

Capacity Building for Water Management: Some Personal Thoughts¹

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ABSTRACT *Capacity building has become a critical requirement for improving water management practices significantly in the future. The current attempts to enhance capacity are a useful beginning, but they suffer from numerous conceptual and operational constraints, some of which are discussed in this paper. Unless these constraints are objectively identified, and the entire process is carefully planned to overcome these problems promptly and cost-effectively, benefits that are likely to accrue from such efforts would at best be incremental. However, if planned and implemented properly, capacity building has the potential to contribute to a quantum leap in water management during the early part of the 21st century.*

Introduction

The concept of capacity building is not new. For example, it was clearly recognized as a priority item at Mar del Plata (Biswas, 1978), even though during that United Nations Water Conference in 1977, the term capacity building did not exist. The emphasis at Mar del Plata was on human resources development in terms of education, training and research (Recommendation F) and institutional strengthening (Recommendation D), all of which are now considered as integral components of the capacity-building process.

Capacity building is a comparatively new 'buzz word' and, like many other recent similar concepts, it could have different meanings for different people. It is currently used, often interchangeably, with other terms like 'education and training', 'institutional development', 'institution building', 'institutional strengthening' and 'human resources development' to indicate somewhat similar issues generally, but sometimes the emphases given to specific issues by individuals or institutions could be significantly different.

Definition of Capacity Building

The UNDP Symposium on capacity building for the water sector, convened in Delft in 1991, defined capacity building as having three elements (Alaerts *et al.*, 1991):

- creating an enabling environment with appropriate policy and legal frameworks;

- institutional development, including community participation; and
- human resources development and strengthening of managerial systems.

It is a somewhat complicated definition which may complexify its meaning and the subsequent process to develop and implement an operational programme. My view is slightly different. The main and primary requirement for capacity building is how to develop a good cadre of senior managers and decision makers, along all the stakeholders of the water sector, who are competent, 'doers', strategic thinkers and risk takers. It is true that one is often told in many countries that the "system is wrong or inefficient", or "the institution does not allow one to do this or that". Similarly, the New Delhi Statement for the Global Consultation on Safe Water and Sanitation for the 1990s stipulated the need for strong sustainable institutions for capacity building. This approach may not be exactly correct. Institutions often become convenient scapegoats for inaction or inappropriate actions, when the real problem is people. Like the famous cartoon character Pogo, the possum, one can say: "I have seen the enemy, and it is us." Equally, sustainability of major institutions like water ministries is really not a serious or major issue. They may not be efficient, they may change their names periodically, get reorganized many times, but mostly their sustainability is not an issue.

My view is somewhat different. I have seen the same institution become very efficient when a good leader appears, and then deteriorate very quickly as soon as the leadership changes and an inefficient leader is appointed. The same goes for policy and legal frameworks. In the vast majority of cases, there is generally nothing in law or policy that prevents an individual or a group of individuals from doing anything that is rational and reasonable. The system is blamed, but often the people concerned do not want to make decisions or take responsibility for a variety of reasons, even when they have the full legal and institutional authority to do so. Normally they want to play it safe, and thus send a memorandum to their boss asking for authorization even when it is not necessary. The memorandum may stay permanently on the boss's desk because that individual also does not want to make a decision, or it may be sent further upwards requesting a decision. In either case, no decision is made, very little gets done, and either the 'institution' or the 'system' gets blamed, while all the time the real problem is with the people concerned because of lack of initiative and an entrepreneurial spirit.

My thesis is that if we could have the 'right' professionals, the institutions and policies would take care of themselves. In any case, I am not aware of a single country where the policy or law does not support a capacity-building process, even though their realization may leave much to be desired. Clearly all policies and laws in any country could be improved, but such improvement, though desirable, is neither a prerequisite nor an essential condition for facilitating capacity building. Much can be achieved in terms of capacity building in all countries within the existing institutional and policy environments. These should not be reasons for delaying the operationalization of an effective programme on capacity building on a priority basis. What is essential is the will and the determination of the people to take up and implement most of what can be achieved under the existing policies and laws.

Hence, my first point is that for *effective capacity building*, the first and the most essential requirement is *having a good cadre of capable senior managers*. The rest, such

as institutions, policies or laws, while important, are second-order necessities. Competent, well-trained, and committed individuals can and will always perform their tasks irrespective of policy constraints, absence of appropriate legal frameworks and unresponsive institutional settings. However, even with the best policies, laws and institutions and adequate availability of funds, if the right people are not there, progress at best can only be slow and marginal. This observation is valid not simply for the various governmental institutions but also for other stakeholders in the water sector such as universities and research institutions, the private sector, NGOs, etc.

Major Issues

There are many other important but interrelated issues, which need priority considerations if the capacities of the water sector in developing countries are to be built up properly within a reasonable time frame. Only seven important considerations will be discussed here.

(1) In spite of the extensive rhetoric of the importance of capacity building, it is not receiving the type of support it deserves from governments, external support agencies, universities and other stakeholders

There is no question that during the past five years, capacity building as a subject has become increasingly popular and is attracting more and more attention. Equally, the amount of funds earmarked for this topic, in terms of projects and programmes, from various national and international sources, has grown very significantly in recent years. However, objective and careful analyses would indicate that for the vast majority of cases, the end results have often been far less impressive than originally expected, irrespective of the glowing evaluations (which are really pseudo-evaluations) that may have been made. The reasons for this are many, and only a few important ones will be discussed.

- The majority of governments and external support agencies (ESAs) are continuing to do basically what they had been doing before, but many of the 'old' activities are now being given the new and trendy label of capacity building to attract additional funds, manpower and visibility. This 'business as usual' approach, primarily to take advantage of additional resources, is not paying good dividends and is unlikely to do so in the future. This, of course, is not a surprising result.
- Generally speaking, neither governments nor ESAs have developed sound, integrated and implementable capacity-building strategies for the water sector, with a solid conceptual base which tries to solve the water problems of the present and the future of any specific country. The very few strategies that currently exist fall within one or more of the following categories: too academic, operationalization aspects not considered specifically, and responds to yesterday's problems with yesterday's solutions, which may no longer be appropriate owing to changing technical, economic, social, environmental and political conditions. Of all the major international organizations, only the United Nations Development Programme has made a concerted attempt to develop a realistic strategy for capacity building for the water sector.

- Universities and research institutions, in both developed and developing countries, are still not geared to educate and train people who can successfully plan, operate and manage water resources in developing countries in an integrated manner under the rapidly changing social, economic, environmental and political conditions. Nor are they conducting research intensively on how most of the real and urgent problems facing the countries concerned can be resolved successfully. For example, a significant part of the Asian continent is in the monsoon belt, which has some very specific boundary conditions for efficient water management. These hydroclimatic conditions simply do not exist in North America or Western Europe. They require very specific approaches and solutions. And yet, all the Asian countries have neglected research on water management under monsoon conditions. Their research efforts are mostly very similar to what is being done in the various major European and North American universities. Even in the only advanced country that is in the monsoon belt, Japan, water management under monsoon conditions is for the most part neglected. Many similar examples can be given from all over the world where good solutions to improve water management are not available for the countries concerned. In such instances, capacities of the institutions need to be built up so that they can conduct research on real problems to find appropriate solutions. Only when the solutions are found can the capacities of the stakeholders be enhanced.

(2) No proper assessment of national capacity-building requirements is available at present for any developing country

While a few attempts have been made recently to assess national capacity-building requirements, they suffer from one or more of the following problems: too shallow, too general, too theoretical, use a laundry-list type of approach for identifying numerous stress, consider only some specific institutions or parts of an institution, no thought is given as to how the results could be operationalized, no long-term commitment available from the most senior decision makers, and the incapability to identify future problems and their potential solutions.

For the first time an attempt is being made to make a national assessment of the capacity-building requirements of all the stakeholders of the water sector in Mexico on a scientific and systematic basis. While this attempt is most commendable, it is too early to make a judgement on the final results at present. The work is being supported by UNDP, and the initial set of results should be available by the end of 1996.

(3) External support agencies work primarily with governments; universities and other stakeholders have generally been neglected

In the long run, universities will have to play the most important role in training the next generations of water professionals properly. At present, universities are basically neglected. University facilities and laboratories are often 10–25 years behind the times. Emphasis is often on theoretical aspects of problems rather than on their practical applications. Accordingly the type and level of research and development that could be undertaken are dictated by these outdated facilities, and the utility value of the research results is extremely limited. In contrast, government laboratories often receive state-of-the-art equipment from

the ESAs, which are for the most part under-used or even never used. Unquestionably, university facilities and capacities in developing countries need to be built up as a priority issue, if national capacity building is to be an important requirement.

(4) Experts sent by external support agencies or invited by national governments are often inappropriate

The vast majority of the experts sent by ESAs, or invited by national governments, are often inappropriate because of their limited knowledge of the physical, social, institutional, legal and cultural conditions and practices of the country concerned. There is no doubt that the experts sent to assist the countries to build up capacities often become part of the problem instead of being part of the solution. This is not surprising since the water problems of Canada, France or the United States, and their solutions, could be very different from those of Egypt, India, China or Mexico. Foreign experts, unless they have worked in the countries concerned regularly over an extended period, and are thus fully familiar with the prevailing conditions, generally would not in most instances even be aware of the real problems, issues and constraints, nor would they be familiar with the institutional strengths, weaknesses and biases, cultural practices and so on. It should be noted that what may work in the United States may not be appropriate for India, and vice versa. Equally what may work in India may not be relevant for China or Mexico, since implementable solutions are not necessarily universal for a variety of reasons. Thus, just because one may be an expert in one country does not mean that person should automatically be considered to be an appropriate expert for solving the water problems of another, especially when the person concerned has only a limited knowledge of that country.

Accordingly, the current practice of flying in so-called experts to a country in which they either have not worked earlier or only have limited experience for short periods, could not only prove to be counterproductive but also could have serious long-term costs because of the problems these experts may help to create. For their part, as a general rule, developing countries should not accept short-term foreign experts, who are not familiar with their national problems, conditions and priorities, irrespective of how much pressure is put on them by ESAs.

It is also not unusual to find foreign experts offering specific solutions and/or procedures as a general generic solution to all similar problems anywhere in the world. This, which can be termed 'a solution-in-search-of-problems' approach, for the most part has proved to be at best not cost-effective and at worst a failure. Instead of starting with a solution and then trying to fit the solution to the framework of the problem, one needs to start with the problem, identify the boundary conditions, and then determine a realistic solution. Unfortunately, the 'solution-in-search-of-problems' approach has been widely used in one form or another in most developing countries in recent years.

(5) There are many areas where it would be difficult to build capacities in the developing world, since the necessary knowledge base and/or methodologies simply do not exist

A good example of this is environmental impact assessment (EIA) of water development projects. It is now clear to those of us who are working intensively

in this area that the EIA methodologies that were developed in the United States in the early 1970s are inappropriate for use in developing countries, and our existing knowledge base in this area leaves much to be desired. Yet these flawed methodologies have been introduced extensively in developing countries, by both the countries themselves and the ESAs. Capacities are being built up using this flawed methodology, and often based on erroneous knowledge. Accordingly, not only are the results sub-optimal, but also it would not be an easy task to change the practices that have already been introduced.

There are other areas where methodologies used earlier, often successfully, may no longer be adequate owing to the rapid changes witnessed in recent years. Thus, before capacities can be developed, considerable research needs to be carried out to ensure that appropriate techniques and knowledge base are available. Thus, capacity building in the research area is an important necessity, an issue that has been widely neglected in recent years.

(6) Many of the capacities that are being attempted to be built up could be irrelevant or inappropriate

Many of the recent attempts at improving capacities have been basically irrelevant since they were either too general or not related to the job needs of the persons concerned in any specific way. A review of numerous training courses indicates that a very significant percentage of them were hastily organized, without much pre-planning or even consideration of the specific requirements of the trainees. Not surprisingly, they have had very little, if any, discernible impact on the subsequent performance of the trainees. Many of these training courses are also often extremely expensive, and thus their overall cost-effectiveness is at best somewhat limited. A good example is a two-week international training course evaluated by this author, which was organized in Indonesia by a very major multilateral development agency and funded by an important bilateral aid agency. It was considered by both to be an "outstanding success", even though the cost per trainee for this two-week course was a staggering US\$34 000. Sadly it never occurred to the two organizations that, irrespective of the quality of the course, which incidentally left much to be desired, they could easily have sent each trainee to a prestigious university such as Oxford for 18 months, instead of on a short *ad hoc* training course which even under the best of conditions could only have a limited impact. There are far too many similar examples which should be a major cause for concern for both the developing countries and the ESAs.

(7) Capacity building is a long-term continuous process, and thus any programme in this area must have the full support and commitment of the various stakeholders in the countries concerned. Equally, if any programme is being financially supported by one or more ESAs, they should also make long-term commitments. Without such commitments, results are likely to be patchy, and are unlikely to improve the water management process in any discernible fashion.

Because it is a long-term process, realistic and measurable targets should be stipulated clearly in the overall programme. There should be regular and objective evaluations of the programme to review whether the targets agreed to earlier are being met, or are even appropriate, and whether the capacity-building

programme is actually contributing to more efficient water management. As techno-economic and other related conditions change with time, new ideas and knowledge are being generated continuously, and the implementation of any capacity-building programme is a complex task even under the best of conditions, the results of evaluations should be reviewed carefully. If necessary, the original programme should be updated in the light of the findings of periodic evaluations. Pseudo-evaluations, which unfortunately are fairly common at present, should be avoided at all costs. A good, operational capacity-building programme can be achieved only if the process is dynamic.

Concluding Remarks

Unquestionably, capacity building is going to be an essential requirement for efficient water management in the 21st century, certainly much more so than it is today. However, it is a very easy task to say it is going to be an important requirement, and countries all over the developing world must give this aspect priority consideration. Already, the issue is receiving considerable rhetoric and lip-service from the many different stakeholders in the water sector from several countries, and the ESAs concerned. One would, however, be hard pressed to identify more than a few intelligent, well-conceived and operational plans that have the long-term commitment of all the parties. In fact, there are many things that are now being done in the name of capacity building which could probably best be forgotten. The 'old wine in a new bottle' approach, which is currently being widely practised in different parts of the world, can only bring marginal benefits. It will certainly not contribute to the quantum leap needed to improve water management in the 21st century. The whole area needs significant new intellectual contributions and practical considerations, which it is not getting at present. Without a concerted effort to build capacity on a realistic basis, it will not fulfil its expected potential. The situation reminds one of the words of George Bernard Shaw, who said:

You see things; and you say "why?"
But I dream things that never were;
and I say "Why not?".

Note

1. This paper is based on a Key Note Plenary Lecture give at the Sixth Stockholm Water Symposium, 4-9 August 1996.

References

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