

Capacity Building of NGOs – Lessons and Issues we face:

Contribution from Richard Holloway of AKF to Rockefeller Foundation symposium

My boss, Tom Kessinger, sometimes uses the term “weasel word” to describe phrases that don’t actually have much meaning any longer, but insinuate themselves with seeming meaning into arguments. I think ‘capacity building’ in many ways that it is used, has become a “weasel” word. In East Timor I saw donors claim that they had build capacity of local CSOs simply by funding them: in other places, mostly USAID funded, I saw ‘capacity building’ meaning teaching CSOs to handle their accounts in ways acceptable to the donor. In other places I saw donors pushing capacity building programmes that reflected their ideological positions – for democracy, for advocacy, for good governance – good words, but interpreted narrowly, and sometimes insensitively to the local social and political conditions. This illustrates the first problem when discussing ‘capacity building’ – who defines the capacities that need to be built? – and it is usually the donors. That is why I like OCAT and similar tools – because they allow, in a participatory fashion, the organisations to ascertain what are the characteristics that are important for a CSO - where they are strong and where they are weak, and thus what organisational capacities they need to acquire.

The first stage in OCAT is developing the parameters of a healthy organisation, and local CSOs do not always agree with donor parameters. I remember Ezra Mbegori leading a workshop on Boards in the CIVICUS global conference in Vancouver, and saying that many African CSOs see Boards as a colonial and imposed construct, and making Board development an important part of capacity building of CSOs was not relished. However, after some discussion it was agreed that a council of elders (mma and mzee), far from being a colonial construct, is, in fact, very African.

However, no one organisation alone, should be able to definitively decide on what capacities CSOs as a group need, nor even should decide on what their own organisation needs by themselves. In my opinion this should come from some serious brainstorming amongst CSOs about their analysis of their society, their understanding of the role of CSOs in that society, and their vision of the society that they would like to see. In Kenya, to take an example, let me do a virtual brainstorming - we have enormous corruption of government budgets, considerable tribal violence backed by political parties, CSOs largely dependent on foreign funding, and a government suspicious of and not well disposed towards CSOs – this is apart from the usual indicators of clean water, health, housing, employment etc. I would suggest that we also have CSOs which are long on activities and short on results – nothing

specifically Kenyan about that, it is the disease of CSOs the world over to be long on activities and short on results..

If this is a useful short overview of the problems of Kenya from a CSO perspective, then a CSO working in Kenya would need to have the following capacities:

- Competence in results based planning and implementation
- Ability to generate respect from government for its solid achievements
- Mediation and peace building skills
- Local resource mobilisation skills
- Skills in reducing and exposing corruption and building integrity and good governance.

Others may disagree with me about the particular skills needed, but the point is that the capacities desired should derive from an organisations analysis of its society and its thinking of what needs to be done to build a healthy society – healthy in social and economic indicators as well as values and ethics.

A small point about capacity building as a tool for sustainability: capacity building of CSOs by donors is so often seen as a way to help CSOs become attractive to other donors, to get funds from them, and to be an exit strategy for the original donor. This is referred to by many donors, amazingly, as sustainability, self-reliance, and decreasing dependency. It is not – it is serial dependency on a string of different foreign donors, not financial self-reliance. What you need for financial self-reliance is local resource mobilization from fund-raising from the public, the government, and business, the making of money from CSO owned enterprises, and this is very important. However, as long as the process of negotiating foreign donor funds is less burdensome than the effort required to mobilize local resources, then CSOs will continue to turn to foreign donors, unfortunately. Serious capacity building for financial self-reliance will only follow a change of thinking and re-orientation about the issue of dependence.

As you know CSOs argue long and hard between trying to change the government policies and practices, or service delivery as their main function. Many CSOs are service delivery agencies – probably most: they think that they are helping the poor better than others, particularly better than the government. Too often they are content, however, to ‘polish their jewels’ by which I mean do what they are doing well, in a limited area, and with limited results. If they are having impact and helping the poor better than the government, then it is worth going to scale, and persuading the government of the rightness of their approach. CSOs then need to have skills in influencing policies, and this involves capacities in advocacy, lobbying, communication, negotiation, persuasion.

A problem with CSOs is that they often think that they know better than the people they claim to be helping, and design programmes for them, rather than with them. This often results in the benefits ending when the project ends, and the hope that something will be sustained – but little certainty. I think

CSOs need skills in participatory problem identification and participatory planning. We often use the words, but do not always walk the talk.

An example from Bangladesh to show what I mean: I helped local CSOs to become organisationally sound in leadership, financial management, strategic planning etc etc. Towards the end of the course, an argumentative CSO pointed out of the window at the rain which signified the annual floods and typhoons in Bangladesh, and said, “No CSO in Bangladesh can call itself a useful organisation unless it has capacity for disaster preparedness: these are the realities of our country, not financial management practices”. I would suggest that financial management is also important for anyone who is using money donated by others, but I took his point. In the same way, no Kenyan CSO can be seriously useful in Kenya unless they have capacities to work on HIV/AIDS prevention and safe sex education – both for their own staff, and for their beneficiaries.

CSOs need to agree what are the issues that are preventing their country from developing an ideal, healthy, civil society, and build their capacities in these fields, as well as developing the default capacities that any organisation that is taking other peoples money to do development need.