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The Serendipity of Capacity Building: A Story from Sri Lanka

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We are indebted to the English author Horace Walpole for the word *serendipity*, which he coined in one of the 3000 or more letters on which his literary reputation primarily rests. In a letter of 28 January 1754, Walpole says that *'this discovery, indeed, is almost of that kind which I call Serendipity, a very expressive word.'* Walpole formed the word on an old name for Sri Lanka, *Serendip*. He explained that this name was part of the title of *'a silly fairy tale, called The Three Princes of Serendip: as their highnesses travelled, they were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of...'*¹

Introduction

When we all started it in the mid-nineties, none of us, including the donors who initiated the process, used the term capacity building — in our case, we² did not even know such a term

¹<<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/serendipity>>

² In the rest of the text the words 'we', 'us', 'our' are being used in most cases to denote a small group of people, including the writer, who implemented the so-called capacity building initiative in Sri Lanka. Sometimes, the use of 'we' also denotes this small group and donors. The small group was later called the Steering Committee (SC). As the narrator of the story, I also use the terms 'I', 'me' and 'my'; this use of

was being used in the development circuit! But after a while, as we were doing it, the term somehow crept into our and the donors' vocabulary. This story is about an initiative of three European donor agencies in the mid-nineties to build the capacity of their partners in Sri Lanka. The story's emphasis is on the unexpected and complicated events that messed up a straightforward plan devised mainly by the donors and their consultants — and how this straightforward plan metamorphosed into a totally different animal that neither the donors nor we ever dreamed of.

The context and the actors

Three private donor agencies from Germany, United Kingdom and the Netherlands started discussions with a few of us about 'doing something' for the problems they face in continuing to offer support to their partners in Sri Lanka. We were told that their organisations were under heavy pressure from their own back-donors and supporters and they would therefore not be in a position to continue their support to Sri Lankan partners, as the latter do not live up to the expectations of the emerging funding regime. For us to get supported under this new regime,

the first person also indicates the role that I played as the coordinator of the initiative.

a change was therefore needed. An 'intervention' was needed to introduce the change. The exact nature of the intervention was to be discussed with the partners and we were expected to implement the intervention. At that time, I was working in a national level NGO that also played a somewhat go-between role with the three donors and their partners in Sri Lanka. I was persuaded to be the liaison and coordinating point of this process.

Contextualising....

The beginning of this story coincided with a series of vast changes happening in Sri Lanka. In 1994, a new government came into power, defeating a party that had ruled the country for 17 years. The seventeen-year period marked some sea changes in Sri Lanka:

- In 1977, a full-fledged market liberalisation policy was introduced. The entire economic structure was changed. Lots of foreign investors came in and free trade zones were established. Privatisation took place at a rapid pace.
- Interestingly, the late seventies was also the time that INGOs started to expand their work in Sri Lanka as the exchange controls were relaxed with the introduction of the open economy.
- The government that came into power in 1977 enjoyed 5/6th majority in the Parliament. Draconian laws were introduced. The constitution was amended with little or no resistance. A system of executive presidency was introduced; vesting near-

authoritarian powers to the president.

- In 1982, the elections were not held on time; instead a bogus referendum was conducted to prolong the period of the Parliament.
- By the early eighties the grievances of Tamil people took a violent form. Ethnic riots in 1983 saw thousands of Tamil people being killed and their property looted. Many were displaced. Thousands of survivors sought refuge in many countries abroad. The Tamil rebel movement became a power to reckon with and the country was dragged into a civil war.
- A similar wave of armed rebellion was waged by southern Sinhalese youths in the late 80s. A period of terror reigned in the country for about three years resulting in killings and counter-killings by both the rebels and the military/police.
- Elections conducted during this period were marred by violence. Election malpractices were rampant. The democratic space in the country was shrunk. Dissent was not tolerated. Disappearances and killings ruled the day.

The change of government in 1994 took place as a reaction to this accumulation of pressures in the 17 years. One of the promises of the opposition party, which subsequently came into power, was that they would adopt a new economic policy: an open economy with a human face. Many civil society organisations and NGOs were behind the force that finally changed the regime. The new

government soon started negotiations with the Tamil rebel movement. A ceasefire agreement was signed. The democratic space which had hitherto been limited or non-existent was gradually reclaimed. Many civil society organisations extended their support to the peace efforts of the newly elected government. Many countries came forward to support the economy, which had been badly affected by the civil war of more than ten years. Sri Lankans as well as others felt a sense of freedom, hope and euphoria; they all thought that a 'new era' had dawned.

The three donors in our story were among the many donors who felt upbeat about the 'new era' and resolved to expand their support to Sri Lanka at this crucial juncture of the country's history. But the way in which the Sri Lankan partners were conducting their affairs, in the opinion of the donors, did not allow them to extend their support. Hence, the donors felt that something needed to be done so that we would not miss the opportunity for increased aid.

The Process

The three donor agencies had been extending their support to a variety of partners in Sri Lanka from the mid-sixties. In 1994, about 80 Sri Lankan organisations were being supported by these agencies. The three agencies worked very closely with each other as they all shared a common identity, representing the Protestant constituencies in their respective countries in Europe. There were many cases of joint funding. There was a great deal of common understanding between the desk officers of the three agencies as they worked together for many years in Sri Lanka. The initiative to 'do

something urgently' therefore came primarily from the three desk officers of the agencies.

A consultant — an Indian based in Thailand — who had worked closely with one of the donors was hired to provide guidance and expertise for the initiative. The donors picked a handful of personalities with whom they have had funding relationships. I was asked to coordinate the process and liaise between the donors and what was later called the Steering Committee and partner organisations.

The three donors designed a questionnaire to assess what was then called the training needs of their partners. A workshop was conducted to discuss the findings of the questionnaire survey and to explain the wishes of the donors to launch a new initiative. There was no resistance from the partners; many of them welcomed the idea.

The handful of personalities picked by the donors was soon called a Steering Committee (SC). I was part of the SC in addition to my responsibility as the coordinator. These people who were hand-picked have had long-standing relationships with the donors. However, according to the donors, these organisations also suffered from problems. But these personalities had earned the trust and confidence of the donors due to their commitment, perseverance and integrity over many years. In fact, many of them came from non-NGO backgrounds such as trade unions, leftist political parties and radical religious groups. In other words, the SC members were not experts on what was later termed capacity building. Rather, they were well-rooted and well-respected people not only in the NGO-

circuit but also in other social and political arenas.

Plan A

The three donors and their external consultant, having gone through the findings of the survey on training needs, came up with an idea of conducting two workshops on Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation (PME) to start with, as these were some of the areas that the donors felt important or lacking among their Sri Lankan partners. The idea was that the external consultant would fly in from Thailand to conduct these workshops and we were expected to find a couple of good Sri Lankan co-trainers to translate the external consultant's English into Sinhala and Tamil, the two languages that are used in Sri Lanka. The plan was pretty concrete, and some tentative dates were fixed for these workshops.

Rethinking Plan A

However, at this time the SC gradually started to think about what was going to happen as everything, it seemed, had been well planned ahead. Some members of the SC expressed reservations about the process though they agreed about the goals of the donors in principle. The SC all of a sudden became active and started discussing and developing a totally different set of activities. Their main argument was that things like PME are important but that these technical trainings would not make sense unless they were well grounded in the context in which NGOs are embedded and the challenges that they face. The SC wanted to consult the partners on this matter to ascertain what kind of issues and challenges they face and what kind of facilitation that could help them to

address those issues and challenges. There was vehement objection by the donors to the new plan as they considered it a duplication of work and a waste of money. Stubborn as it was, the SC went ahead with its plan. Instead of sending a questionnaire, the organisations were visited by the SC members. This allowed us to have an in-depth discussion about the specific issues that the organisations were grappling with.

Enter Plan B

The questions we asked were not very different from those asked by the donor-designed/administered survey. The stark difference, however, was the totally different set of answers that the NGO leaders and key staff gave us. For instance, let's consider the simple question of what kind of training needs NGOs have. When this question was asked by donors, the answer was a long list consisting of: reporting, planning, monitoring, financial management, evaluation, etc. But when we asked the same question, this list was not shown. Instead, they had a long discussion on issues such as the difficulty and challenge of understanding a context that is very complicated and changing rapidly and constantly. For instance, for 17 years they have been working under a near authoritarian regime and civil war situation. Now the government has changed; a ceasefire agreement has been signed. The reactive strategies that the NGOs were compelled to use for nearly two decades seem to be irrelevant in the new scenario. There is space for NGOs to play a proactive role in the peace process. The government is willing to collaborate with NGOs. But what are the possible pitfalls of such collaborations? These are some of the

dilemmas they discussed with us. So the 'burning need' of the NGOs whom we met at that time was how to understand the new context in which they should work. How should they face the challenges that are very new to them? What kind of leadership and cadre should they develop to face such challenges?

They were also sharing with us their failures, exasperations and frustrations about their work. In contrast, their answers to the donor-survey much more guarded. There, they reported that their organisations are doing fine and only have a few minor problems which could be fixed if they have the opportunity to train themselves in areas such as planning, monitoring, financial management, etc. The series of discussions held in different parts of Sri Lanka were indeed a great learning process for both the SC and the organisations concerned. It was also a confidence- and trust-building exercise between them and us. For many of the questions they posed, we didn't have easy answers. But there was willingness and openness from both sides to jointly look for answers.

Having synthesised the deliberations of the discussions we had with the different organisations, we convened three regional consultations to share the findings and what emerged as possible areas of work. It was in these consultations that the idea of a Training of Trainers (ToT) and input for a curriculum of such a ToT came up. The curriculum that the SC finally produced, taking into consideration the concerns raised in the regional consultations, devoted five sessions for understanding the Sri Lankan context and its challenges in addition to another five donor-favoured sessions such as PME,

financial management, etc. The resource persons, it was decided, were to be drawn from Sri Lanka.

The donor response

By this time, I was asked to take over as the overall coordinator of the process while one SC member opted to work full time as the training coordinator. The scheme developed by the SC was a completely new proposition for the donors. The donors' idea had been for a simple operation consisting of a few training workshops conducted by an external consultant. Initially, the donors expressed a lot of reservations about the first five sessions devoted to an understanding of the Sri Lankan context, questioning whether it is proper training. We had no direct answer to that technical question but we strongly felt that it did not make sense for trainings to be delivered in a rather 'one-size-fits-all' approach with little or no sensitivity to the real situation 'on the ground'. The consultant from Thailand expressed the opinion that discussions on context would lead into polemics and further division, given the divisive and political nature of Sri Lankan NGOs. For this, we had a clear answer: given the nature and background of the specific group of organisations that we were hoping to work with, it is necessary to allow such discussions. If not, we argued, it will be a sterile exercise to talk about the issues and challenges that they face.

After a long tug-of-war between the donors and us, eventually the donors conceded to the SC's firmly held position. We felt responsible to carry out this important task; therefore we needed to have our say in the whole process. In hindsight, I feel that this is a rare event that the donors were

compelled to abandon their well-laid, simplistic plan and allow a group of non-experts to experiment with a set of activities that were complicated and extremely ambitious.

What Happened Thereafter: a Very Brief Account

Curriculum of the ToT	
Session 1:	Development theory in relations Sri Lanka (5 days)
Session 2:	Changing context: SL and elsewhere (5days)
Session 3:	NGOs, the phenomenon and Sri Lankan experience (5 days)
Session 4:	Challenges in SL: Agriculture, Youth (6 days)
Session 5:	Challenges in SL: Agriculture, Youth (6 days)
Session 6:	Planning (5 days)
Session 7:	Monitoring & Evaluation (5 days)
Session 8:	Accountability and Financial Management (5 days)
Session 9:	Communication (5 days)
Session 10:	Adult Education and Training (5 days)

Unlike in usual storylines, the climax took place at the very beginning of our story when a group of non-experts asserted themselves and turned the plans of the donors upside down. This is not to say that the rest of the story was boring and uneventful. But for the sake of brevity, the rest of the story is narrated in a very condensed form.

Two batches of trainers (20+20) were trained within a period of three years,

with additional follow-up and refresher courses provided. The participants were predominantly leaders from small and medium-sized organisations. Only a few of them held positions at training desks and the like. The participants were drawn from both Sinhala and Tamil communities. This was a rare occasion to have an intensive training conducted for Tamil and Sinhala people together. The training sessions were therefore conducted in Sinhala and Tamil, with translations. Resource persons were drawn from both the ethnic groups. It was not easy to produce training materials in both the languages due to the lack of skilled translators.

Each participant was visited in her/his work setting to discuss how s/he was trying to translate the learning into action, and colleagues and leadership were questioned to get their feedback on the participant's performance.

The initial project contract was for three years. At the end of this period, an 18-month extension was granted to do the follow-up work. When the SC came up with a proposal about our plans for continuing the work we had begun, the response from donors was at best lukewarm. They were concerned about a possible institutionalisation of an initiative that was meant to be specific and time-bound. So the donors wanted an organisational study to be conducted that would focus on issues

History in brief...

1994: Discussion among donors

1995: Donors discuss the idea with a selected group of people in SL, Needs Identification Survey, tentative plan for workshops

1996: SC asserts itself and comes up with its own plan, negotiations between donors and SC

1997: Launch of the ToT

1997-2002: Phase 1 (2 ToTs and follow up)

1999: Donor consortium

2002-2003: Extension

2004: Donors stopped funding

such as the need, our capacity to continue and more importantly find an ‘appropriate’ organisational model for us to consider. A consultancy firm attached to one of the donors in the Hague, was selected to carry out this assignment. A consultant, with an impressive CV that referred to many things he had done in Asia, Latin America and Africa, was sent to Sri Lanka. After about ten days of work, the consultant started discussing with the SC. It was not easy for him to deal with a diverse group like us, who spoke very different languages, and this perhaps confused the consultant. The consultant left the island with the promise that he would send us his recommendations and an organisational model for us to consider in a couple of weeks’ time. Weeks and months went by and the report from the consultant never reached the island!

In the meantime, the interest of the donors diminished very fast. One of the donors had by this time decided to withdraw itself from Sri Lanka. The other two donors continued their work in Sri Lanka but were not keen to extend their support to us. The reasons given for their decision were ambiguous and contradictory. Undaunted by the vagaries of the donors, the SC decided to take a risk and carry forward the process. By this time, we had encouraged the participants of the two ToTs to form a pool of facilitators. On their own, they were carrying out many activities to improve their skills and knowledge. The SC had a series of discussions with the ‘pool’ to work out a strategy on how we could collaborate in the future. The agreement reached was that they would not become our staff — which would contradict the very notions of capacity building of their own organisations — but work on a freelance and case-to-case basis. This was also a

perfect proposition for us as we did not need to worry about a big payroll. The pool members were from different parts of the country, representing different ethnic groups and engaged in diverse sectors. What followed thereafter was a delivery of training and consultancy services for different groups of organisations in a collaborative form. Initially, our own staff played a central role in designing and delivering programme. But gradually, the pool members were given more responsibility to design the programmes. The synergy between the vast and diverse network of pool members and our own contacts proved to be rewarding to both parties as well those who received our services. For the last two years, we have not received or asked for donor funding. The income we earn from the services that we offer is sufficient to cover our costs.

Lessons learnt

Having narrated the story, this is the moment to reflect on our experience. The reflection is not a post-mortem, as the story is still unfolding. It is too premature for us to jump to conclusions. However, a few points of reflection based on what we have experienced so far are possible; these are outlined below, in no particular order of importance.

Who should ask the questions and how? I have already explained about our experience of Sri Lankan organisations giving different answers to the same questions when they were asked by different actors. It may sound simplistic reasoning, but when the donors ask what kind of problems you have and what kind of solutions you need, it is obvious that the partners would give

answers to please the donors. Put differently, the partners would pretend to use the donors' diagnosis and prescription of medicine to cure their illnesses. This behaviour is understandable in relationships that are characterised by dependency and lack of open dialogue. But when another actor, who did not have a funding relationship, like us asked the same question, the diagnosis as well as the prescription (or at least the preference of the same) was entirely different; in some cases contradictory to what was said to donors. With whom are the organisations doing a genuine sharing and analysis of their own problems? This is one of the factors that capacity building initiatives should take into account when assessing the needs for the same.

Was the process successful? As a ToT, one could say that the process was not successful. In fact, this is the conclusion that the donors more or less arrived at. Most of the trainees didn't become trainers or consultants in the short run so that they could address the issues raised by donors. But in the long run, they became very effective leaders in their respective regions or in some cases, nationally. It was after this phase that they gradually started performing the roles of consultants and trainers. This is a good lesson, we think, to fellow capacity builders. The trainer–consultant model may not be the best form for capacity building strategies. Trainers/consultants just as they are, are not accepted. It is perhaps due to the fact that the 'leader' role is highly appreciated in the South Asian contexts. What we learnt is that one cannot be a trainer or a consultant if you are not an accepted or proved leader. So leadership development and perspective building

should be organically linked to any capacity building effort. If not, we will only be able to 'produce' a bunch of sterile self-appointed (or donor-appointed) consultants and trainers who will, at the end of the day, be rejected or merely tolerated because of the fear of losing donor funds.

What form of governance should a capacity building initiative have? The SC was composed of a diverse group of people who came from very different backgrounds and social engagements. It was not easy for me to work with this group as there was a constant pulling and pushing of agendas. One agenda was wanting the organisation to be a social movement or to be an organisation that supported social movements. In fact, one Board member resigned voluntarily as he thought that we were not serving the most needy organisations. But another wanted a more focused business model. As a result, there was constant debate and creative thinking taking place at the SC level. As new ideas arose, the SC invited new members to join in so that they could contribute to make these ideas workable. One could say that the SC was encroaching into management/operational tasks, which may well have been the case. But we felt that in the initial formative years, it was helpful as the whole thing was a new experiment. The cohesion, engagement and assertiveness of the SC made the organisation a formidable force to negotiate and bargain with donors. This story is proof that a diverse, lively and dynamic governance structure was crucial to whatever success we had.

The need for continuous dialogue and learning on capacity building. In the beginning, I said that neither the donors nor us had any specific idea

about capacity building. But this does not say that both were aimless and clueless. This story compels us to understand that capacity building is not a static thing that can be predetermined using a set of strict criteria for success. Rather, it is an evolutionary and dynamic thing that needs to be constantly learnt and adapted accordingly by all parties involved in it.

How would the donors assess this experience? We are yet to understand how this experience was assessed by the donors who initiated it. There were regular meetings between the donors and us. But I wonder why the donors' perceptions about what happened were not shared by us. What we did was perhaps diametrically opposed to what the donors wanted to do. To be fair to the donors, I think that they were gracious enough to accommodate our stubbornness. But why did the intensive engagement and dialogue that characterised the very early stages of the project, take a dip towards the end of the process? Was this a case of what we call in Sinhala '*benda gaththa berey gabann obna*' (crudely translated: 'now that we've tied up³ the drum, it should be played')?

Financial viability vs social viability. Some members of the SC, especially those who came from non-NGO backgrounds, used to flag this issue whenever we discussed our future moves. Given our experience in the last two years, one can say that we would be able to sustain ourselves by offering services to different groups of organisations. In other words, the

organisation is at the moment, and perhaps could be at least in the next few years, financially viable. But can we be complacent about ourselves just because we are financially viable and are not dependent on donor funds? What is the nature of our client profile? What kind of assignments/contracts are we taking up? A close scrutiny of these questions would raise some serious questions about our future directions. At the end of the day, will we be socially viable? This is a question that we should constantly ask ourselves as we go along.

The end: did they all live happily ever after?

Ours could well be another *silly fairy tale of the three Persian Princes*. The question is, who are the princes: donors or us? Be that as it may, for sure, as we *travelled, like the Persians, we were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which the donors and we were not in quest of*. The moral of the story so far is the joy and challenge of allowing serendipity to happen in our initiatives to build capacity.

So essentially, this is a story to be continued. Perhaps the other part can be told when INTRAC announces its next capacity building conference! Hopefully, there will be more *serendipities* to share!

³ Tied-up is a literal translation of '*benda-gaththa*' in Sinhala which is also used in a figurative sense for 'having married'. The subtle meaning is that 'now that you have married you have to put up with the spouse'!