

An African perspective on capacity building

by Naomi Pardington and Melanie Coyne

What does institutional capacity building (ICB) mean for southern-based NGOs? What are the ICB challenges they face? Most importantly, what are the impacts for the beneficiary populations?

Africa Humanitarian Action has its headquarters in Addis Ababa and is operational in 11 African countries.¹ We see ICB as the enhancement of an organisation's governance structures and mechanisms, management practices, effectiveness in resource mobilisation, human resources coordination and support, and standard of service delivery, external relations, monitoring and evaluation. This list is by no means exhaustive.

Capacity building is imperative for African NGOs if they are to improve their sustainability and accountability and to gain more independence. This is even more important as the international humanitarian community embarks on a period of reform. It is essential that southern-based organisations are at the forefront of change in order to bring about a more equitable relationship with their northern counterparts. AHA envisages African NGOs not merely as being implementing organisations in receipt of funding but as key agents for transformation. It is their local knowledge, skills and experience which place them in a unique position to respond to the diverse needs of beneficiary populations.

No cheap option

It costs money for southern-based NGOs to review existing practices, identify gaps and weaknesses, recruit, retain and train staff to required standards and improve communication systems. Proposal writing, the development of new programme areas and improving monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are time consuming. When external expertise is sought or staff have to travel to participate in training events or meetings of coordination networks, further costs

are incurred. Capacity building is a long-term process requiring sustained commitment. Unfortunately, funding is often only granted on a short-term basis and tied to particular programmes of service delivery, leaving agencies little room for manoeuvre for ICB and organisational development. Thus, for example, AHA – now UNHCR's fourth-largest implementing partner – is subject to 5% overhead limits imposed by the agency. Such constraints have a direct impact on the ability of African NGOs to meaningfully address their ICB needs. Donors need to be more accountable and generous, not just in the amounts they give but in the manner in which funds are allocated.

Two-way process

There is a tendency within the discourse on capacity building to assume that it is something that is 'done' to indigenous organisations by their northern partners, to enhance their effectiveness in service delivery and development. There is an unspoken implication that African organisations are passive actors in this process and that there is a lack of capacity inherent in their organisations. This presents a limited view of African organisations and fails to acknowledge their capacities.

Large international agencies also require capacity building and southern NGOs can be uniquely placed to help sensitise them to local contexts and local ownership, raise awareness of the importance of a participatory approach and enhance their ability to link short-term emergency relief with long-term development. Unfortunately, there are few opportunities for such contact. The past year has seen AHA attend a diverse range of meetings, workshops and conferences, very

often participating as the only African organisation, and sometimes the only southern-based organisation. This is a regrettable reflection of the current status of the relationship between northern and southern partners, especially at a time when 'ownership', 'partnership', 'grassroots development' and 'sustainability' are repeatedly encouraged. AHA wants to see greater representation and active involvement of African and other southern-based actors within forums, networks and working groups.

South-South linkages are equally important and also require funds. As part of its commitment to capacity building and strengthening the ability of southern-based organisations to respond to humanitarian crises, AHA is working with others to strengthen South-South relationships between organisations. As a member of the Overseas Development Institute's Civil Society Partnerships Programme² AHA is helping to encourage greater involvement of southern partners and to establish a worldwide network community of practice for think-tanks, policy research institutes and similar organisations working in international development.

The multiple financial and logistical constraints facing indigenous NGOs in capacity building are set to remain as long as southern organisations remain subject to project-based agendas. For thirteen years AHA has struggled, with increasing success, to overcome these obstacles. However, our efforts and those of similar southern-based humanitarian actors cannot be fruitful unless change also occurs on an international level. Ultimately it is affected populations who stand to gain from having stronger and more able indigenous organisations.

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1. www.africahumanitarian.com
2. www.odi.org.uk/cspp