

CHAPTER 1

FROM CAPACITY BUILDING TO CAPACITY PROMOTION

The term ‘capacity building’ has come into common usage in international development in the twenty-first century. Typically, the term refers to activities designed to provide the skills and knowledge necessary to create new policies, programs, and institutions in the majority world. Such capacity building initiatives are usually consistent with the agendas advanced by donor and international organizations external to countries in the majority world. These initiatives are presented as serving the best interests of the recipient country, with supports, financial and otherwise, often provided to allow the country to undertake the proposed ‘advances.’ Within this context, the capacity building story has at least two faces: the common one is that of benevolence, of assistance—and while that face might in many cases reflect a sincere intention, it too often conceals a second face—a face of destruction and capacity depletion. If capacity building initiatives are to prove beneficial, we need (as called for by Verity, 2007) to take a critical look at the motives and methods that infuse such policies and programs, especially when they involve (as they typically do) relationships between groups with differing access to power in the current social, political, and economic landscape.

As noted by Kenny and Clarke (2010), it was not until the late 1990s that the term capacity building began to regularly appear in the community development literature and in Western policy agendas. As outlined by Craig (2010), the first reference to the term stems from the early 1990s in the work of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNDP, 1991), where it referred to the United Nations’ role in building capacity to support the water sector (see McGinty, 2003 for a discussion). Later in the 1990s, the term was used in Europe to refer to the need to create strategies for community economic development in

disadvantaged communities (European Commission, 1996). Around this same time, ‘capacity building’ found a place in the international development literature to recognize the need to move past ‘top-down’ approaches to development in favour of strengthening “people’s capacity to determine their own values and priorities and organise themselves to act on this” (Eade & Williams, 1995, p. 64, cited in Craig, 2010, p. 47). Since that time, use of the term has increased exponentially. A search for “capacity building” on Google Scholar yields 420,000 results, 250,000 of them within the past decade (2004-2014).

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the notion of capacity building had become a powerful mobilizer of community development initiatives in both the majority and minority worlds. In many ways, the entry of this term—and the underlying philosophy and approach it was meant to capture—was a promising though problematic development, as summarized below:

[U]nder the alluring slogan of ‘helping people to help themselves’ capacity building interventions have promised to change the very nature of development. Capacity building is placed in favourable opposition to traditional top-down social engineering, structural adjustment programmes or welfare-based models of development. (Kenny & Clarke, 2010, p. 4)

However, as highlighted by Kenny and Clarke (2010, *passim*) and others (see, for example, Mowbray, 2005; Craig, 2007; Verity, 2007; King & Cruickshank, 2012), the term “capacity building,” along with its many close relatives (e.g., community development, partnership, empowerment; and their hybrids, such as community capacity building, participatory capacity building, participatory empowerment, and so on) is often used unreflectively, serving to promote a technocratic, neo-liberal agenda. The underlying assumption of many international development initiatives, whether in ECD or other fields, is that the community, region, or country deemed in need of assistance ‘lacks capacity’ and that the donor or international development organization is in a position to provide that capacity, whether in the form of knowledge transfer, predefined outcomes, or managerial methods imported from the minority world. The question of whose capacity needs to be built, for what purpose, for whose benefit, and as identified by whom, is seldom raised, or is not explored in sufficient depth. Indeed, the use of the term capacity building is reminiscent of an earlier critique of the term ‘underdevelopment’:

...‘underdevelopment’ was promulgated on 20 January 1949 in Harry S. Truman’s inaugural address. ‘On that day, writes Gustave Esteva, a former director of planning in the Mexican

Government, 'two billion people became underdeveloped.' In a real sense, from that time on, they ceased being what they were, in all their diversity, and were transmogrified into an inverted mirror of others' reality: a mirror that belittles them and sends them off to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, [into a homogenous] and narrow minority." (Knutsson, 1997, p. 109)

Too often, it is quickly agreed that the recipient country or community is indeed deficient in x, and it is quickly assumed that the development agency (whether an NGO, a government agency, an international donor group, or an educational institution) has the knowledge and expertise that the 'beneficiary' of the initiative needs. One hears far less often of initiatives where an aid organization wants to learn from a developing country, or provides resources to give a country or community the opportunity to identify its own needs and take the time to develop approaches that build on its own self-identified strengths and goals. Even less does one hear of any genuine intention on the part of a minority world country or organization to sacrifice its own power and advantage to allow the partial dismantling of the underlying structural inequities that have generated the need for 'aid' in the first place. As a consequence, many capacity building initiatives offer short-term assistance that fails to resonate with local contexts and cultures and that ultimately undermines local capacity, enriching only the minority world organization's portfolio and strengthening its case for the need for further 'capacity building' initiatives. As such, within international development policies and programs, capacity building has too often served as a "Trojan horse for neo-liberal ideas within community development" (Kenny, 2002, as cited in Miller, 2010). As Ife notes:

It is a short step from the inherent top-down agenda of capacity building to a fully-blown colonialism. The imposition of a developmental agenda on a community is characteristic of the colonialist project, where the coloniser is seen as having superior knowledge, wisdom and expertise, and as therefore being able to impose their agenda on others (Young, 2001). Such a view can be held by both the coloniser and the colonised, though in the latter case there is usually also some level of resistance and an attempt to challenge the agenda of the coloniser. (2010, p. 72)

In particular, capacity building initiatives focused on education and training are often based on a simple 'knowledge transfer' model, echoing Freire's (1972) critique of a 'banking' concept of education. Knowledge transfer models of

education and training assume a one-way transaction, in which knowledge is a commodity possessed by the educator. This notion gives little or no credence (or even space) for mutual transformation in the learning process or for the contribution of local knowledges (see Miller, 2010; Ife, 2010; Fanany et al. 2010; Stoecker, 2010). In this model, the opportunity for education and training to support individuals and societies to draw on their own knowledge and experience to advance their own goals and for educators and trainers to learn from students is lost. As articulated by one Australian Indigenous person:

To restore capacity in our people is to [restore responsibility] for our own future. Notice that I talk of restoring rather than building capacity in our people ... we had 40 to 60,000 years of survival and capacity. The problem is that our capacity has been eroded and diminished [by white colonialists] – our people do have skills, knowledge and experience ... we are quite capable of looking after our own children and fighting for their future. (Tedmanson, 2003, p. 15, as cited in Craig, 2010, p. 55)

In brief, the literature on capacity building is rife with contradictions, highlighting the ‘two faces’ of capacity-building noted at the outset of this chapter—one benevolent, the other potentially malevolent and destructive. More fundamentally, the question of whether capacity building is effective, even when undertaken with the strengths of communities and cultures in mind, has not yet been adequately explored. As noted by Craig (2010):

There clearly remains substantial linguistic and ideological confusion surrounding the term [community capacity building] just as with the terms community, and community development. This confusion is not helped by the fact that, despite warm governmental rhetoric, there is little evidence as to whether [community capacity building] actually works. The community development literature has begun to grapple with questions of its effectiveness (Barr et al., 1995, 1996; Craig, 2002; Skinner & Wilson, 2002) but none of this debate appears to have spilled over into analysing the effectiveness of [community capacity building]. (p. 53)

Why this book?

The approach described throughout this book originated in North American Indigenous communities' deep sensitivity to 'good intents' that carried tragic outcomes. As such, the approach advocated herein can be seen as a response to the concerns and contradictions raised in the literature about capacity building. In recognition of this critique, and to distinguish the approach we advocate from ones we consider problematic, we refer to the initiatives in this volume as 'capacity-promoting' rather than 'capacity building.' Ultimately, this volume takes the stance that capacity promotion, undertaken with a deep respect for the local, a commitment to inclusive processes, and a stance of 'not knowing' on the part of the international development organization, is possible and can be of genuine use and a source of deep learning for all partners involved. Through a combination of good fortune and mutual appreciation, the lead author of this volume developed a capacity-promoting approach predicated on a first principle of 'do no harm' and a second principle of 'honour the local.' This approach was developed over 25 years, first in partnership with First Nations communities in Canada and then employed in co-development activities with numerous countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The lead author felt the book could make a contribution, as he has witnessed, first-hand, the potential for capacity-promoting initiatives grounded in local initiatives to make a powerful, long-term difference in the lives of all partners involved. However, this volume has also been written out of the recognition, echoed in the literature, that 'capacity building' can be—and often is—incapacitating. The understandings and approaches that have guided this work, now over two decades old, remain in the minority of international 'capacity building' interventions—perhaps to an even greater degree at the time of writing than in 1989, when this story begins.

The experience of working with First Nations' communities in Canada will be developed in some detail in chapter 3. However, before commencing that story, a second critique of development follows—this one focusing on Western understandings of child development, with particular reference to sub-Saharan Africa. This critique of child development is relevant to many diverse disciplines and services with origins in the West that perpetuate colonizing mentalities into the 21st Century.

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