



PraxisNote No.9

Metaphor and Analogy

Creating Meaning and
Understanding Complexity

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Metaphor and Analogy: Creating Meaning and Understanding Complexity

The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic, and it seems a tool for creation which God forgot inside one of His creatures when He made him.

Jose Ortega y Gasset

Keywords

Capacity building, organisational learning, analytical capacity, civil society organisations, community groups, knowledge

Introduction

This paper illustrates the value of metaphor and analogy for assisting the development of analytical capacities in civil society organisations (CSOs) based on practical experience from the field. It presents observations of capacity building processes in three very different contexts in the western Balkans¹ where organisations and community groups are struggling to find ways to comprehend and express the complexity of the environment in which they work. The use of metaphor was introduced by facilitators with varying degrees of suggestion in the three contexts, but in all cases participants were encouraged to create analogy to real experience by using pictures, drawing, stories or commonly recognised objects or categories. The examples suggest that the generation of metaphor may assist individuals and groups to make sense of complexity through resorting to simple images. It may also help them understand abstract ideas and seemingly elusive processes, and generate new perspectives and models which form the basis for creating meaning.

¹ The western Balkans is taken to mean the region of the former Yugoslavia and Albania, in which the author has been working for the past four-and-a-half years.

Weak CSO Capacity for Critical Reflection and Practical Learning

Observers of CSO capacity building have remarked an almost 'universal weakness' in CSOs, which inhibits their conversion of critical reflection into practical learning (Fowler, 1997: 64). External barriers over which the organisation may have no control often restrict opportunities for learning. These include donor priorities which may prescribe inappropriate approaches within a short-term fragmentary project framework, the pressure to reduce overheads which leaves little room to invest in enquiry and reflection, and competition for scarce funding resources that creates demands to spend time on promoting immediate or superficial success rather than addressing the more challenging task of advancing longer-term and more deep-rooted solutions (Britton, 2002: 34; Sterland, 2003: 42)

In a recent review of approaches to 'Building Analytical and Adaptive Capacity in CSOs' (2004), Alnoor Ebrahim identifies the continuing tendency of donors and CSOs alike to conceive of capacity building in terms of mastery of a

series of technical skills, such as project writing, strategic planning and financial management, as the most important external obstacle to the development of organisational learning. This kind of capacity building assistance is limited in three important ways:

- It is oriented towards the achievement of short-term or immediate results and outputs, often ignoring the needs to develop more open-ended longer-term process;
- It is more often than not delivered as formal generic trainings without reference to local culture or the specific needs or stage of development of the CSO;
- It cultivates an oversimplified, but atomised understanding of capacity building, neglecting action across the whole organisation as well as dynamic relationship of the CSO with its environment.

Ebrahim suggests a number of possible improvements to this approach in order to advance organisational learning, including the increased use of participatory approaches, the longer-term engagement of capacity building that is oriented towards process, not results, and the greater use of 'iterative' approaches in capacity building programmes; that is, learning by doing.

Learning organisations enjoy 'a kind of robust capability' (Kaplan, 1999: 26) that ensures the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of their activities and provides the flexibility necessary to achieve organisational growth and sustainability (Fowler, 2000; Britton, 2002; Goold and Britton, 2000). The organisational capacity to understand the complexity of social processes, reflect critically upon these processes, and develop systematic

approaches to problem-solving is the essential precondition for CSOs to become learning organisations that analyse and adapt to the challenges arising – both within the organisations themselves and in their external environment.

While confirming many of the points above concerning external barriers to learning, my experience of capacity building in the western Balkans over the last four-and-a-half years suggests that the analytical capacity of civil society organisations may be determined more by their culturally dependent perceptions of the world surrounding them, and their relationship to knowledge; that is, how they learn, how they receive information, and how they process that information into knowledge.

Capacity Building in the Balkans

Balkans civil societies as domains of non-profitable associational activity representing the various interests and values of their citizens, but lying beyond the scope and control of either the state or market, are still in their infancy. In the main they date back no more than 15 years to the collapse of communist regimes in the region and the onset of the various conflicts of secession in former Yugoslavia and Albania. Early on, the emergence and growth of the civil sector was in most cases initiated by and dependent on foreign donors with an interest in increasing the influence of ordinary people in processes of social reconstruction, state-building and also the ongoing democratic and economic transitions. In order to survive, Balkan CSOs have had to become experts in predicting and adapting to the latest donor fad or theme, regardless of where their strengths or the interests of their

constituents may lie. In Bosnia for example, over the last nine years, donor policy has passed from support to humanitarian aid, through service provision, conflict resolution, the strengthening of human rights, democracy, and good governance, to more recent interests in public advocacy, poverty reduction and community building.

Capacity Building as Technical Assistance

A major plank of donor support to Balkans civil societies has been capacity building in the form of technical assistance. It is reported that two years after the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where many capacity building programmes were already running, local NGOs were complaining that they were inundated with trainings on 'how to prepare mission statements, project proposals, and reports' but that 'their real needs – mostly financial and political – were being ignored' (Smillie and Todorović, 2001: 36). A review of NGO capacities in the same country carried out over six months in 2002 (Sterland: 2003) confirmed that there had been no major shift away from the technical model of capacity building in the intervening five years. A single piece of evidence during a recent evaluation for INTRAC of a major capacity building programme in Montenegro, drives home the point: in one workshop, all participants remarked that they had previously attended similar sessions to the ones offered by the programme, while one NGO claimed that, under the programme, its workers had attended their seventh technical training for project writing. This indicates that considerable overlap and repetition characterises the capacity building available, which may be a block to the expected evolution or improved capacity.

Capacity Building as a Process

Despite the perseverance of the training approach to capacity building in the Balkans, donors and CSOs are simultaneously paying greater attention to process. I am called upon to facilitate a wide variety of practical tasks within both a shorter and longer timeframe, as well as conduct consultative evaluations of practice-oriented capacity building projects. It is standard practice for donors and capacity builders to ask for participatory approaches, such as PRA and PLA, to be introduced by way of workshops, consultations, coaching and mentorship. This work, however, poses a conundrum: across the spectrum of CSO activity – regardless of the country, political or social context in which this work takes place, the age of the CSO, the formal level of technical ability of the CSO, the educational or social status of the CSO activists – outcomes of process-led work are remarkable for their similarity, blandness, seeming lack of creativity and paucity of analytical power. Organisational vision statements are abstract and uninspiring, strategies are wildly ambitious, programmes of work resort to the same tried but unproven practices, problem trees lack detail and complexity and read remarkably similarly across fields of operation, and so on. Therefore, emphasising the importance of the *process* does not seem to be a solution in itself. It is critical that practitioners take the point of departure in the particular characteristics and needs of the target organisation in order to adapt their methods and facilitation during each capacity building process.

Positivist Legacy versus Constructivist Future

I believe that an explanation may be found in culturally embedded attitudes to knowledge and learning that are inherited from the socialist past of the Balkan countries, but continue to be reproduced in the still largely unreformed education systems of the region, from primary right up to and through university level. In keeping with materialist socialist ideology and the system of socio-political control and organisation that endowed the ruling parties with a monopoly on truth, Balkan peoples became accustomed to view the world through a positivist lens. Positivist theories assert that the world is as it appears to us, that knowledge is a limited but uncontested field, and cause and effect are determined by simple, linear and mechanistic laws. This basic theory of events, social as well as scientific, became culturally embedded via education systems that insisted upon the supremacy of facts and division of all spheres of social, moral and political activity into two easily definable fields: truth and falsity; right and wrong; black and white. Rote learning and the absolute authority of the teacher severely limited opportunities to develop discourse, interpretation and understanding.

The persistence of positivist attitudes presents a considerable obstacle to civil society capacity building according to participatory and process-oriented principles and the development of analytical capacity in CSOs. Participatory methodologies presuppose either a constructivist or 'critical realist' relationship to knowledge and perception that is diametrically opposed to the positivist position (Mukherjee, 1995: 33–5). According to constructivist theory, knowledge is actively constructed by the

learner who imposes meaning according to her/his personal experience. Constructions of meaning are becoming increasingly more complex and differentiated, reflecting the complexity of the world around us. Critical realism proposes a more conservative relationship to the world, one in which the inquirer recognises certain limitations to individual perception. While it claims that truth lies in an interaction between the inquirer and the inquired, it also holds that results should be consistent with tradition and a wider mass of opinion from the 'critical community'.

Metaphor and Comprehension of the New

Recourse to already known metaphors and analogies, and the generation of new or unfamiliar metaphor in process-oriented work, provides a means of stimulating participants to play a more active role in creating the meaning and understanding upon which critical reflection and analysis may be brought to bear. *The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another.*

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have shown that regardless of the paradigm of knowledge and learning through which we live,

in all aspects of life...we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously, unconsciously, by means of metaphor (p. 158).

The simple metaphors 'time is money' and 'business is war' illustrate how metaphor may render the abstract concrete, and how we comprehend new knowledge by reference to mental models we already possess. In a current community-strengthening programme in Northern Bosnia, the Italian NGO, CISP, and their local NGO training partner are using this principle to help community representatives understand and engage with the complexities of tasks such as local development planning and advocacy.

Storytelling and Capacity Building at Community Level

In most cases, the capacities and willingness of community representatives in Northern Bosnia to absorb capacity building assistance delivered according to traditional theoretical principles is low. They are rural people, mainly older men with only the most basic education. They represent communities of those who have recently returned to their original homes after having been displaced during the war (1992 to 1995). Within their municipalities, they are ethnic minorities and are either ignored by municipal governments and local institutions, or subject to systematic discrimination concerning access to jobs, health services, education and welfare. Social trust is low, apathy and feelings of disempowerment high, and dependency on foreign aid agencies still persists.

On the basis of close co-operation with these communities on house rebuilding projects during the last three to four years, CISP local field staff assessed that, while community representatives had many capacity building needs, conventional assistance would be ineffective. Theory would confuse, and direct practical work

on its own (even when undertaken in participatory workshops or via coaching) would not take hold, because its conceptual basis would be considered as irrelevant to the real experience in the communities.

Children's Tales and Strategic Thinking

In order to introduce communities to the idea and process of strategic thinking, including SWOT analysis, setting goals and the need for solidarity and coalition forming, CISP presented strategy in terms of a tale that is taught to all children in Bosnia and Herzegovina during their first days at school:

'Grandfather and the Beet', tells how grandfather grew a giant beet, but when it came to lifting it for storage, the old man, even though he was the most powerful person in the house, did not have the strength for the task. One by one all the household members join in, each contributing muscle power and new ideas, but to no avail. Eventually the dog and the cat also help. The beet is only finally uprooted when a mouse adds its small contribution to the collective effort.

After reminding participants of the story, CISP unveiled a cartoon sketch (see Figure 1) of the story depicting non-specific characters. With the use of a series of cards portraying the various actors in the community (farmer, child, mayor, doctor etc.), participants were asked to represent a number of combinations of the activities, resources and relationships necessary to achieve their own objectives for community development, and to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each course of action.

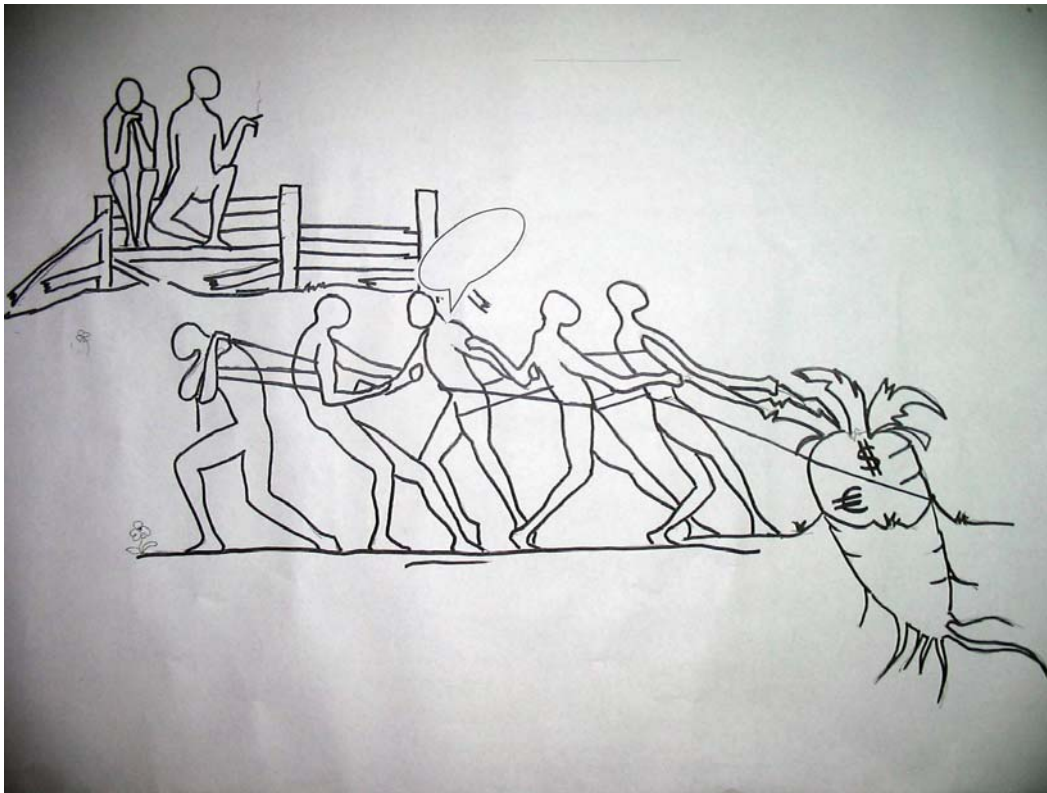


Figure 1: Strategic thinking, after 'Grandfather and the Beet', CISP 2004

Multiple Perspectives and Meanings

CISP has found that the method generates many different perspectives, both from individuals and within groups, on community needs and how best to satisfy them. These perspectives have formed the raw material for closer analysis, discussion and planning during subsequent community activities. It illustrates how use of the appropriate metaphor or analogy may serve as a means to create multiple meanings by which we can understand the complexity of the world around us, and encourage us to interact flexibly with that world. The method also shows that analogy is not purely generative; it also provides a conceptual framework with which we can order and make sense of new knowledge. These two observations come together, if we consider how the

tale, by conceiving of the problem or goal as a stubborn root, demonstrates that 'the framing of problems often depends upon metaphors underlying the stories which generate problem setting and set the direction of problem solving' (Schon, cited in Judge, 1994: 2).

Metaphor and Understanding Organisations

The potential of metaphor as a means of enhancing understanding and learning within organisations has been widely recognised since Gareth Morgan published his groundbreaking *Images of Organization* in 1996. Here Morgan

persuasively asserts that all theories of organisation and management are based upon metaphoric understanding. By detailed reference to eight archetypal metaphors of organisation (machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, instruments of domination) he illustrates how everything that takes place within the organisation, and the way it operates vis-à-vis staff, stakeholders and the wider world is influenced by the meanings generated by the dominant, though often implicit, metaphor. Not all metaphors of organisation are useful. Many in fact are misleading, and an over-dependence on one metaphoric understanding limits organisational learning and development. Morgan suggests, however, that the ability within an organisation to explore new metaphors and examine them in the light of the old, creates increased opportunities for developing analytical capacity and organisational learning, as metaphors provide 'fresh ways of seeing, understanding, and shaping the situations that we want to organise and manage...we can use metaphor to generate a range of complementary and competing insights and learn to build on the strengths of different points of view.' (Morgan, 1996: 6).

Drawing Organisations as Metaphors

Accessing new metaphors is not an easy task. In my capacity building work with CSOs in the Balkans I have often observed how managers and staff find it extremely difficult to conceive of their organisations as totalities on the one hand, and to go beyond overused metaphors of mechanistic systems on the other. A method I use to stimulate the possibilities for advancing description and then

possible understandings of organisations and their environment is INTRAC's rich picture method (described by Bill Crooks in Praxis Note No. 7, 2004). In place of asking individuals to work individually on their own visual exposé of the organisation, I ask them to work in small groups, in order to promote collective creativity, while making sure that a number of possible metaphors are produced. The use of the rich picture method is exemplified below.

Rich Pictures of a Virtual Community

The experience from ongoing facilitation of the localisation of a multi-language Balkan civil society Internet portal and digital radio network, established by OneWorld Italy with the participation of eight NGOs² from seven Balkan regions, suggests that generating new metaphors may aid powers of description, assist in overcoming the limitations of what is already known, and provide a means for analysing the complexities of the organisations in which we work.

The participating organisations all agreed that in order to arrive at a consensus as to what kind of structure the project could be situated in, and how that structure could be managed and administered, they needed first to achieve a common understanding of the mechanisms or processes through which the project works and be able to describe it to themselves and their widespread constituents. A major obstacle for all is that the project is presently organised according to the principles of the medium it uses, the Internet. Each NGO,

² Centre for Development of Non-profit Sector (Serbia), Centre for Electronic Communication (Albania), Citizens Pact (Serbia), MANS (Montenegro) Media Development Centre (Macedonia), Multimedia Institute – mi2 (Croatia), Radio Refugee Network (Bosnia and Herzegovina), and Syri i Vizioni (Kosova/o).

operating as a channel for information from local CSOs, or providing functional services such as financial management and technological expertise, is a node within a complicated web of relations. No single partner has complete knowledge of the whole, but the performance of each is influenced by the performance of the other partners, as well as the participation of each partner's local associate CSOs.

Early on, the participants repeatedly resorted to the metaphor of 'community' to describe the project in its entirety, and the metaphor of 'virtual platform' to give concrete form to 'what' the project is. Owing to their abstract nature, the explanatory and analytical power of these metaphors proved to be inadequate for developing a common understanding of the project, and for providing a conceptual base upon which a local organisational structure could be developed.

The rich picture exercise spawned three alternative metaphoric understandings of the project:

- a pool of ever-increasing water ripples, in which information radiates out from an organisational core at the epicentre to CSOs situated at varying removes from the centre. These organisations simultaneously reflect information back to the centre, creating a constant ebb and flow, like the tide;
- a segmented pie (or sphere), composed of the essential components of the project. The pie, a specifically Balkan staple food common to all cultures, is most usually made from a spiral role of pastry, whose thread cuts across but also unites each pie segment in a number of places;

- a tree whose roots lie in the 'soil' of civil society, but whose fruits are dispersed into the ether of virtual space, which will eventually come to rest on a new plot of civil society soil.

The meanings and associations implicit in these images will now be drawn out and developed in order to test their relevance and suitability for describing and structuring the future locally owned project. It is by no means certain that any of these metaphors will prove appropriate, but the very process of creating new metaphor provides the creative input, a means of comparison and a language for stimulating critical reflection.

Keeping One's Options Open

At this point, a word of caution should be added. Previous experience with rich pictures as tools to understand organisational processes points to the dangers of opting for the obvious, on the one hand, and of not undertaking thorough examination of the newly generated metaphors, on the other. During a guided organisational assessment with a well-established German-Bosnian youth group, rich pictures generated a metaphor that was based upon the smart office and training house they had built with donations from German students a few years before. The *organisation as a house*, while stable, secure and sustainable, was also out of touch with the young people it aimed to assist. Local staff and volunteers were conceived of as being effectively walled in and isolated from wider youth culture, a view confirmed by previous local partner organisations. While other workshop activities and interviews during the assessment revealed a number of other fundamental capacity needs, not least the importance of finding solutions to

confused and disruptive management and board relations, the organisation aimed to concentrate subsequent capacity building efforts on improving relations with local youth. The form this took was a radical restructuring of daily operations, including the removal of all administration and programme staff to a new office, but without any substantive changes to the way the organisation approached stakeholder relations in the field. The changes were extremely unpopular with the local staff, and in the space of two months after the office move, all but one of the staff directly affected by the changes had resigned. This illustrates the danger of focusing on one part of the whole, by closing in on one perspective.

Unlocking Previously Acquired Knowledge through Simple Analogy

Recently I have started experimenting in using metaphor as a means of unlocking previously learnt knowledge and creating a language that can make vaguely or dimly perceived ideas or concepts explicit and obvious. During a longer-term engagement to assist the organisational development of a Montenegrin NGO support organisation, the organisation's trainers and consultants have consistently faced problems with translating theoretical knowledge of capacity building and civil society strengthening into sensitive needs analysis and effective and responsive programme planning. All highly educated and experienced in working with CSOs, these local staff members experience difficulties in describing the complexity of the organisations and environment in which they work, and also in translating their understanding of this complexity into adaptive and flexible approaches when working with their local NGO clients. The result is that, in many cases,

the assistance the organisation has offered to date follows a 'one size fits all' model of generic trainings that is clearly ill-suited to the specific needs of client NGOs that are at various stages of development and working in a range of social segments, geographic and cultural locations.

A hierarchical card sorting exercise³, intended to stimulate recognition of the essential capacity differences the local consultants perceived between their client CSOs, provided disappointing results. Essential distinctions between client organisations were reduced in general to differences in sector or field of operation and geographical area and scope. Direct questioning concerning organisational capacities did not elicit more insightful observations that could form the basis for comparison and analysis. To stimulate imagination and provide a ready-made comparative framework, I conducted an exercise that is usually played as a children's game or as a creative warm-up amongst professional actors. I asked two staff members to answer the question, 'if this NGO were an animal, what kind of an animal would it be?', for a small number of NGOs. I then asked them to explain their choice of animal. I repeated the exercise asking them to classify the organisations according to types of music or musical instruments, knowing that they both had keen and eclectic musical tastes.

The exercise produced a rich mixture of observation, opinion and even analysis based on intimate knowledge of the CSO clients being described, but clearly also informed by theory. By extending the exercise to cover larger groups of organisations, and by increasing the range

³ See Davies, R. (1998) 'Tree Maps: A Tool for Structuring, Exploring and Summarising Qualitative Information', available at: <www.mande.co.uk/docs/treemap.htm>

of metaphor suggested, the approach could be used for providing the initial comparative understanding of organisational strengths and weaknesses upon which more responsive and sophisticated forms of capacity building assistance might be offered to NGOs.

In contrast to the previous examples, this method does not attempt to generate

metaphors that have the potential to structure whole systems of thought or to explain organisations in their entirety. Metaphor here is more a liberating force and creative impulse that provides freedom from the confines of abstract and technical language, and enables the generation of diverse meanings from which detailed comparison and critical analysis may proceed.

'If this organisation were a ...': Sample results from a Montenegrin NGO

Respondent A.

Women's safe house:

'Cat': Promotes a caring approach (for all its 'kittens'). Sees the family and family relations as a crucial area for intervention. Is inventive, resourceful and cunning.

'Classical music': Promotes traditional female values in society, such as non-violence and consensual decision-making, and actively counterpoints them with other traditional values of patriarchy and respect for physical (male) force.

NGO for environment education:

No suitable animal imagined.

'Hip hop music': Modern in outlook. Has a wide and diverse set of friends (partners and clients) and influences. Capable of developing a wide range of projects and activities. It can learn quickly and adapt to new approaches and changing circumstances in society. Suffers from a skittishness or lack of concentration, embodied in short-term goals and objectives.

Local environmental campaigning NGO:

'Dog': Is faithful to the local community. Is a friend and enjoys the support of the broad mass of the local community. Is a leader of the local community. Is persistent and has the commitment to see long-term initiatives through to the end. It is limited in its imaginative scope. It is not a radical force.

'Folk music': It reflects the people – the nation or 'folk'. It is truly a grassroots organisation and is connected morally and practically with the soil. It is dedicated to the local environment and nature. This is the essence of its identity and it is recognised as such.

Respondent B.

Regional parents' association:

'Wolf': It is a fighter. It is also a leader and is able to mobilise individuals behind its objectives. It is active in many areas of school life and children's education / well-being.

'Keyboard / piano': There is unity and common purpose in the organisation as all play the same song to the same rhythm. However, not all the strings are the same strength – some are heard more than others, some are strung too tight and may break (some local branches are lacking necessary skills or are under staffed). While the whole organisation has a clear vision, and has basic financial resources, weaknesses in some areas mean the organisation is not sustainable at present.

Lessons Learnt

To sum up, there are several lessons that can be learnt from these recent capacity building experiences:

We can use metaphor and analogy:

- to obtain the understanding upon which critical reflection and analysis can be based
- as a means to create multiple meanings by which we can understand the complexity of the world around us
- to generate, and learn to build on the strengths of, complementary and competing insights
- as a conceptual framework with which we can order and make sense of new knowledge

It is also useful to be aware:

- that what may be drawn or explained in simple language appears to be more easily understood than the abstract.
- that opting for the obvious, without carefully examining newly generated metaphors, entails a risk of incomplete or distorted analysis which may lead to inappropriate strategic decisions.

Conclusion

Metaphoric thinking is fundamental to the way we both understand the world and interact with that world. Metaphors provide the structures of meaning which determine our everyday actions, our plans for the future and the way we evaluate and build upon the activities we carry out. For development organisations, encouraging greater awareness of 'the metaphors we live by' and stimulating new analogies for

the social and organisational processes we engage in, possibly offers us a means to develop the analytical capacities necessary to build effective and relevant strategy, to advance flexible and responsive approaches and attitudes to stakeholders and internal organisation, and to understand all that we do in terms of open-ended, complex and non-determined processes, rather than discrete short-term result-oriented projects.

As metaphors work by explaining one thing by reference to another, their stimulation must proceed from what is already known; the culturally specific. For the capacity builder, therefore, recourse to metaphor may be seen as a tool for increasing participation and ensuring relevance of approach. The examples cited above also suggest that the generation of effective metaphors – that is metaphors that expand understanding and the possibilities of meaning – works best through reference to categories that may be visually conceived or explained through narrative concerning culturally identifiable actors and objects.

During capacity building efforts, metaphors may be generated for a number of complementary purposes, including increasing powers of description, stimulating creativity, questioning what is already known, understanding complexity and process, and building social theory. The challenge now for capacity builders and development organisations is to develop tools and systematic ways of working for testing the potential of a metaphoric approach for creating analytical and adaptive capacity.

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