Capacity Development: old wine in new bottles?

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Paper presented to the

Sixth Oceanic Conference on International Studies

University of Melbourne

9-11 July 2014
Abstract

The term capacity development has become ubiquitous in the specifications of aid projects: a lack of capacity in developing countries is frequently identified as the main obstacle to development and technical advisers working on donor funded assistance projects are therefore expected to develop ‘capacity’ as the main output of their work. Capacity development is, however, a relatively new phrase in the development assistance literature having only come into frequent use in the last two decades and there is no clear agreement on what it means, with a range of interpretations used by different authors and in different contexts. In practical application capacity is particularly difficult to either define or measure. This paper examines the history and different uses of the concepts of capacity development and capacity building in development assistance, identifies problems in the application of the concept in practice, and argues for a more realistic definition of what technical assistance projects are actually able to achieve.
For several decades now most aid funded technical advisers working to assist governments in developing countries have been expected to ‘build capacity’. This has come to be seen as one of the main roles of development aid. A quick review of current development assistance projects, for example, shows that a significant proportion make reference to capacity development in their title or description. Of more than 19,000 current development projects listed on the development business website DevEx.com in April 2013, for example, almost half (8757) made reference to ‘capacity’. They included an Asian Development Bank ‘Governance and Capacity Building Project’ in Bangladesh, an EU ‘Capacity Development Project for Non-State Actors’ in Zambia, a ‘Capacity-Building Project for Private Sector Development’ in Angola, and a Finnish government project on ‘Strengthening the Capacity of the Nepal Scouts’ (www.devex.com, 7 April 2014). The terms of reference for advisers and consultants working on projects such as these invariably include a requirement that the adviser will build the capacity of local counterparts and institutions. Many authors have noted, however, the difficulties in defining the concept adequately (Land, 2000; Kuhl, 2004; Morgan, 2006; Taylor and Clarke, 2008). Numerous reports, studies, and conference papers have therefore been devoted to explaining what capacity development is and how it should be done. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the OECD, in particular, have been strongly committed to the concept, but all aid organizations and bilateral donors have produced documents and manuals on the subject. This paper argues that, in spite of all the attention given to capacity development, the concept remains vague and unsatisfactory and does little to enhance our understanding of what donor funded technical assistance projects can or should do to assist developing country governments.

**The history of a phrase**

This intense interest in the concept of ‘capacity development’ is relatively recent. The term hardly appears in the literature on development 25 years ago, other than in relation to technical questions such as the water holding capacity of a dam or the electricity generation capacity of a power station. Its application in social science seems to have begun in the 1970s. Since then it has been applied in many disciplines, and has become a dominant idea in discussions of development assistance.
There are two ways to interpret the rise of the capacity development concept. It is either a sudden realization of a truth previously unrecognized, or the substitution of new terminology to express old ideas. Most of the literature produced by aid organizations argues the case for the first interpretation, suggesting that ‘capacity development’ has, at last, provided the answer to the problems of development and the assumed failure of much previous development assistance. I argue however that, in fact, the latter is a more accurate explanation and the ideas expressed under the label of capacity development are not at all new.

A search for early discussions of the idea of ‘capacity’ in social science literature suggests that the phrase ‘capacity-building’ first appeared during the 1970s, used in relation to local government in the United States at a time when policies of fiscal decentralization and ‘new federalism’ were generating concern about the capabilities of state and local governments. The term ‘capacity building’ was used to describe local government development programs (Burgess, 1975; US Department of Health Education and Welfare, 1975; Jones and Doss, 1978; Gargan, 1981). In this literature, capacity building was sometimes used as a synonym for ‘management improvement’, but it had a range of other meanings very similar to more recent discussions of capacity in developing countries. ‘Capacity’ meant the ability of local authorities to govern, to accomplish social purposes, to make informed decisions based on analytical information, to allocate resources rationally, and to produce responsive and efficient public goods and services. Some writers on local government in the US also expressed the concept in terms of a movement from tradition and custom towards higher levels of rationality (Honadle, 1981).

The administrative problems described in the literature on US local government in the 1970s, such as inadequate service delivery, ineffective fiscal management, poor budgeting procedures, lack of coordination between government entities, and a shortage of trained personnel, were more or less the same problems facing national governments in the developing world, so the idea of ‘capacity building’ soon appeared in the context of development assistance. In 1981 Rondinelli and Mandell argued that, in Asia, ‘the only realistic approach to alleviating massive rural poverty is through building the capacity of local government and of non governmental organizations to mobilize community resources’ (Rondinelli, Dennis A and Mandell, Marvin B, 1981: 134). Rondinelli also suggested that limited administrative capacity may be a more important obstacle to poverty reduction than lack of finances (Rondinelli, Dennis A. and Mandell, Marvin B., 1981). In 1989 a major
World Bank study of development in Sub Saharan Africa identified enhanced capacities of people and institutions as one of the requirements for reversing economic decline in Africa, along with better infrastructure and more favourable economic policies.

References to ‘capacity building’ or ‘capacity development’ in all fields of academic literature increased steadily over the following years and came to be applied in many different contexts. From a mere handful of references using these terms in the 1980s, the number of citations increased markedly in the 1990s and escalated in the following decade. The chart in Figure 1 shows the number of citations with ‘capacity building’ or ‘capacity development’ in their title, abstract or subject in several online databases in different time periods, as a proportion of the total items in the database. This clearly shows the increasing popularity of the term.

![Figure 1: ‘Capacity development’ in academic citations 1985-2014 (as percentage of total items)](chart)

In the field of development assistance, a surge in the use of ‘capacity building’ and ‘capacity development’ terminology began in the early 1990s, driven significantly by UNDP and the World Bank. In 1993, Edward Jaycox, then World Bank Vice President for Africa, identified

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1 Academic citations reveal studies of capacity building in situations as diverse as decentralisation in France (Cole, 2006), community capacity building in Australia (Mowbray, 2005), indigenous capacity building in New Zealand (Mika, 2003) and building capacity in electoral administration in the US (Hale and Slaton, 2008).
capacity building as the missing link in African development (Jaycox, 1993) and in 1996 the World Bank published a report on the need for institutional capacity building in Africa (Dia, 1996). UNDP commissioned several major research studies (Berg, 1993; Cohen, 1993; Grindle and Hildebrand, 1995) and issued a Technical Advisory Paper (UNDP, 1997). The Canadian aid agency, CIDA, also contributed to research on the subject (Morgan, 1997; CIDA, 2000).

The volume of literature on capacity development grew further in the period since 2000 and it is now a central idea in discussions of development assistance. The websites of the major multilateral aid organizations, including the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), UNDP, the World Bank Institute, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), provide extensive information on the importance of capacity development, their views on what it means, and what the organization is doing to achieve it. Each of these bodies has issued or sponsored publications and reports on their approach to capacity development (Fukuda-Parr, Lopes et al., 2002a; OECD, 2006; UNDP, 2008, 2009; World Bank Institute, 2009b). Bilateral donors have also commissioned reports and studies (CIDA, 2000; Boesen and Therkildsen, 2004; AusAID, 2005, 2010; DFID, 2006; USAID, 2009, 2011), as have academic research bodies and regional organizations (Land, 2000; Morgan, Land et al., 2005; Morgan, 2006; Watson, 2006; Taylor and Clarke, 2008; NEPAD, 2010). Capacity building has thus become something that any development assistance organization must do if it is conducting its programs according to the current ‘state of the art’ (Kuhl, 2004: 18).

The multiple definitions of ‘capacity’

Despite the volumes of material produced by donors there does not appear to be agreement on what is meant by capacity and what it means to develop capacity.² The implied definitions vary significantly from donor to donor and from report to report and range in scope from a relatively narrow focus on organizational reform and process improvement, to expansive ideas of political and social transformation. There are however common elements. Capacity development is a broad and ambitious undertaking which implies major social and political

² The Oxford English Dictionary definition of ‘capacity’ focuses on its use in relation to measurements of volume or holding power, but other meanings include ‘mental or intellectual receiving power’, ‘mental ability’, ‘talent’, ‘possibility’, ‘capability’ and ‘legal competency or qualification’ (http://www.oed.com/). None of these, however, seem to quite capture the various meanings given to the term in development literature or donor practices.
changes and requires complex, multidimensional donor interventions which must nevertheless be locally ‘owned’. It is usually portrayed as a technical process with definable and measurable outcomes, but most discussions provide little precision on exactly what donors and technical advisers do to develop capacity and how this is different from previous aid efforts.

Most discussions explicitly dismiss the idea that developing ‘capacity’ simply means building knowledge and skills in local staff to improve their ability to do their work, which might be the common sense assumption. This is regarded as an inadequate and outdated understanding. More often capacity development is defined very broadly to encompass the development of institutions, the reform of political and legal systems, and the achievement of far reaching change in the recipient country’s social organization. The OECD DAC, for example, defines ‘capacity’ as ‘the ability of people, organizations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully’ and ‘capacity development’ as the process ‘whereby people, organizations and society unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time’ (OECD, 2006: 12). The World Bank Institute refers to ‘the abilities of individuals, institutions, and societies to perform functions, solve problems, as well as set and achieve a country’s development goals in an effective, participatory, and sustainable manner’ (World Bank Institute, 2003:1), and UNDP defines capacity development as ‘the process through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time’(UNDP, 2009: 2).

The most significant feature of these broad, ambitious definitions, is the idea that all aspects of capacity are interrelated and action is required on many fronts and levels at the same time. An intervention on only one level, without dealing with capacity gaps at other levels, will fail to produce long term results. This idea is illustrated in Grindle and Hildebrand (1995) who identify five dimensions of capacity that may need to be addressed by public sector capacity building initiatives: ‘human resources’, the ‘organization’, the ‘task network’, the ‘institutional context’, and the wider ‘action environment’ of class structure, political stability and government legitimacy (Grindle and Hildebrand, 1995). Donor sponsored capacity development activities must therefore address all the impediments to development in an integrated manner.

Many discussions of capacity development also make it clear that it is not a politically or culturally neutral activity. It must address power relations, mindsets and behaviour change, institutional change, leadership, empowerment and public participation, and grasp ‘windows
of opportunity for change’ which arise from changes in leadership and shifts in priorities and resources. This is expressed most explicitly in UNDP literature.

‘Efforts to strengthen skills, processes and systems do not produce sustainable results if they fail to address the inherently political and complex realities of the situation and deal with the question of ‘winners and losers’. Capacity development, whether intentionally or not, can lead to shifts in roles and responsibilities. These can unsettle vested interests and established power structures and require changes in behaviour, norms and values.’ (UNDP, 2008: 4).

Thus, capacity development may need to address issues of class structure, political stability and government legitimacy (Grindle and Hildebrand, 1995), strengthen citizen demands and consider structures of power and influence (OECD, 2006), facilitate popular participation and promote community empowerment (World Bank, 2009), and generate an engaged society that holds the government accountable (World Bank, 2005).

This broad concept of capacity development is often contrasted with previous programs of traditional technical cooperation and training which are considered to have failed to produce results (Fukuda-Parr, Lopes et al., 2002a; World Bank, 2005; OECD, 2006). The World Bank’s appraisal report on a proposed capacity development program in Rwanda, for example, explains the reasons for the poor results from previous donor efforts.

‘initiatives were scattered and ad hoc, and insufficiently coordinated with other capacity building activities; they were supply-driven; they lacked a strategic and comprehensive vision; they were not integrated into the broader context of development needs; and they were treated in isolation from the public sector … Mostly, initiatives failed to produce results when beneficiaries lacked ownership.’ (World Bank, 2004, 12)

The proposed new World Bank initiative, based on the capacity development model and addressing inter-related issues in one program, was proposed as the answer to these past problems.

The OECD has suggested that capacity development is not just an activity but a new, ambitious, challenging and more systematic approach to development (OECD, 2009). The World Bank Institute similarly argues that

‘Capacity development has revolutionized the business of international assistance with its paradigm shift to accelerating development by unleashing the potential that is already
available within countries rather than simply resource transfer from abroad’ (World Bank Institute, 2009a).

Local ownership is also an important aspect of the capacity development framework. The OECD’s 2006 report on ‘The Challenge of Capacity Development’, for example, emphasizes the importance of ‘endogenous demand’ and national ownership and leadership, and presents this as one of the key differences between the ‘old’ idea of technical cooperation and the ‘new paradigm’ of capacity development (OECD, 2006: 11). The World Bank’s report on capacity development in Africa also argues that capacity development must be country-centred (World Bank, 2005) and an OECD conference on capacity development declared that:

‘*Domestic leadership of capacity development is essential.* We will align CD efforts behind a country’s vision for development and key deliverables within a national strategy. Without effective control of the process, a country will be unable to align resources for CD to its key priorities, and sustainable improvements in capacity will be almost impossible to achieve’ (OECD, 2011: 1).

‘Ownership’ is itself a notoriously difficult concept to define (Boughton and Mourmouras, 2002). In this case it means that developing country governments should lead the capacity building process by setting out their capacity development objectives in a national development plan. Donors should only support capacity development activities where there is such evidence of national commitment. If there is no high level government commitment, however, donors should not give up but should take steps to build it by strengthening client and citizen ‘demand’ for better capacity. UNDP’s guidelines for capacity development, for example, argue that:

‘To be effective, supporting capacity development therefore requires us to create appropriate political and social incentives and mobilize strong political ownership and commitment.’ (UNDP, 2008: 4)

Finally, many discussions of capacity development give the impression that it is a precise, technical process with definable objectives and predictable, measurable outcomes, somewhat like an industrial production line. Documents on capacity development produced by the leading development assistance organizations often include guidelines, frameworks and diagrams setting out best practice processes for the structured and organized delivery of capacity development. The OECD DAC, for example, recommends a four stage approach
which begins with a good understanding of the context, through ‘institutional analysis’, ‘power analysis’ and ‘drivers of change analysis’. The second step is to identify and support sources of country-owned change. Step three is the delivery of capacity development support, focusing on specific capacities needed to accomplish clearly defined goals. These capacity development programs must have clear objectives, the right inputs, cost-effective methods, where possible use local suppliers, involve NGOs and the private sector, and take account of technological changes. Finally, in step four, donors should learn from experience and share lessons through monitoring, tracking how money is spent, and collecting the views of clients and end users (OECD, 2006: 19-20).

UNDP has identified capacity development as its primary service to developing countries and has issued a number of documents explaining its approach to the task (UNDP, 2008, 2009, 2011). These set out a five step process, illustrated in the diagram in Figure 2, which involves engaging stakeholders, assessing capacity assets and needs (using UNDP’s Capacity Assessment Methodology), formulating a capacity development response, implementing the response, and evaluating capacity improvement.

![Figure 2: UNDP Capacity Development Process Diagram (UNDP, 2009: 2)](image)

The ‘assessment of capacity’ stage might address any of three mutually reinforcing levels of capacity (the enabling environment, the organization and the individual), and consider any of four ‘core issues’ (institutional arrangements, leadership, knowledge, and accountability) and two types of capacity (technical capacities in sector specific skills, and broader functional capacities). The capacity development response will be ‘an integrated set of deliberate and
sequenced actions embedded in a programme or project’ (UNDP, 2008: 13). The final step of the five step process is evaluating changes in performance. This is, however, acknowledged to be a challenge ‘since the impact is achieved through a complex mix of factors whose causality cannot be traced to one or more ingredients in a linear fashion’ (UNDP, 2008: 16).

The World Bank Institute’s ‘Capacity Development Results Framework’, while also defining capacity development as ‘a process of socio-political, policy related and organizational change’ (World Bank Institute, 2009b: 3), focuses more closely on how these changes occur, drawing on adult learning theories and identifying ‘agents of change’ as the target. This framework uses a ten step process, starting with validation of the development goal and moving through to monitoring outcomes. The guidelines discuss how to identify desired learning outcomes, such as raised awareness or enhanced skills, and how to break them down into learning objectives such as improved understanding, attitudes, or motivation, skill acquisition and skill application. This focus on learning processes and the role of knowledge and information in producing social change seems, however, to bring the concept of capacity development closer to the old model of training and skill transfer so severely criticized in many other documents on the subject.

![Diagram of World Bank Institute Capacity Development Program Cycle](image)

**Figure 3: World Bank Institute Capacity Development Program Cycle (World Bank Institute, 2009b: 24)**

The real world of development assistance implementation, of course, rarely works as neatly as this. Despite the apparent precision of the diagrams and ‘how to’ guides, it is still difficult to identify exactly what capacity development might be in practice in any particular situation, and what donors and technical advisers should be doing under the new concept of capacity
development that is significantly different from previous technical assistance projects. The manuals generally provide relatively little practical detail about the delivery of capacity development activities and process diagrams often show the implementation phase as a more or less empty box. In the case of the World Bank Institute’s model in Figure 3, this step is not shown at all. The process passes straight from designing activities to monitoring them.

The examples of capacity development activities cited in donor documents cover a wide range of interventions including setting up new government agencies, training government staff, improving operating procedures and business processes, reforming education systems, changing human resource management practices, developing leadership skills, coaching, mentoring, sharing technical solutions between countries, and improving citizen participation and access to information (OECD, 2006: passim; UNDP, 2008: 18-19, 2011: 1). The World Bank government capacity building program in Rwanda, referred to above, which was designed to address the failings of previous technical cooperation efforts, included a large amount of training for government personnel, new computers and IT systems, functional reviews of government Ministries, salary incentives for technical staff, and redrafting national legislation. Almost half the cost of the program was earmarked for external technical advisers (World Bank, 2004). The examples of capacity development projects from DevEx.com are also, in the main, concerned with training programs, study visits, contracted technical advisers and donations of equipment. Indeed, almost all the activities traditionally included in programs of economic development can be subsumed under the umbrella of capacity development (Kuhl, 2004).

**Capacity development in practice: more of the same**

At an operational level, therefore, despite claims to the contrary, capacity development does not appear to be substantially different from previous technical cooperation programs or indeed older ideas about ‘modernization’. In fact on closer inspection capacity development appears to be everything it says it is not. It is not particularly new, it maintains donor dominance over development assistance, and it tends to shift the burden of responsibility for development failures to the recipient government.

Although the capacity development literature makes much of the contrast between the ‘old’ idea of technical cooperation and the ‘new paradigm’ of capacity development, claims made about the shortcomings of the old model are rarely supported by data. A World Bank report on capacity development in Africa, for example, asserts that ‘Before 1990 the main focus of
capacity development was aimed at resolving short term technical constraints to project implementation and had limited results on developing capacity’ without reference to any supporting data or research (World Bank, 2005: 38). Fukuda-Parr et. al. (2002b) and Morgan (2002) make similar sweeping claims with little evidence. However, the historical literature on development contains many examples of the successful use of technical assistance to improve government performance long before the concept of capacity development emerged (Jacoby, 1967; Raphaeli, Roumani et al., 1984; Huff, 1995; Acemoglu, 2003).

Indeed, many of the ideas found in discussions of capacity development are not particularly new in the literature on development. Esman and Montgomery’s proposed ‘systems approach’ to programming US development aid, for example, contains most of the elements of today’s ‘capacity development’ approach, including focusing on broad sectoral reforms and major changes to the wider environment, making use of local human resources and existing capabilities, sustaining participation over the long term to build local institutions, selecting activities based on the strength of domestic support, and using technical cooperation to improve the quality of civic life (Esman and Montgomery, 1969). Kuhl’s investigation of the logic of the capacity development concept traces the evolution of ideas about institutional strengthening in development discourse since the 1950s, from ‘Help for Self Help’ through ‘Development is about People’ to the current focus on ‘Capacity for Development’, showing that similar ideas have inspired each of these previous formulations (Kuhl, 2004: 11-12). The importance of ‘ownership’ is also not a new concept. The US International Development Advisory Board, in 1951, for example, argued that:

‘Sound economic development requires the maximum participation and support of the governments and people of the countries themselves. It must be their program in its planning, in its direction, in the encouragement of local capital, and in the management and technical training offered ...’ (US International Development Advisory Board., 1951: 15)

Although discussions of capacity development argue that the direction of social, political and cultural change needs to be endogenously determined by the people and institutions of the developing country, rather than being based on Western blueprints (Fukuda-Parr, Lopes et al., 2002b; OECD, 2006: 12), implicit in capacity development activities is the assumption that the goals and priorities to be achieved by developing country governments should be ones that are acceptable to donors. This generally involves introducing institutions, values and ways of working that reflect developed country institutions and values. So, in spite of the
rejection of the ideas of ‘modernization’ reflected in statements that ‘one size doesn’t fit all’ and the need to consider context, there is an underlying assumption that the necessary institutional requirements for development are similar in all economies (Pritchett, Woolcock et al., 2010: 3). This is evident from the type of activities promoted by capacity building projects and by the criteria suggested for measuring capacity (UNDP, 2005). Capacity development programs variously aim to promote transparent government, merit based public service, active civil society organizations, gender equity, democracy, a market economy, and international standards in a range of government and private sector activities. Measures of ‘enabling environment’ capacity cited by UNDP include the openness of political debate, the strength of civil society organizations, and the extent of media freedom. These are all worthwhile goals for developing countries to aspire to, but it is debatable whether they have much to do with economic development and poverty reduction. Many countries in recent decades have successfully implemented economic development initiatives and significantly reduced poverty without meeting many of these capacity goals, and there is considerable evidence that some of the institutions heavily promoted by donors are outcomes of increased material prosperity rather than preconditions (Chang, 2003).

These donor policy prescriptions often amount to an ambitious and complex transformation of the existing society and culture. A number of authors have pointed out that these donor expectations have generated an increasingly complex, demanding, unrealistic and sometimes internally contradictory agenda for change in developing countries (Ottaway, 2002; Dijkstra, 2005; Rondinelli and Montgomery, 2005; Pritchett and de Weijer, 2010). The resulting list of essential reforms often ‘constitutes an overwhelming smorgasbord of changes deemed necessary to assure government effectiveness’ (Brinkerhoff, 2005: 7). The literature assumes, however, that these transformations can be facilitated or accelerated through carefully formulated capacity development projects and foreign technical assistance. ‘Capacity development’ provides justification for larger, more complex and more politically and socially intrusive technical assistance programs. Because everything is interrelated donors

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3 Singapore’s newly independent government in the 1960s, for example, suppressed the activities of opposition politicians, journalists, students and labour representatives and used government machinery for election campaigning, enabling the ruling party to win all seats in Parliament in successive general elections. The country nevertheless achieved spectacular success in economic growth and capacity development (Rodan, 1989; Quah, 1998).
need to try to solve all problems at once, generating complex reform agendas which can be a burden on developing country governments.

At the same time, the idea of capacity as the solution to development provides an opportunity to shift responsibility, and therefore blame, to developing country governments themselves, while at the same time, in the circular logic of capacity development, arguing that, by definition, these governments lack the capability to implement development programs. This is perhaps the most concerning aspect of the capacity development paradigm. It identifies the people and governments of developing countries as the primary cause of their own lack of development, discounting, it would appear, the effects of history, geography and conflict, the legacies of colonial neglect, unfair trade relations and absent infrastructure. If donor projects fail it can be seen as the recipient country’s fault because they lack either ‘capacity’ or sufficient ‘ownership’.

**Conclusion**

In spite of extensive discussion of the subject, the exact meaning of capacity development remains illusive. Indeed it has become so overloaded with meaning that it has become, in effect, a synonym for ‘development assistance’ (Kuhl, 2004: 15). UNDP’s declaration that ‘Capacity IS Development’ is thus truer than perhaps they realize (UNDP, 2010). While there is some validity in criticisms of previous donor practices, the emergence of the capacity development concept in the last decade or so does not appear to have made a significant difference to what donors do or to the results achieved. Evaluations and case studies of actual projects suggest that the problems identified by critics of the ‘old’ technical cooperation persist. For example, the World Bank’s assessment of the results of it new capacity building program in Rwanda rated the project only ‘moderately satisfactory’ with progress across the components described as ‘uneven’ and the sustainability of the reforms following the end of the project uncertain, in spite of the insistence on ‘ownership’ (World Bank, 2011).

While some of the ideas put forward in discussions of capacity development are useful, and certainly provide some sensible advice for those tasked with steering economic development on behalf of donors or national governments, reminding us, yet again, that development is a complex issue and that simply providing a little training or stand alone technical advice is unlikely to produce results, much of the literature contains exaggerated rhetoric, the repetition of broad generalizations, and statements of the obvious which provide little useful insight into what can realistically be achieved by external actors. With their constantly changing cast of
country representatives, program managers and technical advisers, donors can rarely expect to understand the context well enough to be able to analyze ‘power relationships’ and ‘drivers of change’. Donors cannot define capacity clearly, assess existing capacities reliably, or measure the impact of their efforts at capacity improvement. Development assistance cannot be precisely calibrated to produce efficient public servants and civic minded political leaders, and donors certainly cannot transform politics or society. The term ‘capacity’ is now entrenched in discussions of aid, and may still sometimes be a useful concept, but only if it is given a more realistic definition. If governments lack capacity it is usually because they lack resources, people, infrastructure and motivation. Donors should simply continue to provide resources, transfer technology, and develop skills, while being fully aware that the outcomes of these efforts, despite all best efforts, are unpredictable and frequently disappointing.

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