
Cultivating capacity amidst COVID-19



Reflections from Rick James (INTRAC) inspired by capacity development experts

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COVID-19 has brutally exposed underlying systemic weaknesses in NGO capacity building. Much of the NGO sector is in crisis mode, convulsing and contracting as funders make painful decisions about future funding. As short-term survival comes to dominate much of NGO thinking and actions, it is not surprising that capacity strengthening has slipped down the agenda. We know learning and research are usually the first casualties in cuts. Consequently, as the need for capacity building increases, particularly in areas of organisational resilience, adaptive strategies and trustworthy leadership, most NGOs feel they do not have the money, nor the time, to access this support.

Challenges to providers

Capacity building providers in many parts of the world are experiencing a sudden reduction in demand for services as contracts are halted. Given that so many providers now operate as social enterprises or as independent consultants, few have substantial reserves or grants to carry them through this time of uncertainty.

Furthermore, many capacity building providers have had to dramatically change how they deliver their services. Instead of face-to-face trainings and workshops, providers have had to shift to remote working and online methodologies. There are obvious concerns here about losing the personal contact and the in-room group dynamics. Shifting to online facilitation also has drawbacks in most parts of the world who have 'less than perfect' internet connections. This can mean that those in poorer countries and more remote areas may be excluded from capacity building services. In addition, activists working on sensitive political issues in dangerous contexts may have legitimate security concerns about using digital technology (see article on ['The perfect negative storm for CSO in Mexico'](#)). Online training may also further marginalise those with disabilities, lack of computer literacy or language. Adapting to online capacity building is much more than simply learning new skills, it requires creative ways to ensure everyone can be included.

[1] This paper is inspired by discussions between capacity building providers from India (Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay, PRIA Educational Trust), Indonesia (Ibnu Mundzir, C4Change.Id1), Ethiopia (Hiwot Alemayehu), the UK (Lucy Morris, Rachel Hayman, Willemijn de Bruin & Rick James, INTRAC), Canada (Emily Wilson), Mexico (Mariana Diaz -Ávila and Alfredo Cuaron, SACBÉ). The paper was produced with funding from the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, as part of a small project aimed at exploring how capacity building language influences practice.

[2] We opt to use capacity building as it is still the most commonly used term. We recognise that despite the negative connotations, it is still less clumsy than the alternatives such as capacity strengthening and capacity development. But all we can really do from outside is 'cultivate' another's capacity with money and ideas. Growth comes from within.

[3] During the last decade, many of the capacity building providers (like CDRA, CDKN, INTRAC, CORAT, Olive) who used to receive grants from donors now have to generate all their income through fees. Consequently, many now cease to exist.

Opportunities for action

COVID-19 is amplifying and accelerating pre-existing dynamics in capacity building. But the implications are mixed. As one provider put it: “where there were cracks, lights will shine through but where we have seen strengths we really have the opportunity to build on it at the moment”. So at the same time as intensifying the inherent weaknesses in the ecosystem, paradoxically COVID-19 may also force us towards better capacity building practices to which we have only paid lip-service in the past.

One critical area that we may finally address is the long-standing need to strengthen locally-based provision of capacity building services. For more than 25 years we have been talking about the need for greater localisation of capacity building services. The sector needs more and better national consultants and trainers for NGOs. Funders might finally take this critical bottleneck more seriously as they realise it is no longer feasible to rely on expensive international experts. They have to strengthen and work with what already exists in-country.

Changing emphases in capacity building

Adjusting to the new COVID-19 realities obviously places new and different demands on NGOs. Three priorities are coming into sharper focus: sustainable financing; adaptive strategy and trustworthy leadership.

Sustainable financing

Clearly in the face of falling income, NGOs will need to focus on developing new income sources, aspiring towards long-term funding relationships with donors who share the same values and understanding of how change happens. To make this happen, NGOs may need to give up control of the design process and become more willing to co-create programmes with funders – and even more importantly with the people and communities they seek to support. The traditional ways of writing project proposals and asking for funding will need to change.

NGOs will also need good systems for financial analysis and become more ruthless in making necessary cost savings. All of this may hopefully propel NGOs towards more sustainable programming, relying more on uncovering the existing assets within countries and communities, rather than inadvertently promoting dependence with input-laden projects.

Adaptive strategy

With so many NGOs struggling to survive, organisations are having to take tough decisions on priorities, thereby making significant strategic shifts. Organisational resilience is the order of the day (see [‘How COVID-19 is testing the resilience of CSOs’](#)). Responsible partnership at a time of exit is required (see recent [INTRAC blogs on Exit](#)). Genuine collaboration with other stakeholders - partners, funders, other allies, government – are no longer ‘nice to have’, but critical for future impact. More fundamentally, in the face of funding cuts and ‘decolonising development’, international NGOs are re-imagining their core role and even identity. In many countries, COVID-19 will mean that working at the grassroots safely and effectively will require NGOs to adapt their approach to reach people and communities in new ways. There is therefore a huge capacity building need for NGOs to address issues of identity and strategy to remain relevant in such a fast-changing environment.

To navigate these changes effectively, it helps to take a systemic view, exploring different potential scenarios, experimenting and quickly adapting – behaving like a start-up. Strategic planning may no longer have the luxury of a 3-5 year time frame. Making decisions for the next 3-5 months is hard enough. Such agility requires truly adaptive management and leadership.

Trustworthy leadership

One thing we have learnt from 2020 is that there are no certainties. Our attempts at prediction and forecasting are deeply flawed ([Heffernan 2020](#)). In this chaotic, current environment, what matters most is whether or not people trust their leaders.

To be agile and adaptive in today's climate requires leaders to put into practice the intentions to delegate and empower. Even remote working highlights the fallacy that effective leaders have hands-on control. Trust is vital. Both ways.

Yet it is incredibly difficult to lead in such uncertainty, particularly when the most obvious metrics, such as income, are likely to be moving in the wrong direction. Leaders have to take difficult decisions without much information about the future and often with conservative, risk averse boards. So there is a huge capacity building need to support NGO leaders by walking alongside, encouraging, coaching and mentoring them. In such overwhelming circumstances a key input can be simply to create time and a safe space for leaders to unload, reflect, learn and think.

Furthermore, their staff are also likely to be under huge stress at work - from funding cuts, lack of face-to-face contact and the need for an instant response. And also at home – pressures from home schooling or looking after vulnerable family members. Personal care of staff is therefore paramount. Organisations and therefore leaders may need to adapt to increasing mental health issues in their staff (and also themselves). The need to lead with emotional intelligence may not be new, but COVID-19 makes this even more critical than before.

Investing in the ecosystem

COVID-19 poses huge tests for NGOs. For many, their very existence is at stake. To survive in such a harsh and chaotic environment demands sustainable financing, strategic agility, and perhaps most of all, trustworthy leadership. To help NGOs rise to these challenges, they need access to skilled and committed in-country capacity building providers. Developing local capacity building providers is therefore a pressing priority. In an uncertain future, funders with foresight will rise to this challenge. They will invest in people on the ground who can cultivate the capacities civil society needs - not just to survive, but to thrive.