Deconstructing Development Discourse

Buzzwords and Fuzzwords

HARMONISATION ACCOUNTABILITY OWNERSHIP IMPACT CAPACITY EMPOWERMENT POVERTY PARTICIPATION SUSTAINABILITY CITIZENSHIP TRANSPARENCY GENDER GOVERNANCE CORRUPTION FAITH ADVOCACY SECURITY

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CHAPTER 19

Capacity building: who builds whose capacity?

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This chapter focuses on the role that development NGOs play in capacity build-ing, arguing that many conventional NGO practices are ultimately about retain-ing power, rather than empowering their partners. This leads to tunnel vision and to upward rather than downward or horizontal accountability, based on the assumption that the transfer of resources is a one-way process. At worst, this un-dermines rather than strengthens the capacities of the organisations that NGOs are attempting to assist. Sharing responsibilities and risks, mutual accountability, and committing to the long term rather than to short-term projects are more likely to create partnerships that can withstand vicissitudes and contribute to lasting change.

Building or undermining capacities?

The danger of working in any kind of aid agency is that one begins to see the world through its eyes; and, as identities gradually merge, it is increasingly difficult to look at the world afresh, or to see ourselves as others see us.

This is particularly so in the case of international aid agencies, where the reality-checks of working up-close and personal are muted in unfamiliar cul-tural settings, as well as being distorted by asymmetries of power, and by com-plex insider–outsider dynamics (Eyben 2006). Too easily, 'development' and 'aid' are used synonymously; and both are assumed to be good. Too readily, aid agencies assume that *their* priorities (which are necessarily shaped by their upward accountability, and fed by their own public-relations priorities) will naturally coincide with those of the people on the receiving end, or can be bolted on without too much problem. When they become fashion accessories, or mere buzzwords invoked in order to negotiate bureaucratic mazes, the use of concepts such as 'gender', or 'empowerment', or 'capacity building' is not only drained of any remaining political content, but may actually end up crushing local capacities rather than releasing their potential.[1]

But if capacity building means anything, it is surely about enabling those out on the margins to represent and defend their interests more effectively, not only within their own immediate contexts but also globally. Unless one believes that the Development Industry in all its expressions is inherently

self-serving, the 'good cop' of international aid *vis à vis* the 'bad cop' of international capitalism, then it follows that hindering social transformation is not the intended outcome. So what is it that goes so wrong?

There are no easy answers, as every context presents its own specific challenges: the sustained political violence that wracks Colombia is not the same as the gang violence throughout much of Central America, though doubtless they share some of the same roots in drug trafficking. And regions that seem quite calm, at least to an outsider, can erupt apparently overnight. Witness the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, which burst into life on 1 January 1994, the very day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect.

My focus here is on the role that development NGOs might play in the areas of capacity building. This is partly because I have worked mainly in the development NGO sector for almost 30 years, but more importantly because it is often *assumed* that NGOs have some unique ability or role to play in this arena.[2]

In time-honoured feminist tradition, I shall start with a thumbnail sketch of where I am coming from in order to locate myself in this analysis. For most of my professional career I have worked in the international NGO sector. For ten years I was on the spending side, based in a regional office for Mexico and Central America. Though at pains to establish relationships that were *not* predicated only on money, we and our 'partners' were under no illusions about the fact that it was our job to decide who should be funded to do what, for how long, and on what conditions; and to defend these decisions within our own regional team and to our managers and oversight committees in the UK. We saw our role as twofold: on the one hand to provide critical accompaniment to our counterparts, and on the other to marry these to the NGO's values and criteria in a way that allowed everyone to feel comfortable in the relationship.

Then followed a wretched time spent working as a bureaucrat in the UK. Now my job was not to relate to our counterparts, but to police the money. Counting beans offers no food for the soul, so it was a relief to take on the editorship of *Development in Practice*. But as a result, I found my job security depending initially on a trickle of one-year grants (with the plug likely to be pulled at short notice), being 'evaluated' by managers with no particular expertise in journals publishing, chasing funding applications that had languished in someone's in-tray for months, having to meet reporting requirements that bore no relation to the needs and rhythms of the project, and so on. In short, this experience was the same as that of hundreds of thousands of organisations worldwide that depend on Northern NGO 'partners'. (The contribution to this volume by my former colleague in Mexico, Miguel Pickard, addresses this problem in greater depth.)

Having been on both sides of the partnership fence has given me some insight into what constitutes 'good capacity-building practice', and into how

many NGO practices are ultimately about holding on to their own power, rather than empowering others. This leads me to pose three questions:

- What do we understand by capacity building in the context of development, and specifically of development aid?
- How central are NGOs in taking forward a capacity-building agenda? What is their track record in this? Do they really make a difference?
- How can the South engage with the North in capacity building?

A background to capacity building

A glance through the development literature – from scholarly articles to agency PR – confirms the 'buzzword' status of *capacity building*. Some dismiss it for this reason as a sloppy piece of aid jargon. For others, it is a synonym for institutional or organisational development. Often it is no more than a serious-sounding alternative to 'training'. After all, no NGO could admit to funding one-off training workshops whose impact may be short-lived, or that risk serving mainly as social events for the same old bunch of tired aid junkies. But simply changing the name does not change the practice, and adopting a narrow view of capacity building as in-service or vocational training is just as unhelpful as using it as a catch-all to mean everything and nothing.

The intellectual and political roots of capacity building lie partly in the rights-centred *capacitación* of Liberation Theology and the *conscientização* work of Paulo Freire. Southern feminists and 'gender and development' policy makers and activists have also deepened the understanding of 'empowerment' and social exclusion (see, for instance, Srilatha Batliwala's contribution to this volume). Amartya K. Sen's work on entitlements and capabilities provides insights into the dynamic nature of the exclusion that capacity building seeks to address. This has influenced the pivotal work of UNDP on human development in articulating an alternative to the economic view of 'human capital' associated with the international financial institutions (see also Ben Fine's contribution to this volume on the subject of social capital). However, these institutions – most notably the World Bank (now re-cast as the Global Knowledge Bank) – have also adopted the language of capacity building and participation, relating this to the neo-liberal agenda of rolling back the state, privatising public services (the 'marketisation' of social welfare), good governance, and democratisation. (Evelina Dagnino's contribution to this volume develops this theme in relation to the co-option of the popular democratisation project in Brazil.) In the post-Washington Consensus era, the role of civil society (another woolly and contested term) is crucial. And, within the international development context, NGOs are considered – and often consider themselves – to occupy pride of place as 'civil society'. The list of NGOs with consultative status at the United Nations runs to 60 pages, each with about 40 entries – that's one NGO a day for six and a half years or, if you don't have

that much time, roughly one per minute for an entire 24-hour day. And they are only the ones at the tip of the iceberg.

My point here is that capacity building originally drew on a generally left-leaning range of intellectual and political traditions, but is today commonly used to further a neo-liberal 'pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps' kind of economic and political agenda. If NGOs are not aware of these competing agendas, their role in capacity building will be at best insignificant, at worst damaging.

Engaging with the wider context

Capacity building is not a 'thing' or a commodity that can be reduced to a set of ingredients for a universal recipe on 'how to do it'. Recognising that there are many diverse and competing actors in development, we can nevertheless state that its early origins lay in the belief that the role of an engaged outsider is to support the capacity of local people to determine their own values and priorities, to organise themselves to act upon and sustain these for the common good, and to shape the moral and physical universe that we all share.

Because aid agencies exist to channel resources from one part of the world to another, and because the currency of aid remains the Project, despite the growing Northern NGO focus on advocacy and 'one-programme frameworks', it is tempting to take short cuts in order to get things done. This leads to NGOs taking too little time to understand the local political and cultural environment as well as the international policy context within which people, their organisations, and their governments are functioning. Aid agencies, particularly but not exclusively NGOs, characteristically see the aspect of people's lives that relates to their project-defined 'target groups', but often fail to see the cat's cradle of shifting inter-relationships in which these same people are embedded (Eade and Williams 1995: 17–19). If NGOs live in a kind of Project World theme park, they will fail to see the less visible processes that will undermine the impact of their projects. A case in point is the belated discovery that providing micro-credit to women in Bangladesh, notwithstanding the remarkable achievements of Mohammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank, does not always benefit them. Why? Because men use women as a means to get credit for themselves (Rahman Khan 1995), or because their fathers, brothers, and husbands feel threatened by women's greater financial independence, and so literally beat them back into submission (Schuler *et al.* 1998). Taking more time to understand the non-project realities and underlying gender-power dynamics may pre-empt these unintended impacts.

And what are the capacities that NGOs seek to build? They may be intellectual, organisational, social, political, cultural, representational, material, technical, practical, or financial – and most likely a shifting combination of all of these. The ability to articulate and mobilise around specific interests or demands is intimately linked to the development of a civil society in which divergent interests can be represented, and which has appropriate

mechanisms for adjudicating among these. Civil society flourishes best when the state is capable of balancing competing claims in the interests of the common good. Good governance is not served if a state is encouraged to abandon its responsibilities to its citizens, or when it transfers these piece-meal to institutions (including NGOs) that see this as a great capacity-building opportunity, but are not themselves accountable to those who use their services – a point to which I shall return.

A capacity-building approach therefore means getting out of Project World, focusing less on supporting scores of projects and more on seeing any intervention within the wider context of social and other kinds of change – local, national, regional, and global. Training may be successful in its own terms, but contribute very little to enabling participants to change their realities. International NGOs may claim spectacular campaigning achievements, but translating these successes into sustainable changes in people's lives means a long-term commitment and listening to what they themselves say. Rather than viewing support for this or that organisation or activity in a fragmented or insular fashion, it is necessary to look intelligently at the whole web of social relations within which these organisations and their activities are embedded. A change in one bit of the system may have many repercussions on another part, not necessarily positive. For instance, if public services are put out to tender, NGOs that previously co-operated with each other may start to compete for a lucrative contract. An opportunity for one quickly becomes a threat to others.

Development NGOs

How relevant are development NGOs to capacity building? Reading some of the literature, one could be forgiven for thinking both that capacity building is an exclusively Southern 'need', and that international NGOs are among those best placed to meet it.

The sad reality is that most development aid has precious little to do with building the capacities of 'The Poor' to transform their societies. Not even the best-intentioned NGOs are exempt from the tendency of the Development Industry to ignore, misinterpret, displace, supplant, or undermine the capacities that people already have. Recognition of this danger is precisely what lies behind NGO initiatives to establish standards of behaviour and accountability in the humanitarian field: initiatives such as the Sphere Project, ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability in Humanitarian Action), or HAP (Humanitarian Accountability Partnership). Even so, how often do 'end-users' or 'clients' get to shop around to choose their service provider? The Salvadoran refugees who withdrew their co-operation with the European NGO charged with providing medical assistance remain an exception that proves the rule.[3]

There are two points to be made here. The first is that while NGOs may be no worse than other development actors, they do not have any inherent capacity to build the capacities of 'The Poor'. Some are of course better equipped than

others to do so: the local faith-based NGO that replaced the ousted European agency in the Salvadoran case was committed to training the refugee community alongside its provision of health-care services, although this came hand in hand with what many regarded as a conservative and authoritarian theology.

Conventional wisdom holds that operational NGOs tend to replace rather than build local capacities, but even here it is difficult to generalise. One British co-operant-sending organisation, for example, has moved away from exporting 'experts' to work overseas for a couple of years towards employing local experts who can commit to a longer period, building up new social relationships in the process. Similarly, it is often thought that material inputs and capacity building are at opposite ends of the aid spectrum. Capacity building is *about people* and therefore not about *things*, so training and education are all right, while bricks and mortar are not. The reality is seldom so stark. I well recall spending a Sunday morning helping a network of health workers in the outskirts of San Salvador to build a small clinic, while the afternoon heat was spent under the mango trees in more conventional health education activities. For them, both were essential: they needed a place to meet and to attend to patients, particularly in the rainy season, and building a joint community clinic was critical to establishing mutual trust; they also, of course, needed to acquire new skills and knowledge. They saw both activities as being on the same capacity-building spectrum. I learned a lot about building techniques that day. And I learned a lot more about building a shared vision based on trust and co-operation.

To take a slightly different example, a Northern NGO that advocates energetically on behalf of its 'partners' in the South may be experienced by them as diminishing their own voices and knowledge, rather than helping them to acquire the skills needed to undertake their own lobbying, in their own time and in their own way – arguments reminiscent of the 'nothing about us without us' slogan that originated in the South African disability-rights movement.[4] What this means is that we cannot look at an input in isolation and say *a priori* that X represents capacity building while Y doesn't. It is much more a question of understanding the subtleties of the context and direction; an approach, rather than a thing.

The second point is that a capacity-building approach hinges on the capacity for self-criticism. We have heard a thousand times that if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day, and if you teach him to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. But, as a friend in El Salvador once asked: What if that fisher is not a man but a woman? And what if she doesn't own the water in which she is fishing? Or her customary fishing rights have been taken away from her? An NGO in South Africa takes the question a step further: what if the NGO does not even know how to fish? For NGOs to make a lasting difference means that they must reflect hard on their own role(s) and be alert to changes in the environment in which they operate. It also means a commitment to learning as *intrinsic* to their interventions to build the capacities of others.

Simply invoking concepts like partnership is not enough to steer NGOs through these issues. The re-defined role of the state is a case in point. An NGO may have been doing commendable education with village health workers for many years, complementing government services. However, if the government privatises its health services, or charges user-fees that place health care out of the reach of those most in need, then that same NGO may find itself performing a *de facto* 'gap-filling' role within a quite different political agenda, one that is bent on reducing the role of the state and privatising public services. My point here is not whether neo-liberalism is good or bad, but how easily NGOs with a narrow project focus can become unwitting pawns in others' chess games.

What does the North have to learn?

This brings me to my third question. What are the kinds of skill that Northern NGOs need if they are to adopt a capacity-building approach to their work?

Some have been identified already: self-awareness, self-criticism, and a degree of modesty. Then the ability to distinguish between different agendas and fads, rather than spinning around like a weathervane in a windstorm. It also calls for a wide repertoire of engagement. By and large, Northern NGOs engage with the South via the transfer of financial and technical resources: in other words, through money-driven partnerships. Although this donor–recipient relationship has been extended in recent years, notably in the area of advocacy, it essentially remains what it always was. 'Hard' resources are transferred from North to South in return for 'soft' resources in the form of information, 'stories', and *New Internationalist*-cum-Benetton photos that in turn feed into the Northern NGO's capacity to raise funds or recruit campaign supporters. 'Soft' resources may also be used in policy- or issue-focused lobbying and campaigning. But again, the agendas and timetables are almost invariably set by Northern NGOs and not by their Southern 'partners' – even though the principal policy targets may be *global* institutions, *global* processes, and respect for *universal* rights.

But, you might say, if this division of labour works, what does it matter? If you espouse a capacity-building approach, it matters quite a lot. First, because if a relationship is only as sustainable as its money supply, then power games and dependency lie at its heart. All power corrupts, but absolute dependency undermines absolutely. The Northern NGO depends on getting money from its domestic public, or (increasingly) from governments (and this has its own implications in relation to the 'too close for comfort' arguments presented by Hulme and Edwards 1996); the Southern 'partner' can function only by virtue of a dripfeed administered by philanthropic outsiders. If the dosage changes, or runs out, the life of the Southern partner is threatened.

Second, a partnership that is based on a one-way transfer of resources (whether these are financial or intellectual) is profoundly asymmetrical, a fact which will tend to distort the functioning and dignity of the weaker partner,

as well as fostering the hubris of the stronger one. Organisations that have priorities projected on to them, however subtly, are almost bound to shift their agendas to match those of their donors. Few Southern organisations have the capacity to generate 'no strings' funds from the general public. In-country fundraising is beginning to happen in nations with large and wealthy middle-classes such as Brazil, India, Mexico, or South Africa – while remittances from migrant workers may be more important in weaker economies or in particular regions of stronger ones (Jennings and Clarke 2005). Southern organisations that depend on Northern funding are thereby compromised in their role as civil-society organisations. Obviously, it makes no sense for Southern organisations to do less local advocacy and mobilising because of the constraints imposed by financial dependency. But it is also dangerous for any NGO to assume functions for which it is not equipped or not accountable, simply because it has the financial muscle to do so. Jenny Pearce (1993) has shown how, by taking on more political roles in public life – roles for which they were not *politically* accountable – Chilean NGOs effectively *depoliticised* the social movements that they set out to serve, and which had given them their legitimacy in the first place: something that Sonia Alvarez (1998) has called the 'NGOization of social movements', a phenomenon that she attributes to their 'professionalization' and recasting as 'gender experts rather than as citizens' groups' (Alvarez 1999). And all thanks to Northern NGO support.

Because administrative accountability has been fashioned around money, the systems have tended to move upwards from recipient to donor, not the other way around. Yet, as we have seen, the intended beneficiaries seldom get to choose which NGO is going to provide services or advocate on their behalf. The victims of floods and mudslides in Manila or Tegucigalpa – or, come to that, New Orleans – may not much care whether they are helped to safety by Catholic Relief Services, by any or all of the Oxfams, by a local Red Cross volunteer, or (most likely) by their next-door neighbour. But when it comes to the longer-term reconstruction effort, it may make a great difference whether the work is designed and financed by the World Bank as opposed to, say, World Neighbors. The Bank is likely to promote small-enterprise development, the fostering of the spirit and capacity to compete in the marketplace (Moxham 2005); the NGO on organisational skills and on healing social divisions. The intended beneficiaries of international development assistance may be consulted about this or that, but they rarely have the opportunity to tell an aid agency to just leave them alone (although there are countless examples of ways in which people express their displeasure by deliberately subverting aid projects). NGOs, on the other hand, insist on *their* right to choose whom to help and how, and what they want in return.

Don't get me wrong here. The relative autonomy of NGOs can be vital. In the 1980s, for instance, it is what permitted Northern (mainly European and Canadian) NGOs in Central America to work with local organisations and informal structures that enjoyed the trust of people working for social change, and not to be sucked into the brutal counter-insurgency effort. It is what made

it possible to claim the right to 'humanitarian space' to assist civilians living in the conflict zones in El Salvador and Guatemala. The same held true of NGOs that supported clandestine opposition to Apartheid in South Africa, or to the Marcos regime in the Philippines.

But there is another side to the autonomy coin. NGOs can, and do, pick up and then abandon their Southern 'partners' without being called to account. NGOs that are concerned to help to build capacity, in full recognition of the social, political, and ethical responsibilities that this entails, should first scrutinise their downward and horizontal accountability. They need to look at the impacts of their support on the webs of relationships in which their chosen 'partners' function. They need to look at how they learn from their 'partners', not just gathering 'stories and pictures', but in terms of their values, their perceptions, their analyses, concerns, and aspirations. They need to check their feedback and communication mechanisms, because without these there is no mutual accountability. Consultation is not just a question of asking, but of accounting back for decisions taken. The list could go on. But the basic message is that if NGOs want to take capacity building seriously, then they must be prepared to change their own structures and practices in order to reflect this commitment to partnership, reciprocity, shared risk-taking, and inter-dependence.

Finally, all this takes time. Aid agencies are always in a hurry. They feel the need to spend in order to justify their existence to their constituencies and to their donors. But there are no prizes for coming first, and a lot of collateral damage can be done by taking things too fast – or indeed by packing up as soon as the funded activity is over. The workshops have been held, the participants gave positive feedback on their evaluation forms, and so capacity has been built. A year later, there is nothing to show for it. A more sustained relationship may not yield spectacular results, but these results may well be more lasting. An example from Honduras illustrates this. In the mid-1980s we began funding an incipient social-education programme run by a *campesina* whose goal was to create a peasant women's movement. However, the self-esteem of most of the women who came along to the meetings was so low that they would simply wait for her to tell them what to do. She did not want to reproduce the static top–down structure found in all the other popular organisations and local NGOs, whatever their professed radicalism. I put her in touch with a feminist social worker and former nun in Mexico who had worked for many years with non-literate women. She visited the programme and, with them, developed a self-help manual that would help them, and women like them, to tackle the deep sources of their oppression. Given their Christian faith, she drew on positive images of women in the Bible to help get the message across. Imagine my delight *nearly 10 years later* when I was sent a copy of the manual, by then a best-selling publication; and a video showing women who had been too shy even to say their names addressing mass rallies calling for women's right to own land. And when, *more than 20 years later*, I was invited to the inaugural meeting of the peasant women's movement

that had grown out of such humble beginnings. If we had expected concrete results after the three-year grant came to an end, we would have been sorely disappointed. But how genuinely interested are NGOs in what happens after 'their' project has finished? While they might adopt a more programme- based approach to grant making, with the aim of 'scaling up' or at least ensuring that the whole is more than the sum of the parts, seldom does this extend beyond the final report on how the funds were used. More often than not, the grant is disbursed, the 'project' does what is expected, accountability for the use of funds is assured, and the final report ends up gathering dust deep in the organisational archives.[5]

Conclusion

Capacity building is an approach to solidarity-based partnerships with an infinite variety of expressions. While some of the ingredients can be identified, there is no global recipe, no quick fix. Partnership entails mutual accountability, and you cannot have one without the other. This includes accounting back honestly for decisions that affect others. This approach is demanding, and it calls for time, flexibility, shared risk taking, open dialogue, and a willingness *on both sides* to respond to feedback. Co-development is also far more rewarding than trying to be a catalyst, which exerts 'an impact or change on another component within a system without itself changing' (Eyben 2006: 48).

NGOs can foster the capacities of those Southern organisations whose aspirations they support. Partnership is not about accepting anything and everything that each other does, but for Northern NGOs it almost certainly means getting out of the driving seat and learning to trust their chosen partners' navigational skills. Just because they paid to fill up the tank does not give NGOs the right to determine the route. What is abundantly clear is that you can't build capacities in others that you don't have yourself. And if you can't learn, you can't teach either.

That said, disengagement is not an option. The gulf between rich and poor diminishes our humanity. Another world is possible, but only by building on the capacity of the most oppressed to repudiate injustice, and work for mutual respect and solidarity.

Notes

1. This essay draws on my earlier work, in particular Eade 1997; Eade and Williams 1995.
2. The focus on development NGOs is certainly not limited to international or Northern NGOs; nor are the issues peculiar to the NGO sector. The NGO world does not divide into neat North–South, good–bad, powerful–powerless categories. Nor should one deny the real contests and divergences that exist between and often within them. Rather, my concern is

with NGOs as holders and brokers of power *vis-à-vis* those who have more or less power than they do.

3. The reasons for this 'vote of no confidence' have of course been variously interpreted, but they revolve essentially around political agency. The refugees argued that the NGO imposed a 'doctor knows best' philosophy, while they wanted to develop skills as community health workers in preparation for their return to El Salvador. The NGO claimed that it was vital to keep medical supplies under firm control, in order to prevent them leaking out to the FMLN fighters, and that the refugees were either FMLN sympathisers, or were the victims of political manipulation and threats (Terry 2002).

4. Space does not permit discussion on the vexed issue of advocacy by Northern NGOs; suffice it to say that Southern activists and academics alike complain that all too often the role assigned to them is that of providing local evidence to fuel Northern advocacy on their behalf, or 'case studies' to illustrate Northern analyses of the problems facing the Global South. See Eade 2002, in particular the chapters by Maria Teresa Diokno-Pascual, Dot Keet, Paul Nelson, and Warren Nyamugasira; and Olukoshi, cited in Utting 2006:121.

5. Staff turnover seriously impedes long-term Northern NGO engagement with Southern organisations beyond the grant period. The director of a small agency that receives funds from various Northern NGOs once commented to me that he usually knew far more about each NGO's history in Chiapas than did the successive 'new brooms' sent down to sweep through his agency's funding requests. A curious reversal of roles indeed when Southern 'partners' end up safeguarding the histories of their Northern NGO benefactors! Central Americans interviewed in 1997 made similar points: 'The international aid agencies, particularly the NGOs, "lived through the process with us" and often identified deeply with it. Suddenly it was all change. The new emphasis was on technical issues, efficiency, efficacy, and so on – but without recognising and taking into account the more subjective elements' (Ardón 1999:63); 'Many of the international aid workers are new. They did not live through the war years, and do not have a detailed knowledge of the context. This has made working with them far harder, since it is like having to start all over again – which takes up a lot of time' (*ibid.*: 66).

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