

Capacity Development

BRIEFS

SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND LESSONS LEARNED

A REVOLUTION IN CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT? AFRICANS ASK TOUGH QUESTIONS

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In the past year, the donor community has paid unprecedented attention to the subject of capacity development. From the World Bank Task Force on Capacity Development in Africa to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, donors have signaled both the importance of the issue to African development and a new determination to improve results on capacity development interventions. For African practitioners, however, whether this new attention will result in real changes is still unclear. This brief examines some of the African reactions, gathered through a series of consultations in the past year, to growing attention on capacity development among donors. Unless the new commitments lead to real changes in behavior on the ground, the African practitioners say, the latest commitments will simply be remembered as yet another missed turning point.

The signing of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness¹ in March 2005 appeared to mark a new day in progress on capacity development. The agreement, which established a set of concrete commitments and areas that donors and partner countries pledged to monitor jointly in the next three years, put capacity development in a central role. Five of 12 areas to be monitored as indicators of progress mention capacity development or use of country systems, which implies the existence of minimum standards of country capacity. Most of the other indicators focus on improved donor coordination under country leadership, which also requires increased capacity for many countries. This agreement—unprecedented in scope, specificity, and backing by donors and partners—redefined the conditions of the development partnership and opened a window of opportunity.

For many African development practitioners, however, these commitments sounded a bit too familiar. Much of what was agreed to in Paris has long been labeled “best practice” in managing aid and is consistent with a long line of reports stretching back for more than a decade (box 1).² The test will be putting these commitments into practice.

Box 1: Call for CD Reform Is Nothing New

As early as 1968, the DAC observed that “assessments already made invariably stress the need for better coordination of technical assistance at country level in order to use available resources effectively.” Eliot J. Berg took the debate further in his work on technical cooperation and capacity building in Africa (1993). OECD’s *Shaping the 21st Century* (1996) and OECD-DAC’s *Criteria for Donor Agencies Self-Assessment in Capacity Development* (1999) both pointed to the need to integrate capacity development into donor agencies’ daily operations, especially at field level. Another plea for change recently came from OECD-DAC’s *The Challenge of Capacity Development: Working Towards Good Practice* (2006c), which draws similar lessons, urges donors to change behavior and places more emphasis on capacity development.

¹ In this international agreement, more than 100 ministers, heads of agencies, and other senior officials committed their countries and organizations to increase efforts to harmonize, align, and manage aid for results with a set of monitorable actions and indicators (OECD 2005).

² See Berg 1993; OECD 1968; OECD 1996; OECD 1999; and OECD 2006b.



Box 2: The Consultations

Two sets of consultations with countries in Sub-Saharan Africa were held, both using the Global Development Learning Network, a network of satellite-linked videoconferencing studios. Country teams met for half a day to read position papers, discuss their relevance to participants' countries, and debate positions. Later in the day, the groups were connected to five or six other country groups by satellite to share notes and compare opinions.

The first consultations took place in September 2005 as part of the preparation of *Building Effective States—Forging Engaged Societies* (World Bank 2005). An anglophone segment linked participants at sites in Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Tanzania and also included participants from Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. The francophone segment linked Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Rwanda, and Senegal and also included participants from Mauritius.

The second set of consultations in March 2006, jointly organized by the DAC secretariat and World Bank Institute, followed publication of *The Challenge of Capacity Development: Working Towards Good Practice* (OECD 2006c) and involved participants in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Mauritania, Senegal, Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.

This view of opportunity tinged with a taste of *déjà vu* emerged from a set of consultations that the World Bank Africa Region, World Bank Institute, and OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) conducted in 2005–06 with African practitioners working on capacity development (box 2). Because country leadership is seen as essential to reaching Paris Declaration commitments, African stakeholder views provide an important compass and reality check to contrast with donor discourse. The consultations provided critical feedback on the rash of donor declarations and promises on how to improve results on capacity development.

Participants in the consultations generally welcomed the attention to these issues that has accompanied the aid efficiency drive in the past two years. These issues are now receiving even greater attention as donors consider major increases in aid levels to Africa. Donors—working through the DAC—have agreed to a list of “good practices” and entry points that include greater attention to country ownership, greater use of local resources, more and better monitoring and evaluation, and greater attention to links to the enabling environment. Even if some of these indispensable changes in behavior come from donors, however, they will not be enough if African partners do not share the same analysis or are not prepared to take the lead in implementing changes at the country level.

Nevertheless, the participants were convinced that Africa is now in a position to play a more important role in defining the way forward. In some countries, the enabling environment is improving and citizens are demanding more of their governments and external partners. Although Africa's performance is uneven, citizens are clearly expressing support for democratic systems and participatory decisionmaking in public life. This is creating new space for a more demanding civil society that will hold governments

accountable for their performance. A renewed social contract is at the heart of successful capacity development and stronger institutions.

Capacity Development and the Paris Declaration: Why Africans Are Cautious

During the consultations, it was clear that a growing number of Africans are not only raising tough questions about donors, but tough questions about themselves. Despite rhetoric on the importance of country leadership in setting their own development agenda, the participants said many African countries are still not taking the lead or fostering the kind of participation that is necessary. “There must be a national appropriation of the capacity development paradigm,” said a participant from the Ivory Coast. This entails “a broader and more systematic involvement of all actors in society, who must take part in all phases of the process, from policy dialogue to elaboration, implementation, and follow up of national capacity development strategies.” Better communication among development partners and involvement of a wider set of actors, including the private sector, is critical, they said. It is important to “give voice to the voiceless,” a Kenyan participant added. So far, progress in that dimension has been limited, they said, and both African governments and donors share the blame.

Calls for strengthening capacity of civil society to fulfill its oversight role and demand better performance of governments were heard from participants in nearly every country consulted; the demand for reform should be strengthened and more systematically linked to ongoing capacity development initiatives. They also agreed that civil society should be more clearly involved in developing a national framework strengthening existing capacity and addressing capacity gaps. “The capacity discourse must be made more



accessible and less technical,” said a Benin participant. “Civil society has a key role in that respect and can contribute to clarifying what needs to be done.”

Civil society and the media should be central to demands for greater accountability, just as donors are under greater scrutiny from their own constituents for the additional funds to be committed to Africa. Thus, progress toward better mutual accountability needs to be demonstrated if commitments made by African and OECD countries are to be credible.

African stakeholders view this engagement as vital, but the participatory aspect of elaborating development strategies is often more ceremonial than real. In many countries, civil society engagement in development of poverty reduction strategies has been purely rhetorical. “It is crucial to better involve reform champions in the decisionmaking process,” said one Mauritanian.

In nearly every country, participants linked capacity development with good governance and the fight against corruption; combating corruption requires stronger capacities in the public sector, private sector, and civil society for greater vigilance and oversight. Africans must demonstrate leadership and political will, especially because donors have few instruments and a mixed record in tackling the issue. The focus needs to shift to strengthening the capacity of oversight institutions, such as parliaments, NGOs, and the media. “It is both a question of the enabling environment and specific skills that these groups need to perform their roles,” a South African donor participant said.

These statements are largely consistent with OECD-DAC and World Bank papers that note that one of the main problems impeding capacity development in recent years is lack of attention to the enabling environment and the role of the “engaged society,” which, with “effective states,” make up two essential halves of the capacity development equation.

African practitioners noted that relying too much on funding scattered and uncoordinated projects has considerably hindered development of sustainable, country-owned capacity in the region. Aid harmonization and predictability among donors would improve the efficiency of the whole process, they said. The Paris Declaration defines one of the key indicators of capacity development as the share of technical cooperation provided by donors through coordinated programs supporting capacity development.³ One Senegalese participant said, “The state must demonstrate leadership by coordinating donors’ interventions in support of capacity development.”

All the Africans consulted agreed on the importance of a “best-fit” approach, that is, adapting good practice to country context, better and more systematic use of strengthened country systems, and more programmatic forms of aid. The same goes for reducing reliance on capacity-depleting practices, such as project implementation units, salary “top-ups,” and using too many foreign consultants without drawing on existing capacity to find local solutions. Few deny the progress made by donors shifting from *what to do* to *how to do it* and recognizing that no one case fits all. At the same time, African partners’ self-identified needs, existing strengths, and power structures must be at the frontline of partner discussions with donors on how to support capacity development.

The Africans, however, expressed reservations on just how much donors will be guided by their own rhetoric. The Paris Declaration may not be the “Copernican Revolution” some are waiting for, one participant said. The call for country leadership and enhanced flexibility is not among many donor agencies’ strong points. This leaves donors faced with a multitude of contradictions, which hamper much-needed behavior changes.

Some Glaring Contradictions

Despite a vast literature and growing number of tools available on capacity development, donors and African stakeholders both face a major knowledge gap. Lack of common understanding on how to define, measure, and track capacity development means that discussions on the subject are often vague and open to interpretation. Many people still think of capacity development as technical cooperation—mostly provision of foreign consultants and training and an often supply-driven process. Donors too often focus on inputs (e.g., number of personnel trained)—an approach with little success in stimulating capacity in Africa. Indeed, the major difficulty lies in tackling capacity development from a holistic perspective, said participants from Kenya and Tanzania, and “identifying and linking entry points at all levels,” including individual, organizational, and enabling environment.

Although calling for country-driven strategies and “best-fit” approaches, donor incentives still focus on supply-driven prescriptions that are not always in tune with country priorities. Donors may acknowledge the need to engage with appropriate national actors, participants from Burkina Faso and Ghana said, but they often fail to support development of bottom-up

³ See indicator 4 of the Paris Declaration: “Strengthen capacity by coordinated support” (OECD 2005).

approaches or accept priorities and timelines of host countries.

Promises made by the European Union and at the G8 summit in Gleneagles, both in 2005, to increase aid by \$50 billion by 2010 risk further undermining African countries' accountability mechanisms, creating greater aid dependency, and making countries accountable to aid donors rather than to their citizens.⁴ The Commission for Africa, the World Bank Africa Action Plan, and other donor initiatives also run the risk of establishing accountability frameworks for donors, rather than fostering accountability in Africa. Mutual accountability, more independent monitoring of results, and real efforts to stimulate African leadership in the aid process are critical to turning these initiatives into opportunities, participants said.

Although donors recognize the importance of good governance and strengthening the capacity of key institutions, a Ghanaian participant said, they often "do not demonstrate the adequate level of commitment to support the demand for local accountability."

Donors increasingly concede that capacity development is much more than provision of training, international experts, or mere knowledge transfer from North to South; yet, most bilateral donors continue to rely on technical cooperation as their preferred aid instrument. Some estimates of donor-assisted capacity development efforts suggest that more than a quarter of total net overseas development assistance (ODA) is spent on technical cooperation.⁵ This assistance has done little to foster the broad changes needed in the enabling environment, especially in many low-capacity countries. African stakeholders say that broader, more comprehensive approaches with clearly defined capacity goals must be pursued under African country leadership.

In sum, the consultations with African stakeholders reinforced some well-known messages, while highlighting "double talk" that has characterized the

issue. Expanding the dialogue will be essential as the World Bank and DAC continue work on capacity development. Donors must use these messages as a compass when engaging with African partners at the policy and field level.

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⁴ See OECD 2006a and OECD 2006b.

⁵ DAC member spending on technical cooperation with developing countries and multilateral organizations amounted to \$18.4 billion in 2003 and \$20.8 billion in 2004, 27 percent of total net ODA in 2004 (OECD 2004).

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