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Mutual reinforcement: combining project outputs with capacity development outcomes for service delivery

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DELIVERING WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES
IN AN UNCERTAIN ENVIRONMENT

Mutual reinforcement: combining project outputs with capacity development outcomes for service delivery

K. Nilsson & D. McNicholl, Malawi

BRIEFING PAPER 1751

Capacity development of permanent local institutions is needed to improve the sustainability of investments made in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector. To check capacity development intentions, development partners (DPs) can ask the question "What capacities are you developing and why?" This will verify that capacity development is being done with precise objectives, and is aligned with institutional needs and role definitions. DPs can use implementation and capacity development objectives as mutually reinforcing opportunities to support strong project outputs as well as to improve outcomes for service delivery. Two particular techniques for capitalizing on this duality are highlighted: supporting implementers, and supporting reflective learning. Examples of practical combinations of capacity development approaches are presented from the perspective of Engineers Without Borders Canada working in collaboration with other DPs and with district governments in Malawi's WASH sector.

Capacity development for outputs and for outcomes

As local, permanent institutions in Malawi, it is essential that district government offices play a central role in ensuring sustained service delivery in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector for the country. The capacity of local government has been recognized as a main factor affecting sustainability [Lockwood and Smits, 2011]. For this reason, many development partners[1] (DPs) provide capacity development support to district governments in addition to project investments in infrastructure and behaviour change to support WASH services.

The interest of WASH DPs in capacity development with district governments is well founded; in Malawi, achieving service delivery for WASH remains a challenge. Although the proportion of the population with access to improved water sources has been increasing, in large part due to donor-funded investments, the sustainability of these gains is in doubt [Government of Malawi, 2012]. DPs either need to continue funding Malawi's WASH infrastructure indefinitely, or help break the cycle of installation, breakdown, and costly rehabilitations. Disruption of this cycle can happen if district governments' capacity is increased to enable them to play the role assigned to them under Malawi's Decentralisation Policy - that of management, maintenance, and oversight of WASH services [Government of Malawi, 2010]. By fulfilling their mandated role and increasing their technical and community knowledge, Malawi's district governments will be able to optimize private sector, community-based, and DP involvement in the sector.

Furthermore, capacity development towards sustainability outcomes need not come at the expense of project outputs. This remains true even when the capacity development approach uses local government to manage and deliver on project activities. Assistance in achieving project outputs and ongoing learning can support capacity development, while also benefitting the rollout of the project.

"What capacity are you developing and why?"

The necessity of further developing Malawian district governments' capacity is broadly recognized by DPs. There is, however, no commonly agreed approach to effective capacity development, nor a shared view of what capacities should be developed. Asking the question: "What capacity are we developing and why?"

can help DPs improve capacity development intentions and clarify assumptions about the future role of district governments as service delivery managers. This simple question can be an effective check that capacity development is being framed to suit the needs of the institution whose capacity is being built. Considering this question can:

- Clarify long-term objectives for the roles that institutions should play
- Check for alignment of proposed capacity development approaches with intentions; and
- Ensure capacity development intentions are precise enough for assessment of the project's capacity development goals and for applying learning to future projects.

Explicit capacity building intentions set the stage for improved project outputs, and for better outcomes to support sustainable service delivery.

Approaches for strengthening capacity development

Since 2006, Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB) has been working with private, public, and DP stakeholders in the WASH sector in Malawi. Over this period, EWB has gained experience in capacity development with district governments. In particular, EWB focuses on supporting experiential learning as an approach to ensure relevance and applicability of new learning. This provides the opportunity to practice and develop skills inside a project that are also important for the roles the institution is mandated to play outside of the project. Experiential learning also builds in the practice of applying skills to the actual work environment directly, minimizing the need to translate new learning to the work context.

Three techniques a DP may employ that can meaningfully enhance experiential learning are:

- Supporting technical learning
- Supporting implementers; and
- Supporting reflective learning.

This paper focuses on the latter two techniques as underutilized opportunities for capacity development. The experiences of EWB in using these approaches for capacity development are presented below. Though the examples describe EWB's typical approach of embedding staff with district government offices, the techniques are not exclusive to the use of embedded capacity support. Rather, the cases here are shared to offer practitioners insight into how these techniques can be applied to any project. EWB's experience suggests that investing in these approaches can improve the performance of local government within both the project scope, and the ongoing mandate of local government for sustainable service delivery.

Supporting implementers

Providing support to district staff involved in project implementation can both help a project go better while also developing capacity. When districts are engaged with partial responsibility for a project, there is an opportunity to support the district with some of the areas they find more challenging. This can improve the project's output while also enhancing capacity development. Supporting districts to become successful implementers requires watching for possible road blocks and assisting the district in overcoming these. It should be noted that this is different from taking control over these challenging aspects of the project; this approach focuses on providing support to enable success that is owned by the district. Acting in this way not only improves project outputs, but also project outcomes by capacity development.

Improving outputs and supporting outcomes

The synergy between capacity development – which improves project outputs while also supporting outcomes for sustainable service delivery – can be understood through a bean plant metaphor. The plant is like a project; its desired output is to grow and produce bean seeds, which are analogous to project outputs. Simultaneously, by growing, the bean plant fixes nitrogen (NO^{3-}) into the soil. This can be likened to capacity development outcomes, as the nitrogen-rich soil enables other plants to grow better. Similarly, the capacity development results of projects enable an improved growing environment for other projects and routine services.

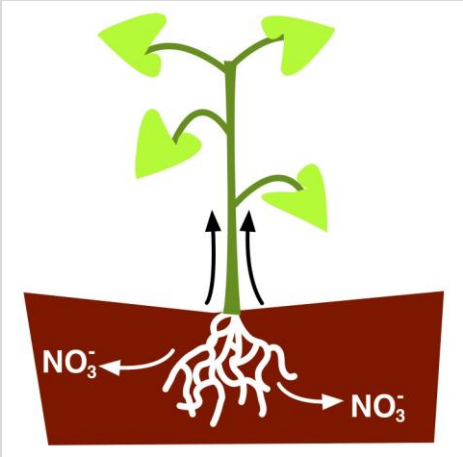


Figure 1. A bean plant fixing nitrogen

Supporting implementers in Rumphi

One example that shows the value of supporting the navigation of implementation challenges and multi-stakeholder mediation. In Rumphi district in Northern Malawi, the Water Office was presented with two different project proposals for developing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system for rural waterpoints in the district. The M&E system would help them track areas of water coverage, as well as gather information on functionality of infrastructure, to help guide future infrastructure projects. At the time, EWB had a staff member who visited the district a few days a month. When this situation of two parallel projects came up, the EWB staff was able to manage relationships between the district and both of the DPs that were proposing M&E systems. Using an understanding of the technical aspects of monitoring, and the interface between the technology and the human systems involved, the EWB staff worked with the district to clarify their needs and constraints. He also supported the district to communicate with the DPs, helping them to understand the district's priorities. Based on experience working with M&E systems while embedded in another district, he was also able to assist the district in interpreting the two proposals and anticipate likely outcomes of each. Acting in the role of knowledge broker between these stakeholders, a hybrid approach for the M&E system was developed.

This result improved the output of the project for the district: the M&E system suited the local context, met the needs of the district, and reduced the inefficiencies and overlaps that may have occurred from parallel systems. By facilitating information exchange between the district and the DPs engaging with the district, the rollout of the projects and the result for the district was improved. At the same time, the skills of the district staff were also strengthened. The EWB staff saw an increase in the ability of Rumphi district staff to navigate these negotiations over the course of his involvement - showing capacity development in stakeholder engagement and in advocating for their own needs.

Supporting implementers in Mangochi

Helping turn recommendations into actions within a project is another way to support project results and capacity development at the same time. EWB partnered with Mangochi district in Southern Malawi as well as a DP implementing a project within the District. EWB staff was hired by the DP to act as embedded capacity support for district staff, and to provide the DP with recommendations based on a direct-from-the-ground view of the project's rollout. During one meeting to plan a new project in the district, the EWB staff member became concerned at the high levels of ambition being proposed within the project. Having strong relationships with both the DP and the district, she was able to raise the potential issue at the meeting. Pointing out that the number of project activities might be too high for the available person-hours of the district staff, she expressed concern that the district might not be able to do other essential work outside the project's scope. It was agreed that the calculation on the feasibility of the proposal should be done. She later

followed up on this recommendation with the District Water Office staff to calculate the person-hour requirements of the proposal. It was found that this one project would take nearly 80% of available staff time. The district decided this seemed feasible and adjustments to the project were not needed. However, in raising that concern and assisting with the follow-through recommendation, she brought a management lens to the discussion which had previously been technically focused.

In this case, the decision made by the district about their ability to manage the workload did not change, but the conversation and follow-up forced the District Water Officer to calculate person hours and consider the time resources available – a skill that is rarely practiced otherwise. The district's awareness of the potential threat posed by such a high commitment to one project has also increased, such that if this did begin to pose problems, the district would be more conscious of the implications of this project on the availability of staff for other work, and could assist in clearer identification of specific challenges more quickly. It may also allow the district to better manage other commitments that arise in the future, and recognize that their schedules may already be full.

Supporting reflective learning

Creating space for critical analysis of project activities is another useful approach for supporting capacity development. Facilitating reflection on recent activities can help district government to extract lessons from experiences, and inform future iterations on these activities both within a project and for ongoing mandates within sustainable service delivery. A facilitator who is trusted, non-judgmental, and has detailed knowledge of the project's rollout, can engage with district staff to help extract insights from a district's involvement in a project. This learning, once highlighted, can then be applied to future contexts, including the district's service delivery roles.

Supporting reflective learning in Phalombe

Quarterly review meetings are one way to support reflective learning. In Phalombe district, in Southern Malawi, EWB partnered with another DP to implement a sanitation program with the district government. It was a one-year project, structured to be handed over to the district through a gradual phase-out of DP involvement as the district's responsibilities and commitments to the project increased. As part of the project design, two types of regular reflection exercises were instituted: one focused on implementation, and another focused on capacity development. Each was carried out separately. The quarterly review of the program activities took a technical focus, examining the project's rollout and sharing learning and changes that the district staff wanted to make going forward. They particularly focused on lessons they had learned in the transfer of activities from the DPs to the district. The capacity reflections focused on six different capacities identified as crucial for the long-term success of the sanitation program in the district. District staff were asked guiding questions about how they were learning in these areas through project activities, and how they were applying that learning back to the project. Both of these reflections demonstrated considerable learning and skill development in the district staff over the project period, and also created a problem-solving and discussion space used by the district staff to plan for the next quarter. This support for reflective learning further contributed to the capacity development objectives of the project. Furthermore, the results of this reflection can now be used to assess the impact of capacity building activities.

Supporting reflective learning in Mangochi

A more frequent and structured approach than the quarterly reflection exercise for supporting reflective learning can also provide benefits. An After Action Review (AAR) tool is being used by EWB staff embedded in Mangochi district in Southern Malawi to facilitate ongoing learning immediately after an activity has been completed. The tool focuses on comparing expectations with actual occurrences, and examining the differences to find learning which can be applied to future activities.

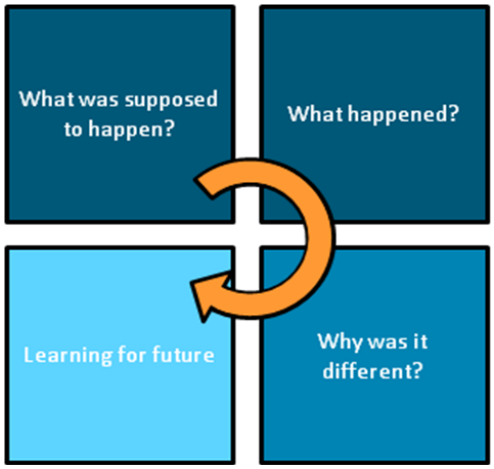


Figure 2. After Action Review process

Source: Developed based on ideas presented in Department of the Army of the United States of America (1993)

Using this tool, district staff and the DP have considered their experiences in contracting, data management, funding and financial management. This has led to recommendations for future projects as well as corrective measures for the current project, including: the need for more detailed budget feedback to the district; the need for more training in database use; and lessons about how to enable districts to manage contractors independently. Furthermore, the use of this tool is building reflective and learning capacities in the district. These can be applied towards ongoing improvement of any initiative – within a project or not. By using the AAR tool to reflect on specific activities, specific learning was extracted from experiences and can be applied back towards future activities, showing an iterative and adaptive development of capacities.

Lessons learnt

DPs implementing projects with both implementation and capacity building objectives should see these outcomes as being overlapping and mutually reinforcing, rather than distinct or even conflicting. To identify and take advantage of these points of synchronicity, the following steps are recommended:

- Ask, and answer, the question "What capacities are we developing and why?" to clarify institutional roles, check for alignment with needs, and ensure precision of intentions
- Assess opportunities to merge capacity development with experiential approaches to benefit both project outputs and long-term service delivery outcomes
- Find a practical combination of capacity development approaches that suit the unique context, including supporting technical learning, supporting implementers, and supporting reflective learning, to include in the project; and
- Share your experiences with other DPs and projects to help improve sector capacity building practices.

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Examples: [Style WEDC – References]

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Note/s

[1] Development Partners as used here refers to non-governmental organizations, bilateral and multilateral donors, and others implementing development projects.

Contact details

Kristina Nilsson
Engineers Without Borders Canada
Box 2207 Lilongwe 3, Malawi
Tel: +265 991 060 534
Email: kristinanilsson@ewb.ca
www.ewb.ca

Duncan McNicholl
Engineers Without Borders Canada
Box 2207 Lilongwe 3, Malawi
Tel: +265 993 100 756
Email: duncanmcnicholl@ewb.ca
www.ewb.ca