smaller group of professionals, who would then be equipped to themselves train others in their country. Using this approach, two questions need to be carefully addressed from the beginning:

- What knowledge and skills does a person need to be able to train others?
- What structures will be available for the person to pass on knowledge to others in his/her country?

For a person that does not have much experience teaching or conducting training, it will most probably not be enough to participate in one training-of-trainers to be able to pass on knowledge to others. A continuous process building skills and knowledge would be needed. Further, a future trainer will need structures, facilities and financial resources to train people in his/her country. This aspect needs much more attention in order to make the training-of-trainers approach more effective. Selecting participants for a training-of-trainers workshop, therefore should be based at least on two main criteria: (1) Is the person that is attending a training-of-trainers in a position to be a trainer in the future (e.g., a government official will probably not have a chance to train others)?, and (2) Is the person part of a structure that offers capacity building activities in the country (or can the person at least get access to such a structure)?

3.6 Institutionalizing capacity building programmes at regional and national level

Bringing the different aspects addressed above together, one suggestion to increase the effectiveness of capacity building activities could be that international organizations focus their efforts on institutionalizing capacity building programmes at regional and national level. Instead of offering capacity building programmes and training courses themselves and spending tremendous resources on participants' travel, efforts should focus on building the structures in the countries through which capacity building programmes could be offered on a regular and long-term basis. In most developing countries, capacity building providers of different type are already available but they are usually under funded and not well equipped (e.g. national cleaner production centers, universities, government training centers, etc.). Technical and financial assistance provided by international organisations could focus on sustaining, expanding and improving these structures, with the objective that capacity building programmes on different subjects can eventually be provided on a regular basis in the country itself. Once structures are established and functioning, new developments or topics can be easily brought to the relevant target group. If the programmes are attractive enough they could even be run as part of a commercial activity, raising funds to reach financial sustainability.

Capacity building providers of this sort could be available at regional level (such as CITET in Tunisia⁶), national as well as local level, and - depending on the programmes - be supported through different funds and by different agencies. The range of courses offered could be adopted and linked to any other major programme initiated in the country to create synergies and strengthen efforts by offering accompanying training courses. This would require close coordination of capacity building activities by international organizations and the donor community to ensure that a consistent message is provided. With courses being offered on a regular basis, and a larger number of people being trained, these efforts are much more likely to contribute to the critical mass of people needed that embrace the ideas of sustainable development.

4. What does that mean for the work of international organizations?

⁶ CITET: Tunis International Center for Environmental Technologies in Tunisia.
UNEP Discussion Paper: Ways to Increase the Effectiveness of Capacity Building for Sustainable Development
2006 IAIA Annual Conference, Stavanger, Norway

International organizations will still have a major role to play in catalyzing and kick-starting activities, but any programme initiated should at least to some extent contribute to building institutional capacities for long-term delivery of capacity building activities. Rather than planning capacity building workshops themselves, international organisations could identify the institutions in a country that have a potential to become capacity building providers. What type of institutions that may be, and what capacities already exist, will be different from country to country. As much as possible it should be avoided that new structures are created, as long as there are already some in place. For any new activity, from the planning stage onwards, local institutions and experts should be involved as much as possible in organizing and carrying out the capacity building action. While receiving technical and financial support, any involvement will already be a learning-by-doing experience for the institutions, and will be the first step towards building in-house capacity and a reputation.

Shifting the focus of work to building up institutional structures for long-term capacity building programmes in countries, the results and indicators reflecting the success or failure of capacity building programmes also need to be adjusted. The success of capacity building activities is genuinely difficult to monitor as it is a soft target difficult to quantify. Reports on capacity building therefore often remain at a level describing that trainings have been held, that participants have been trained, and the workshop report qualifies as a main output. Giving stronger emphasize to the institutionalization of capacity building activities at regional, national and local level, will require redefining results, such as:

- Training courses on a subject have been integrated into the national training and education system;
- Budget for the mid-term delivery of the course has been secured externally or internally;
- A local institution is running a capacity building programme with local trainers on a regular basis; etc.

5. Conclusion

While the importance of capacity building is widely acknowledged, more attention needs to be drawn to the identification and implementation of effective capacity building approaches. The ultimate goal of capacity building is to sustain a process of individual and organizational change and to enable organizations, groups and individuals to achieve their development objectives. Any capacity building activity needs to be carefully designed so that it contributes to this goal. In this process, it is essential that the needs of the beneficiaries as well as the already existing capacities in a country are carefully assessed and that the specific capacity building objectives are clarified.

To eventually sustain a process of change, a critical mass of people is needed that shares the same values, pursues the same objectives, and is equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. To move in this direction, groups outside the national government need to get more attention, including local level officials, researchers, civil society groups and private sector representative to ensure their continuous contribution towards sustainable development. In addition, the generation of future decision-makers need to be targeted through the systematic integration of sustainable development into national education programmes.

This task obviously goes beyond the scope of the human and financial resources of international organizations and implies a fundamental change in the approach to capacity building. Rather than offering a vast of variety of capacity building activities, which are often one-off events and not properly coordinated, international organizations could focus their efforts on institutionalizing capacity building programmes at regional and national level and building the structures in the countries through which capacity building programmes could be offered on a regular and long-term basis. Instead of offering capacity building programmes themselves, international organizations could see their role in identifying institutions at national and regional level that have a potential to become capacity building providers, catalyzing and kick-starting activities, and providing targeted financial and technical assistance, while national institutions and local experts take the lead in implementing the activities.