



PraxisNote No. 6

# Using African Proverbs in Organisational Capacity Building

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with Rick James

**INTRAC**  
The International  
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Organisation, Organisational Assessment, Capacity Building, Africa, Culture, Heritage

## Introduction

The rich and diverse African heritage can make a considerable contribution towards addressing many political, economic and socio-cultural challenges that the continent, and even the world, faces today. African cultural heritage, passed on from generation to generation, has been a source of guidance for African communities in times of peace, uncertainty, birth, life and death. It has been a basis of their self-identity, self-respect and self-confidence. It has enabled them to live in harmony with their physical, social and spiritual environments. This heritage provides a foundation for leadership, guidance, problem solving, decision-making, self-reliance and development. It helps people to be balanced and focused. Strength drawn from past lessons guides them to the unknown future with confidence.

The rediscovery of the under-appreciated and under-utilised heritage has significant implications for development and capacity building. The failure of so many development interventions over the past half-century can be partly attributed to their lack of rootedness in the society they were

designed to change. Development has been perceived as synonymous with taking on a Western-world identity. For development interventions to catalyse fundamental change, they have to engage with people's identity and values, whether they be individuals, communities, organisations or indeed nations. Such identity-based development is needed to elicit the required understanding, motivation and passion to change. Capacity building needs to be grafted onto pre-existing foundational values, not simply importing another's value base.

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This PraxisNote illustrates how one aspect of African heritage can support this goal. It shows how the traditional wisdom contained in African proverbs<sup>1</sup> can be applied both to understanding organisations and to improving their performance. The use of African proverbs in this way presents a new and creative way of communicating and discussing organisational principles that transcends the common communication barriers. It therefore offers an important means to making capacity building more effective.

More specifically the paper will discuss:

- what African proverbs are and their use in traditional African community life;
- the growing importance of organisational assessments in development practice;
- why African proverbs offer a more effective alternative to most current Northern organisational assessment frameworks;
- some lessons we have learnt from our experience of using African proverbs in organisational assessments and other organisational capacity building interventions;
- a sample proverbs-based organisational self-assessment tool.

## Proverbs and their Use in Traditional African Society

Proverbs are an integral part of African culture. They are simple statements with deep meaning. Proverbs can be understood where literacy is low, and appreciated by the most educated. They

are guidelines for individual, family, village and community behaviour, built upon repeated real life experiences and observations over a long period of time.

Proverbs play different roles in traditional African society. Some of these roles are:

- Identifying and dignifying a culture. Proverbs express the collective wisdom of the people, reflecting their thinking, values and behaviours. Using proverbs to communicate and understand organisational issues is therefore a very powerful tool in the quest for a genuine African identity.
- Unlocking ‘stuckness’, clarifying vision and unifying different perspectives. Proverbs add humor and diffuse tension around otherwise very sensitive issues. Every African society has used proverbs for centuries to ease uncomfortable situations, confront issues and build institutions and relationships.
- Proverbs are metaphors and they explain complex issues in simple statements. For example two villages in conflict may be less likely to fight after reflecting on the proverb *when elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers*. The meaning behind the simple statement about elephants is a powerful message about the negative effects that a disagreement between two chiefs can have on innocent villagers. The proverb *when spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion* communicates the importance of unity and collaboration in tackling problems and inspires people with faith that they can address problems together, no matter how big.
- By being metaphorical, proverbs create strong mental pictures. This is a powerful way for motivating people into action.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from BBC publications, *The Wisdom of Africa*; Kumakanga. (1975); Chakanza (2001).

- Proverbs are like seeds. They become ‘alive’ when they are ‘sown’. They are simple statements until applied to real life situations, which then bring them to life and expand their meaning.

## Organisational Assessments in Capacity Building

Organisational assessment (OA) has become a major part of the capacity building process. An organisational assessment is a ‘check up’ to determine the health status of an organisation. INTRAC has identified more than fifty different OA tools in this burgeoning field. Organisational assessments are used for a number of different purposes by a range of different stakeholders, such as by donors to make funding decisions, by capacity builders to monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions, and by NGO clients and others to highlight their capacity building needs. An OA is not an end in itself but a means towards an end. It is not enough to know how ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’ the organisation is if no action is taken to remedy the situation.

Recent research and experience in capacity building has highlighted the critical importance of client ownership in any capacity building process. Self-assessment is therefore increasingly seen as essential in organisational assessment for capacity building. Research conducted by ECDPM in 2003 concluded that ‘self-evaluation has been recommended for capacity-development in response to a growing awareness that externally led evaluations are often inappropriate or counter-productive... The use of participatory self-assessment methods that involve organisations’ members and external stakeholders is crucial’ (ECDPM 2003). Organisational

assessment can be described as a mirror to assist the partner to reflect on how it is doing and how it can improve and strengthen key areas of its work. As Goethe said, ‘A living thing cannot be measured by something external to itself; if it must be measured it must provide its own gauge’ (Kaplan 2002: 159).

The practice of facilitating a number of organisational self-assessments, however, has highlighted that most OA tools are conceptually and linguistically too complicated for the range of organisational stakeholders (particularly junior staff) to engage with on a meaningful basis. Most OA tools used are borrowed from the North and many of those have emerged from the private business sector in the USA. Yet in commenting on one of the simplest tools (and one developed by and for NGOs in Malawi), participants still concluded that ‘*you need a university degree to fill it in*’. Many staff in NGOs in Africa have not reached this level and indeed most junior staff in Malawi have probably not even completed primary school.

While it might be argued that organisation and management principles are universal to an extent, they are not as easy to communicate in many African languages as they are in English. In English, for example, we can use a word like ‘strategy’ with minimum explanation for it to be immediately understood. But many African languages do not have any direct translation of the word, thus diluting its meaning and increasing the risk of misunderstandings. The power of language cannot be overemphasised. This may explain why a lot of literature on development and management, mostly written in the North, is without much corresponding translation into action on the ground in the South. This may be due to a communication gap.

At CADECO, an organisational change consultancy in Malawi, we therefore embarked on formulating our own more relevant and effective tools to address these problems. We came up with the proverbs-based tools, which would enhance the communication of organisational issues in a language which people from all types of organisations and educational backgrounds would easily understand and use.

## Proverbs Organisational Self-Assessment Tool

Since proverbs are a language of communication and many organisational problems are caused by or compounded by communication problems, proverbs are invaluable for understanding and addressing organisational issues. Although there may be no direct translation for the word *strategy*, proverbs like *a monkey who tried to get three mangoes from three different branches in a tree at the same time fell on its back* or *a mother of twins must sleep on her back* can immediately unlock many insights about strategy. CADECO has developed a tool that covered six key areas:

- Leadership and vision
- Strategy
- Roles and responsibilities
- Policies, systems and procedures
- Organisational culture
- Sustainability

A rating scale of 0–5 is used: 0 = we do not experience this in our organisation, 5 = we strongly experience or observe this in our organisation.

A full version of the tool can be found in the appendix but here is an example from the section on leadership:

- a) **How clear and well shared is the vision of the organisation?**
  - *What the eyes have seen the heart cannot forget*
  - *You can only jump over a ditch if you have seen it from afar*
- b) **How effective is the leadership role in this organisation?**
  - *An army of sheep led by a lion would defeat an army of lions led by a sheep*
  - *When kings lose direction they become servants*
- c) **How approachable are our leaders?**
  - *The path to the chief's house does not grow grass*
- d) **How do the leadership styles being practiced in this organisation meet the different leadership needs of the organisation?**
  - *When the beat of the drum changes, so must the step of the dance*
- e) **How well does the organisation develop its leadership for current and future needs in the areas of:**
  - Effective time management**
    - *Time never goes back*
  - Concentrating and focusing on high leverage efforts and activities**
    - *At the crossroads you cannot go in both directions at the same time*
  - Leadership succession**
    - *When a reed dries up, another one grows in its place*
  - Building integrity**
    - *A crab's daughters cannot walk differently from their mother*
    - *Character is like pregnancy, you cannot hide it for long*
  - Widening personal and organisational exposure**
    - *To him who has never travelled, a small garden is a big forest*
    - *The eyes that have seen an ocean cannot be satisfied by a mere lagoon*

## Some Lessons on Using African Proverbs from our Practice

CADECO has used African proverbs in OA processes, but also in strategic planning, team building, leadership development, board development and self-development interventions. We have also used African proverbs in working with a range of organisations including: community-based organisations (CBOs); professional NGOs; churches; and government departments. From this experience we have learnt a number of lessons, including:

1) In the proverbs-based self-assessment tools, the proverbs act as a communication aid or amplifier. The participants discuss their understanding of the proverbs. They then apply this understanding when answering the question and determining the assessment rate and its explanation (see the example above). We have learnt that it is often necessary to use an external facilitator to moderate the discussions and the self-assessment process.

2) It is necessary to use the most fitting proverb to the intervention or situation at hand. Using 'loose' proverbs without a clear link to the intervention or the situation may confuse people and disrupt the process. The practitioner must always ask himself or herself the question, 'what is the most effective proverb that I can use in this situation?' In a roles and responsibilities clarification intervention, for example, proverbs like *if the sun says it is more powerful than the moon, then let it come and shine at night* and *the cat in his house has the teeth of a lion* may be very appropriate. In communicating the importance of learning from practice – indeed praxis itself, a proverb like *a person is taller than any mountain they have climbed* would be appropriate.

3) In training workshops it is important to use only a few proverbs, to maximise their impact. Too many proverbs may lead to loss of interest in the proverbs. This also applies to carrying out assessments using the proverbs-based tools. In a three-day team building workshop for example, we use about three proverbs to bring issues and insights to the surface for discussion at the beginning. In the proverbs-based assessment tool this may mean that not all categories may need proverbs – only those where proverbs will add significant value. In other words, proverbs are more useful where a direct question may not raise all the issues, because people do not completely understand the question.

4) It is important to use reflective questions in order to bring out insights from the proverbs. Since proverbs may mean different things to different people at different times and in different contexts, the questions must be properly phrased and focused to enable them to solicit only those insights related to the issue at hand. In a self-development session for example, we use a question like: 'What insights can we learn from the following proverb: *a changed place cannot transform an individual but a transformed individual can change a place?*'. When we used this question and proverb with a rural CBO, a chief explained his total agreement with the proverb by telling the group a story of someone in his village who migrated to a neighboring country hoping to be 'transformed' by its better economy, and somebody else who came from that country to reside in his village. The person who came to reside in his village was very productive and within a short time became very wealthy. The person who migrated to the other country came back after a few years frustrated and poorer as the 'transformed nation' failed to transform him.

5) Proverbs can be used as reflective case studies. To do this most effectively it is important to know and use the story upon which the proverbs are based. Using a story is especially useful when there are complicated issues which are difficult to communicate. For example, it is extremely difficult to teach and communicate organisational identity issues. But using ‘proverbs case studies’ easily transcends such a barrier. One of the proverbs we have used in ‘identity interventions’ is the story behind the proverb *an eaglet that does not know that it is an eagle may live like a chicken*.

*A farmer picked an egg from an eagle’s nest. He placed it among the eggs a chicken was sitting on. When the eggs hatched, among the chicks was an eaglet from the eagle’s egg. The eaglet and chicks moved and grew together. Because of its socialisation, the eaglet took the personality of a chick and was growing into a chicken until one day when an eagle was flying over the chicken and the chicks and noticed the eaglet.*

*The eagle descended and hovered over the chicken and the chicks, screaming and apparently trying to call the eaglet. The chicken and the chicks became restless and afraid and ran for cover. The eaglet also became restless and afraid and was running for cover. In the process however the eaglet looked up and was immediately struck by its resemblance to the eagle. For the first time the eaglet saw that it was different from the chicken and the chicks. Instead of producing more fear, the screams of the eagle started to produce a magnetic attraction for the eaglet. The eaglet felt like getting close to the eagle. At that moment, the eaglet knew that it did not belong to the chickens any more. The eaglet had never flown before. It tried to jump and the moment it did it flew away with mother eagle.*

#### **Discussion questions**

- What does the story of the eaglet teach us as an organisation?
- How similar or different are we to the eaglet?
- What are we going to do in order to improve?

6) Finally, proverbs must be used naturally and flexibly, not mechanically. If used mechanically, the proverbs may actually become a hindrance to the process. The power of proverbs when used properly is their ‘invisibility’ as they serve to facilitate the process rather than draw attention to themselves. This means that proverbs must be used only when their use will add value to the process. Development practitioners must not get too excited with the use of proverbs to the extent of *using crutches when they can walk on their own feet*.

## **Conclusion**

Every different culture will have its own ways of communicating – for some it may be stories, for others music, for others pictures and in some parts of the world today MTV-style videos. Proverbs are still important in many parts of Africa. The important lesson for capacity building is to embed the process within the cultural context in ways that not only bring greater understanding and engagement with the issues, but also motivate and energise the participants towards change. In this PraxisNote we have highlighted the contextual power of proverbs in eliciting the understanding, ownership and commitment essential to any successful capacity building process. It is our modest effort to harness Africa’s wisdom in contributing to collective organisational performance improvement worldwide. In your context, what culturally rooted methods might empower your capacity building processes? How could the use of African proverbs add value to your current methods?

## References

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## Appendix: Proverbs Organisational Self-Assessment Tool

Rating (0–5): 0 = we do not experience this in our organisation  
5 = we strongly experience or observe this in our organisation

CATEGORY AND 'REFLECTION' PROVERBS	RATING (0–5)	EXPLANATION
<b>1. Leadership and Vision</b>		
<p><b>a) How clear and well shared is the vision of the organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>What the eyes have seen the heart cannot forget</i></li> <li><i>You can only jump over a ditch if you have seen it from afar</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>b) How effective is the leadership role in this organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>An army of sheep led by a lion would defeat an army of lions led by a sheep</i></li> <li><i>When kings lose direction they become servants</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>c) How approachable are our leaders?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>The path to the chief's house does not grow grass</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>d) How do the leadership styles being practiced in this organisation meet the different leadership needs of the organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>When the beat of the drum changes, so must the step of the dance</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>e) How well does the organisation develop its leadership for current and future needs in the areas of:</b></p> <p><b>Effective time management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Time never goes back</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Concentrating and focusing on high leverage efforts and activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>At the crossroads you cannot go in both directions at the same time</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Leadership succession</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>When a reed dries up, another one grows in its place</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Building integrity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>A crab's daughters cannot walk differently from their mother</i></li> <li><i>Character is like pregnancy, you cannot hide it for long</i></li> </ul>		

<p><b>Widening personal and organisational exposure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>To him who has never traveled a small garden is a big forest</i></li> <li>• <i>The eyes that have seen an ocean cannot be satisfied by a mere lagoon</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>2. Strategy</b></p>		
<p><b>a) How well is the organisation using its 'cutting edge' against competition?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A mother of twins must sleep on her back</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>b) How well does the leadership balance long-term and short-term needs in their thinking and planning in this organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Since men have learnt to shoot without missing, birds have learnt to fly without perching</i></li> <li>• <i>There is no such a thing as bad weather, only bad clothing</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>c) How consciously and proactively does the organisation learn from what is happening in its task environment?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>If you can bear the hissing of a snake, do not complain when you are bitten</i></li> <li>• <i>Those whom the gods want to kill, first they make deaf</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>d) How conscious are people in the organisation about the changes in the state of the internal health of the organisation over time?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>An egg does not go bad in one day</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>e) In addressing its issues, is the organisation addressing real issues or only symptoms?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>If you cut a piece of a liana creeper without removing the roots, it will continue to creep</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>f) How effective are the strategies the organisation is implementing in terms of:</b></p> <p><b>Identifying and utilizing leverage</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A hunter with one arrow does not shoot with careless aim</i></li> <li>• <i>If you are not pretty, know how to sing</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Being focused for concentration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>When you are at the crossroads you cannot go in both directions at the same time</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Being realistic about the organisation's capacity to carry out its work</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What a duck has failed to pick, a chicken cannot</i></li> </ul>		

<p><b>Recognizing that organisational growth and development takes time</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>There are no short cuts to the top of a palm tree</i></li> <li>• <i>Even the biggest cock that crows the loudest was once upon a time just an egg</i></li> <li>• <i>Little by little the snail reached its destination</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Implementing strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A lazy man's farm is the breeding ground for snakes</i></li> <li>• <i>Pray for a good harvest, but keep on hoeing</i></li> <li>• <i>Success is a ladder which cannot be climbed with hands in your pocket</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>3. Roles and Responsibilities</b></p>		
<p><b>a) How well are the roles and responsibilities defined and respected in this organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Two cocks do not crow in the same pen</i></li> <li>• <i>If the sun says it is more powerful than the moon then let it come and shine at night</i></li> <li>• <i>A cat in his house has the teeth of a lion</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>b) How well is conflict managed in this organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>You cannot kill the rat when it is sitting on your clay pot</i></li> <li>• <i>There is no venom like that of the tongue</i></li> <li>• <i>When elephants fight it is the grass that suffers</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>c) How strong is the team spirit in this organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>No matter how powerful a man, he cannot make rain fall on his farm only</i></li> <li>• <i>One person cannot move a mountain</i></li> <li>• <i>Friendship is adding value</i></li> <li>• <i>The man who eats alone dies alone</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>d) How well do individuals and departments work together and how well does the organisation work together with other organisations?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>e) How well are power and politics exercised in the organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Those who live in peace work for it</i></li> <li>• <i>We make war so that we can live in peace</i></li> <li>• <i>Negotiate with your enemy whilst you are a strong and formidable force, and he will always fear and respect you; but negotiate at the brink of defeat, and he will trample you down</i></li> </ul>		

4. Policies, Systems and Procedures		
<p>a) <b>How effective are the rules and regulations in the organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Rules are stronger than an individual's power</i></li> <li>• <i>There can be no village without rules</i></li> </ul>		
<p>b) <b>How effective is the process of formulating the policies, systems and procedures?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A chief should not make rules alone</i></li> <li>• <i>A chief should not make rules when he is angry</i></li> </ul>		
5. Culture		
<p>a) <b>How conscious are the people of the effect of their behaviours and attitudes on the effectiveness of the organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The owner of a smell does not notice it</i></li> <li>• <i>You cannot tell the quality of a fig fruit by its outside appearance</i></li> </ul>		
<p>b) <b>How clear is the identity of the organisation both to insiders and other stakeholders?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Because of his double identity, the bat was never buried</i></li> <li>• <i>The person you know during day time should also be recognisable at night</i></li> </ul>		
<p>c) <b>How free are people to express their real feelings in this organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>When hunting, animals will only come out when you make a noise</i></li> <li>• <i>The man who kicks his old friend for warning him that the path he has chosen is disastrous can only be headed for trouble</i></li> <li>• <i>An antelope cannot drink water when a hunting dog is chasing it</i></li> </ul>		
<p>d) <b>How are people judged in this organisation/ what is given value?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Do not be quick to insult the mad man who frequently comes to your home's doorstep, he may become your mother's husband</i></li> </ul>		
<p>e) <b>How transparent are processes and the way decisions are made in this organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>You can't hide the smoke when the house is burning</i></li> </ul>		
<p>f) <b>How well does the organisation balance action and learning?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>When the lion runs and looks back it's not that he is afraid, rather he is trying to see the distance he has covered</i></li> </ul>		

<p><b>g) How committed are employees to stay on in this organisation?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A bird in hand is worth two in the bush</i></li> <li>• <i>Grass may be greener on the other side but it is just as difficult to cut</i></li> <li>• <i>A happy man marries the woman he loves, a happier man loves the woman he marries</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>h) How well does the organisation do in terms of trying to create an empowering organisational culture?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Constructive arguments build a village</i></li> <li>• <i>A visitor brings a sharper razor blade</i></li> <li>• <i>A visitor sees more in an hour than the hosts in a year</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>6. Sustainability</b></p>		
<p><b>a) How sustainable is the organisation in its client, organisational and financial aspects?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Money is not everything</i></li> <li>• <i>Your own farm implements are more important than your mother and father</i></li> <li>• <i>If you eat all your harvest, you won't have seed for tomorrow</i></li> <li>• <i>Recognition comes with having one's own possessions</i></li> <li>• <i>A borrowed axe doesn't last</i></li> <li>• <i>In your good times prepare for bad times and in your bad times prepare for good times</i></li> <li>• <i>A healthy chick comes from a healthy egg</i></li> </ul>		