

**Report of the UN Inter-Agency Workshop
on Capacity Development**

Geneva, 20-22 November 2002

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I. INTRODUCTION

As a follow-up to discussions at the Third Session of the High Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) in New York in March 2002, and subsequent consultations among representatives of UN agencies in New York, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (DESA) and the United Nations Development Programme UNDP, organised under the aegis of HLCP an inter-agency workshop on capacity development in Geneva from 20 to 22 November 2002.

The workshop was pursuant to resolutions of the General Assembly (including in particular, resolutions 53/192 and 56/201) and more recently ECOSOC (resolution E/2002/29) which call for greater and more systematic attention by the system to capacity building. The meeting lasted two and one half days, and included plenary sessions and three working groups which presented their conclusions and recommendations at the end of the workshop. The meeting was a useful opportunity to facilitate an exchange of experience among all participants.¹

Each participating agency was invited to send staff responsible for capacity building and to provide a summary overview of how it is understood and interpreted in their agency/ organization with examples of more and less successful experiences, criteria of success in capacity-related programmes and projects and their relationship to goals of the Millennium Declaration. Interested bilateral and non-UN multilateral organisations were also represented.

The workshop started with presentations from 16 organizations, agencies and entities from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and the OECD/DAC secretariat. These presentations, and the discussions that followed them, demonstrated the depth and diversity of the system's experience in supporting capacity development over many decades.

Background

Discussions on how to improve system support for capacity development or capacity building² are not new in the system. UNDP has had guidance for its staff on how to design "institution building" projects since the early 1970s. More recently during the early 1990s, UNDP sponsored a number of studies of the topic including one on *Rethinking Technical Cooperation: Reforms for Capacity Building in Africa* (Berg 1993).

In 1995, the General Assembly³ called on the United Nations development system to "continue to work on promoting a common understanding and the operationalization of capacity-building concepts, as well as on ways of enhancing the sustainability of capacity-building". In

¹ See Annex 1 for list of participants.

² 'Capacity development' and 'capacity building' were used almost interchangeably in discussions at the meeting.

³ Resolution 50/120.

1998, the General Assembly⁴ reaffirmed that “capacity-building and its sustainability should be explicitly articulated as a goal of technical assistance provided by the operational activities of the United Nations system at the country level, with the aim of strengthening national capacities in the fields of, inter alia, policy and programme formulation, development management, planning, implementation, coordination, monitoring and review”.

As a follow up to resolution 53/192 of the General Assembly and the recommendations of a consequent workshop in July 1999, which involved member states, agencies and relevant experts on the subject, the Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions (CCPOQ) approved on behalf of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), a Guidance Note on Capacity Building, which provided an initial framework for action for mainstreaming capacity building.⁵ There was further follow up later in 1999, when UNDP and UNICEF collaborated on a joint workshop on *Planning and Monitoring of Capacity Development* held in Harare, Zimbabwe, for which a key concept paper was developed.⁶

In 2001, the United Nations General Assembly⁷ reiterated the importance of capacity building and its sustainability as a goal of technical cooperation provided through the operational activities of the system, and requested the system to report through the Secretary General to the Economic and Social Council on their efforts in support of capacity building. It also stressed the importance of disseminating the expertise acquired through technical cooperation provided by the system and directed it to use to the fullest extent national expertise and indigenous technologies in the implementation of development activities.

At the International Conference on Funding for Development (March 2002) the World Bank and UNDP launched two publications that are relevant on this issue. The World Bank’s publication *The Role and Effectiveness of Development Assistance: Lessons from World Bank Experience* (World Bank 2002) examined evidence of success and failure of technical cooperation over the past 50 years. During 2002, UNDP launched two publications derived from its ongoing research programme: *Capacity for Development - New Solutions to Old Problems* and *Developing Capacity through Technical Cooperation: Country Experiences*. These publications highlighted the importance of acknowledging that the circumstances of each country are very specific, and that despite significant achievements, sustainability of capacity for development remains elusive.

At the ECOSOC session of July 2002, the Secretary General presented a report on the different activities of the UN system in following up the various decisions on capacity building made by the General Assembly⁸. A high-level panel on capacity development took place at the

⁴ Resolution 53/192. This was based partly on a series of evaluations of the impact of UN system support to capacity building and the recommendations that emanated from those evaluations.

⁵ It also highlighted the comparative advantage of the UN system for capacity building as being “based on its mandate, history, experience and the participatory nature of its development cooperation with member countries and its neutrality, its multi-component structure and worldwide reach, organizational culture of experimentation, facilitation and partnership, and the skills of multinational staff”.

⁶ See UNDP/UNICEF, *Capacity development: an analysis and synthesis of its current conceptualisation and implications for practice*, (Harare, 1999).

⁷ Resolution 56/201.

⁸ See document E/2002/58.

operational activities segment of that ECOSOC session. The discussions on this agenda item highlighted the importance of capacity building and the consequent resolution⁹ referred to the importance of capacity building in the context of the internationally agreed development goals, and “encouraged the organisations of the UN development system...to intensify their efforts to reflect on and analyze their knowledge of and experience with capacity building with a view to offering improved support to the development of national capacities” and requested closer cooperation in “further defining...the indicators and benchmarks used to design, manage and monitor capacity building activities”.¹⁰ In order to respond to the request of the Council for an inter-agency effort, it was suggested that an informal system-wide reflection on the subject of capacity building/development be held in the latter part of 2002.

II. OBJECTIVES

There were four main objectives of the workshop:

1. To share knowledge and experience in capacity building/development among the organizations of the UN system.
2. To clarify the nature and objectives of capacity development and to arrive at a more consistent and coherent common understanding.
3. To begin to establish benchmarks and indicators used to design, manage and monitor capacity building in support of the efforts made by recipient countries to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development commitments, and in so doing to draw on the accumulated experience of the UN system.
4. To agree on common approaches to capacity development in circumstances of conflict, post-conflict recovery and chronic crises, such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

III. OUTCOMES OF THE WORKSHOP

1. Terminology

There are varying perceptions of capacity development/capacity building within the UN system, in part reflecting the different functions of the UN system organisations: technical, normative, humanitarian and operational.

The term “Capacity development” well reflects the fact that “capacity” is always available and its development a matter of degree as well as a primarily endogenous process. “Capacity building,” on the other hand, in the strict sense of the word, implies that capacity is

⁹ See resolution E/2002/29.

¹⁰ See para.15 of resolution E/2002/29.

newly created, and is often perceived as external actors playing a leading role in this creation of capacity. Therefore, “capacity development” is the more adequate term to describe the endogenous process of enhancing capacity to which external actors can lend assistance. Nevertheless, while the understanding of capacity development as an on-going, endogenous process has taken root throughout the United Nations system and the wider development assistance community, different actors within and outside of the system have become accustomed to using either one of the terms to refer to this process. Therefore, the duality of expression will be maintained here for the time being for the sake of practicality, placing emphasis on the common understanding of the substance of the process rather than a uniform terminology.

2. Definition

The workshop acknowledged the substantive contribution to the development of a common understanding of the nature, goals and characteristics of capacity development/building previously made by UN bodies as in the cases of the ACC Guidance Note on Capacity Building and the UNDP/UNICEF Workshop on Capacity Building in Harare. However, these endeavours have had insufficient impact on the conceptual thinking and operational characteristics of the capacity development/building activities of the various United Nations system actors. One cause may be the lack of clarity in operational terms. The ACC Note left room for an interpretation of the scope of capacity development/building as equivalent to the development cooperation process as a whole, without fully distinguishing between capacity development /building and financial and material development assistance on the operational level.

The capacity development/building concept has been translated in different ways into the programmes and activities of the various United Nations actors. There have been difficulties in defining the operational characteristics of capacity development/building. As a result, there are today limitations in assessing the scope of the totality of capacity development/building activities throughout the UN system. This in turn has implications for how overall success is measured and/or observed.

The workshop therefore proposes that UN system use the following definition of capacity development/building:

Capacity refers to the ability of individuals, communities, institutions, organizations, social and political systems to use the natural, financial, political, social and human resources that are available to them for the definition and pursuit of sustainable development goals. Capacity building or capacity development is the process by which individuals, institutions and countries strengthen these abilities. The United Nations and other external actors can assist this endogenous process, by:

- *focusing on enhancing the skills, knowledge and social capabilities available to individuals, institutions, and social and political systems, but also by*
- *supporting their integration into the knowledge networks that help to sustain these capabilities; as well as*

contributing to material and financial support necessary to apply the skills, knowledge and social capabilities.

Capacity development/building thus is one mode by which the United Nations system supports member states in attaining the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development targets and in sustaining their achievements. It is, along with financial and material development assistance and the advancement of the international institutional framework for cooperation, an integral component of the development cooperation process. Capacity development/building helps to create the enabling environment for moving the development process forward and thus is complementary to other modes of development cooperation. United Nations system actors can assist in capacity development/building both as partners supporting their clients' efforts and as agents of change in a convening, norm setting and advocacy role.

3. Some critical success factors

Sustainability and ownership

The ultimate aim of assistance in capacity development/ building processes is to help countries to attain, sustain and endogenously broaden the knowledge and skills necessary to reach their development goals. The design of capacity development/building activities therefore should be based on an assessment of the concrete capacity development needs of the government and other stakeholders in the development process of the country.

In assessing the country-specific capacity development/building needs, United Nations system actors should build on existing programming and coordination instruments, including the CCA/UNDAF process and agency-specific programming tools. These should be enhanced to address, on specific items gaps in capacity as it is defined above and with due regard to ownership, accountability and sustainability. Particular emphasis should be laid on mechanisms to reflect capacity gaps as perceived by the governments and other stakeholders in the development process of the country. The revision of existing assessment and programming instruments, in particular the CCA/UNDAF, should result in integrated guidelines encompassing both the increased emphasis on capacity development/building and other recent changes in focus and methodology and be accompanied by corresponding training packages and other capacity development instruments.

Accountability

Capacity gap assessment lays the basis for an identification of concrete capacity development/building assistance goals, in line with the above definition of the common understanding of capacity development/building, which serve to define the benchmarks and performance indicators of the programme/activity designed to close this gap. Ultimately, countries are responsible for their capacity development. However, agencies are accountable for the adequacy of their supporting activities and their performance based on these benchmarks and indicators. It should be taken into account, however, that modes of programme and project execution have an impact on accountability.

Coordination and information sharing

The United Nations system should make use of existing mechanisms for information sharing and coordination with the aim of effectively mainstreaming the common understanding of United Nations capacity development/building assistance and further improving the design, implementation and monitoring/evaluation of capacity development/building programmes and activities. These mechanisms include, apart from high-level coordination bodies, inter-agency working groups and networks as well as various thematic groups, with the latter having the added value of broadening the scope of discussion and coordination beyond United Nations system actors. The coordination bodies notably HLCP, UNDG and other relevant networks and thematic groups should periodically include capacity development/building in their agendas.

At the national level, UN country teams should regularly address capacity development/building activities to increase coordination and the sharing of experiences. In particular, UN agencies should improve coordination of their capacity development/building activities in their respective target areas and with corresponding target actors. There should be a single place where country-specific information on capacity building/development initiatives produced by all UN system actors active in one country, including the Bretton Woods Institutions, could be accessed to facilitate agency-specific programming processes. This information should also include the capacity building initiatives needed for needs assessments, strategy and programming papers, reports etc. While closed internet-systems providing access to this information to all UN agencies will probably be the medium of choice for these gateways, account should be taken of problems of connectivity, which should be addressed by maintaining hard-copy files of documents to be made available upon request.

4. Indicators and benchmarks

The workshop noted that the UN system has over the last 50 years acquired a great deal of experience and knowledge in the area of capacity building¹¹.

- (i) It has been involved in defining the operational implications of global agreements. These agreements should also be interpreted in terms of national capacity needed to achieve them.
- (ii) It has been involved in sustaining advocacy efforts by agencies or groups within the society in support of achieving specific goals of the Millennium Declaration.
- (iii) It has been used to provide a forum where different elements within the society or within a region discuss how best to share or implement the task of pursuing those goals.
- (iv) It has been involved in providing operational support via a multitude of projects and programmes to national efforts to design appropriate policies and/or to implement them.

¹¹ Much of UN system entities' experience with capacity building is project-based.

UN agencies' experience with, and involvement in, elaborating and implementing national plans of action on various major issues in the 1990s have been a good means to bring harmony between national plans and global aspirations. Capacity also needs to be developed at regional and global levels. There is a special challenge for the UN system to facilitate/contribute to the creation/strengthening of appropriate fora at those levels.

All this experience of the UN system has provided it with an underused stock of knowledge. There is considerable scope for the UN system to draw on its technical knowledge and experience, to help to define and/or update benchmarks and progress indicators that recipient countries can use to design and manage their programmes for building or strengthening their capacity to achieve internationally agreed goals.

The UN system has already a well recognized role in making explicit the development indicators for the MDGs and collecting and assembling the statistics involved in monitoring them. It has *a fortiori* a responsibility in elaborating and monitoring the indicators for the capacity goals associated with the MDGs¹². Yet the capacity needs associated with the 48 indicators¹³ used in reporting on progress towards the MDGs and their implications for individual countries and for regions have yet to be fully elaborated.

Capacity is in many instances a moving target and needs to be constantly updated in many areas if a country is to stay abreast of global processes. This makes the capacity to keep on developing national capacity an end in itself.

The meeting concluded that among the key questions that the UN system needs to consider include:

- (i) To what extent does a country have the capacity to meet a MDG and who determines it?
- (ii) To what extent does it want that capacity to be supported and/or strengthened?
- (iii) What is the contribution the UN system can make taking into account its different roles (convening, norm-setting, advocacy, operational)?

A successful UN system contribution to implementing internationally agreed goals at country level requires that national plans and policies are consistent with the MDGs and that there are articulated sectoral or thematic programmes aligned with those plans. Where countries think they need to strengthen their capacities further in order to achieve agreed goals, they are more likely to be successful if their national plans, policies and underlying programmes not only have development goals/objectives but also capacity development goals and objectives.

The UN system's involvement in capacity building/development efforts should be:

- aligned with MDGs (support to national partners to align their plans etc to MDG);
- based on national policies / strategies / priorities (country-led and owned); and

¹² Indicators for capacity development are not the same as indicators for development (e.g. GNP/capita, HDI, etc.).

¹³ See Secretary-General's report on progress towards the MDGs, A/57/270, pp 22 –34.

- based on (or) inspired by international consensus.

These are all points which should normally be covered in the reports that the UN country teams prepare on progress towards the MDGs.

As national plans and policies are the starting point for capacity building efforts made by countries themselves, basic UN system frameworks such as CCA and UNDAF can be useful entry points for the UN system to bring its expertise and wisdom at the country level. Account needs to be taken of other frameworks such as the PRSP. The recommendation of the JIU report¹⁴ on results based budgeting for simplification of the diversity of frameworks¹⁵ at the country level also needs to be borne in mind.

Indicators for capacity building/development will be more helpful if they focus on both outcomes and progress in areas that can be influenced (policies, strategies, human resources, financing etc). These should to the greatest extent be specific, measurable or at least observable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. Where measurement is not possible, qualitative indicators should be used, particularly where the UN system's wealth of experience has value added.

5. Capacity development in special circumstances

Given the parameters of their mandates and modes of operations, what capacity development should the UN system's organization consider in potential hazards? The conditions in these special circumstances call for adjusting our capacity work in crisis situations and adapting requirements during on-going and potential crises.

Is capacity building/development possible (long term perspective)?

- The most important capacity facet during emergencies is the adaptation to changing conditions;
- Capacity development objectives should be related to the situation and, if possible, co-determined by community representatives;
- Capacity development should begin with the analysis of existing capacities and gaps; this includes situational analysis of risks, potential hazards and coping mechanisms at the country and local level while preparing for and during the crisis situations. Based on this analysis, capacity development programmes would have to be adjusted (e.g. projecting teacher training requirements in light of HIV/AIDS).

¹⁴ *The Results Approach in the United Nations: Implementing the United Nations Millennium Declaration*, JIU/Rep/2002/2.

¹⁵ The diversity of such instruments can bring capacity costs to the countries involved so need to avoid labor and country management intensive processes.

¹⁸ For specific recommendations concerning capacity building in special circumstances see previous section

- Mandates may vary from one agency to another for development work at the country level and the basis for the entry points of intervention may depend on the prospect for sustainability or standards set by international conventions and agreements.

Some principles underlying capacity development in special circumstances

- The outcome of capacity building efforts should relate to larger national or international development objective, such as the Millennium Development Goals or safety of the country's nuclear plants.
- National/local authorities/communities should have the capacity to identify the problem to be addressed and to analyse its causes, risks and hazards.
- Ownership of the identification of problem(s) and their solutions is critical but not sufficient. The requirement of accountability is needed to complement it.
- Clear identification of responsibilities and accountability measures for all actors are required.
- An essential part of capacity development is to facilitate civil society's voice/involvement to demand accountability.
- Leadership's authority and commitment, as well as ability to plan, coordinate, motivate and mobilize support, are important ingredients for success.
- Where viable actors are lacking at the national level, to build on what is most needed is particularly important at the local level.
- Time constraints might preclude ownership of preparedness for crisis (e.g., in case of imminent refugee influx).
- Capacity-building should not undermine already existing local capacities.

Some recommendations for UN agencies development activities in special situations

- Utilization of local actors and building on existing capacities can contribute to capacity development.
- Demands by donors to have national authorities develop separate, individual plans for each of them is counter-productive; what is needed is an adjustment of national plans that would integrate these concerns.
- It is necessary to ensure that human resources be available for implementation of emergency activities.
- It is important to build capacities of local communities to receive the returnees.

- Emergency planning is currently being integrated into the CCA guidelines, building the capacities of the UN system to respond more effectively to the demands of countries in special situations,
- The collaboration of influential actors at the local level can facilitate dealing with highly sensitive issues. For example, UNFPA worked with religious leaders in matters of family planning.
- When strengthening planning capacity of national partners, UN agencies should consider whether to support the establishment of new and additional plans, or to adjust/strengthen existing national capacity.
- When building national capacities in “special situations”, a preferred option should be to enable humanitarian and development workers to build on existing capacities.
- Initiatives should be taken to determine how best to establish a culture for accountability (e.g. risk assessment).
- While capacitating the individual (e.g. refugee), there is also a need for ensuring an enabling legal environment (e.g. access to the labour market).
- There is need for close cooperation between the humanitarian agencies and the development agencies to ensure that capacities created are not lost.
- In post conflict situations, planning must extend beyond national needs to cover the region’s needs as well.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The new paradigm for UN operational activities in support of development is based on the recognition by all Member States of the need for a renewed international partnership in facing the global development challenges. This renewed partnership finds its best expression in the consensus which has emerged among all Member States on a series of internationally agreed objectives, such as the Millennium Development Goals and other objectives identified in major UN conferences and summits. The following outcomes emerged from the three working groups.

One of the main conclusions of the workshop is that developing countries can achieve those objectives only if their national capacities are sufficiently strong and dynamic. In some cases this requires that they be strengthened and further developed. Although successful capacity development is substantially an endogenous process, the United Nations system can, in its various roles, contribute through its external support and through catalytic interventions.

The workshop recognized that:

- Capacity development/building is a country-driven process and cannot be conceived as externally dominated;
- Capacity development involves all sectors of the society in programme countries, at the central and local levels, in both the public and private sectors;
- Capacity development is a fundamental vehicle for enhancing national abilities in developing countries to participate actively in the development process;
- Capacity building is not limited to the enhancement of individual skills but addresses institutional, organizational and societal dimensions of the performance of developing countries; it involves all sections of society in the programme countries, at the central and local levels, in the public sector as well as the private sectors;
- Organizations of the United Nations system can contribute to the development of national capacities at different levels, according to their different mandates and competencies;
- The CCA/UNDAF process and other frameworks such as the PRSP are good entry points for the UN system's support to capacity development at the country level.
- In order to strengthen capacity-building efforts by the United Nations development system, a constant concern in designing development assistance activities at the country level should be the assessment of capacity needs of programme countries, including at system-wide level (within CCA and UNDAF).
- Exchanges of information within the system on capacity building initiatives and good practices should be expanded. This should cover the use of indicators, benchmarks and other practical ways of verifying evidence of successful performance of United Nations system organizations in supporting the development of national capacities. Quantitative measures should be used where possible but qualitative means should not be ignored where they may be of good use.
- Capacity development in special circumstances (crisis or post-crisis situations) is possible, requires great adaptation to changing conditions, should emphasize ownership, accountability and expansion of local capacities, and should be integrated in CCA guidelines.

Follow up

A number of actions were suggested as a follow up of the workshop¹⁸:

- The report of the workshop and its recommendations should be submitted to the attention of HLCP.
- HLCP should be requested to consider and suggest possible actions/decisions in order to encourage a system-wide strategy in support of the development of national capacities for the pursuit of MDGs and other internationally agreed objectives.

- Articulating the benchmarks and indicators needed for capacity building linked to the MDG's is an urgent task for all agencies concerned and the UN system should draw on its unique reserve of experience in this task.
- Each agency of the United Nations system should have a "capacity-building" strategy as part of their own corporate strategy in order to support the pursuit of MDGs and other internationally agreed international objectives.
- HLCP may consider requesting – unless this is already foreseen – all agencies of the United Nations system that the annual report that the executive heads of each agency submit to their respective governing body devotes a specific section to the assessment of the strategy adopted by that agency to support capacity building.
- HLCP may also consider requesting UNDG to make further efforts to emphasize a capacity-building dimension in the preparation of CCA and UNDAF.
- HLCP should sponsor an informal network¹⁹, for the continuation of the dialogue on capacity building, relevant experiences, good practices, possible indicators and benchmarks, and other potential ways to measure success in capacity building, within the United Nations system. The sponsors of the workshop should take the lead in following this up under the aegis of HLCP.

¹⁹ This network could also be linked with ongoing efforts for the assessment of the effectiveness of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, notably in the area of the integration of United Nations system country-level initiatives with national development efforts (see Secretary-General report to ECOSOC E/2002/60 on the assessment of the effectiveness of operational activities for development of the United Nations system), and the work on lesson learning and the institutional memory of the UN system, both of which are part of the follow up to the Triennial Policy Review.

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Annex 2: List of documents presented

DESA/ UNDP

- Supporting capacity development: new opportunities for the UN system: Background Note for the Inter-Agency Meeting (New York, October 2002)

UNCTAD

- Review of Technical Cooperation Activities of UNCTAD (TD/B/49/4, TD/B/WP/151)
- Evaluation of Capacity Building in UNCTAD'S Technical Cooperation Activities (TD/B/WP/155)
- UN Inter-Agency Workshop on Capacity Building/Development, A Note by the UNCTAD Secretariat

UN

- United Nations System Support for Capacity-building (E/2002/58) Report to ECOSOC 2002
- ACC Guidance Note on Capacity-Building 2000
- Progress on the implementation of General assembly resolution 56/201 on the triennial policy review of operational activities for development of the UN system (E/2002/INF2/add.2)
- Capacity-Building for Poverty Eradication, Analysis of, and lessons from, Evaluations of UN System Support to Countries' Efforts. United Nations, New York, 2002,

UNDP

- Developing Capacity Through Technical Cooperation: Country Experience (Earthscan 2002)
- Capacity Development: Principles and Practice

UNDP/UNICEF

- Capacity Development, an analysis and synthesis of its current conceptualisation and implications for practice (Background paper for the Harare Workshop, 1999)

UNEP

- Capacity Building, Technology Transfer and Country-level Coordination for the Environment Pillar of Sustainable Development, Report of UNEP GCSS/GMEF Cartagena

UNHCR

- Reinforcing a Community Development Approach (EC/51/SC/CRP.6)

UNICEF

- Developing National Capacities for Achieving the MDG's within a Human Rights Perspective, A UNICEF approach to Capacity building

UNU

- United Nations University – Capacity Development

CIDA

- Some notes about Capacity and Capacity Development, for consideration by the UN Inter Agency Workshop on CD
- CIDA Perspectives on Capacity Development

OECD/DAC

- Perspectives on Capacity Development for the Inter-Agency Workshop
- Criteria for Donor Agencies' Self-Assessment in Capacity Development (DCD/DAC(99)4)