

Caught between principles and politics: a donors' view on capacity development

Jonas Gutheil and Maria del Mar Morales Burkle

Capacity development (CD) is considered a cornerstone of development cooperation and an important process to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. After years of efforts, the effectiveness of CD projects continues to be questioned. Donors hold significant power in shaping CD projects, yet their perspective has rarely been covered. This study bridges the existing knowledge-gap by gathering governmental donors' viewpoints on the factors that influence whether CD projects are successful. The study concludes that the ideas that donors' have regarding how CD projects should be structured in order to be effective, are often in conflict with the way the development cooperation system is structured. Donors should help their partners put these ideas into practice by providing frameworks, guidelines and incentives that encourage better CD projects.

CD is the process through which individuals, organizations, and societies create, enhance, and maintain the knowledge, skills, and procedures they need to carry out their functions in an effective way. As part of development cooperation, countries like Sweden have provided CD support to countries and organizations in the South for them to be able to develop their capacities. Through 26 interviews with informants from 7 Northern governmental donor agencies, this study set out to explore and describe current CD challenges and opportunities from their perspective. The four main challenges reported are: (I) the level to which CD projects are owned by actors in the South, (II) the individual and technical focus of the projects, (III) a need to prove short-term results, and (IV) internal constraints of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

First, even though donors believe CD should be guided by the needs of Southern actors, the priorities and interests of donor countries and the international organizations that support projects still take precedence in determining what CD projects set out to do. Second, CD projects still focus mostly on developing the technical skills of individuals through e.g. training. This is problematic because it does not address the other levels (organization and society) and types of capacity (e.g. communication or leadership) and rarely achieves long-term change. Third, CD projects are most effective when they can change and adapt according to how contextual circumstances develop. However, an excessive pressure to produce short-term results and a fear of losing control and resources does not allow for this adaptability. Fourth, within Sida, the staff experience a heavy administrative burden that prevents them from focusing on ensuring effective CD.

This study also suggests possible opportunities or ways forward for each of these challenges: (I) Finding ways to transfer power and control of projects (e.g. through direct support, community philanthropy, and local funding) to Southern partners. (II) Improving all actors' knowledge on what holistic CD implies, increasing efforts to bring actors together, and performing contextual and political analysis before projects. (III) Providing the necessary

conditions for Southern partners to access flexible and adaptable projects. (IV) Reducing the administrative burden by simplifying administrative procedures and increasing internal communication. However, donors' actions are not enough to overcome these challenges, instead efforts at all levels of the system are necessary in order to achieve effective CD.