Overseas Development Institute

Capacity, complexity and consulting

Lessons from managing capacity development projects

Ajoy Datta, Louise Shaxson and Arnaldo Pellini

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advancing knowledge, shaping policy, inspiring practice

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Acronyms

CDRA	Community Development Resource Association
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
KNOTS	Knowledge Technology and Society
LFA	Logical Framework Approach
MUNDO	Maastricht University Centre for International Cooperation in Academic Development
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PRINCE2	Project in Controlled Environment 2
RAPID	Research and Policy in Development
UK	United Kingdom

Executive summary

In the past few years, the Overseas Development Institute's Research and Policy in Development Programme has increasingly collaborated with or managed large multiyear projects where it has been responsible for helping local institutions and organisations to build their capacity to use knowledge to improve policies and practices. Setting aside the issue of knowledge-to-policy links, this paper serves to 1) reflect on what capacity is and how it develops; 2) identify implications of this for approaches used to promote capacity improvement processes; and 3) assess what this means for funding practices. The key findings and recommendations of the paper are as follows:

For consultants

1. Capacity development as a deliberate process is an inherently political one. If change processes are not owned and led by those whose capacity is being developed, they are unlikely to happen (or, if they do, to be sustainable). As such, consultants (preferably during a pre-project phase) need to help actors with sufficient influence within the client organisation to understand the full ramifications of what capacity building is likely to entail.
2. Capacity development activities need to focus not just on the capacities needed to produce technical results (such as organisational procedures) but also on what it takes to build more effective and dynamic relationships between different actors (such as research managers and their subordinates) within an organisation.
3. Negotiating with the client exactly what the consultant is responsible for (such as activities/outputs or outcomes such as behaviour changes) using Champion (2010)'s consulting grid can help consultants maintain a healthy relationship with the client and select appropriate project management approaches that enable them to measure progress towards predefined targets (such as the logical framework approach) or provide more flexibility, emphasising observation and learning (such as outcome mapping).
4. Promoting capacity development requires an appreciation of many domains of knowledge and disciplines. Like in teaching and practicing medicine, an understanding of these issues is brought about through both formal learning processes as well as considerable 'hands-on' experience. Furthermore, given their likely better knowledge of the context, there is significant merit in working with 'local' capacity development consultants.

For funders

Investing in effective capacity development interventions entails the following:

1. Appreciating the multidimensional nature of capacity. Capacity development inputs in the shape of standard training modules are not necessarily on their own going to help in achieving capacity improvements;
2. Promoting ownership and responsibility of capacity development strategies. Asking clients to make some form of contribution and/or co-investment could encourage them to take greater 'control' over projects and programmes;
3. Delivering long-term and flexible support. Long-term core funding and space for clients to deliver what they think is needed (encouraging them to draw on both conventional and advanced approaches) when it is needed can help them to respond to complex and dynamic contexts;
4. Considering different funding modalities, but avoiding project management units that are separate from the body of the client organisation in favour of a more difficult, but substantially more embedded, approach to developing capacity;
5. Assessing clients (and consultants if appropriate) according to how best they interpret and respond to the circumstances they meet during the project – that is, their ability to improvise – rather than with regard to delivering outcomes they have limited control over (given the emergent nature of capacity); and

6. Encouraging higher levels of professional rigour among those who manage capacity development projects and programmes and promoting the growth and development of national-level capacity development service providers.

1. Introduction

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI)'s Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme has for almost a decade undertaken research on the role of knowledge in policy processes, which it has endeavoured to translate into practical advice. This has included efforts (usually through short-term consultancies) to instil skills and abilities in individuals (researchers, policy-makers, intermediaries and practitioners) to make better use of knowledge in informing policies and practices. These have taken the form of an array of interventions, including guidance notes, seminars, workshops, coaching and knowledge networks (see Mendizabal et al., 2011 for some of the lessons from this work).

However, in the past few years, RAPID has increasingly taken on a more substantial role in larger, multiyear operational projects, where it has been responsible (to varying extents) for helping local institutions and organisations (in Africa, Asia and Latin America) to put into practice some of the advice it has provided in the past. That is, capacity development of local institutions (e.g. to change the way they engage with policy) has become a key priority. Setting aside here the specific issue of promoting greater levels of knowledge uptake, this paper serves to help us to step back, reflect on some of our work managing capacity development processes and draw implications for future practice.

Specifically, this paper aims to 1) reflect on what capacity is and how it develops (mainly in an organisational setting); 2) identify implications of this for approaches used to manage deliberate capacity improvement processes; and 3) assess what this means for funding practices. Throughout the paper, we illustrate key points (in the form of text boxes) using material and experiences which stem largely from two large multiyear capacity development projects—one in which external consulting teams were asked to provide capacity development services to an Asian client (a very large and hierarchical research organisation with many hundreds of researchers and other staff) and another, still active at the time of writing, to improve state responsiveness to citizen needs and interests in a variety of African countries. Given possible sensitivities in cases where things may have not gone according to plan, we have taken the decision not to identify the names of clients or funders.

Key learning in the paper draws on a 'light-touch' review of some of the grey and academic literature available on capacity development, complexity, managing social change and aid agency behaviour. The cases draw on the observations of RAPID staff involved in various projects as well as on primary documentation such as trip reports, after action reviews and project reports.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses what capacity is and what this means for how it can be improved. Section 3 assesses the implications of this for the approaches consultants take to promote deliberate capacity improvements. Section 4 discusses funding practices and how they could be altered to increase the effectiveness of capacity development work. The final section concludes. The paper does not provide all the answers to the problems facing practitioners in promoting capacity improvements, and avoids being prescriptive, but we do provide advice for both capacity development providers and funders to guide them in their practice.

2. Capacity and its development

Ubels et al. (2010) suggest that 'capacity is not a specific ability or competency nor a secret ingredient'. So what is it? This section discusses this, drawing on a framework developed by Allan Kaplan. It then goes on to discuss how capacity might be improved through deliberate processes, as well as the kinds of interventions available to do so.

2.1 Capacity and its multiple dimensions

To help describe what capacity is, we draw on a framework developed in the early 1990s by Allan Kaplan and his colleagues at the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in South Africa, which describes capacity as seven interrelated elements in an organisational setting (Kaplan, 1999):

- Context and conceptual framework reflects the organisation's understanding of its world and its attitude towards it.
- Vision sets out what the organisation will do to respond to its context.
- Strategy outlines how the organisation intends to realise its vision and entails the development of, as well as designing the organisation around, particular methodologies of practice.
- Culture is the norms and values that are practised in the organisation—including the way of life and how things are done.
- Structure outlines and differentiates, among other things, the roles and functions of staff, lines of communication and accountability and decision-making procedures.
- Skills refers to the skills, abilities and competencies of staff.
- Material resources are what an organisation needs to support the work programme, such as finances, equipment and office space.

These elements tend to form a hierarchy in terms of things to address in improving overall organisational capacity, with the conceptual framework at the top and material resources at the bottom. For instance, unless an organisation knows where it is going and why, has a well-developed sense of responsibility for itself and is adequately structured, training courses to instil skills in staff are unlikely to have any effect in the medium to long term (Kaplan, 1999).

Importantly, Kaplan highlights the often invisible nature of some of these elements. While material and financial resources, skills, organisational structures and systems tend to be the more visible within the hierarchy, vision, strategy and cultural values are often not seen. Although many organisations have written statements of these values, elements at the top of the hierarchy of organisational life tend to be 'ephemeral, transitory, not easily assessed or weighed. They are to a large degree observable only through the effects they have. And they are largely invisible to the organisation itself as well as to those practitioners who would intervene to build organisation capacity' (ibid.: 26).

But what are these elements dependent on? Kaplan argues that an organisation should be seen as a system that is greater than the sum of its multiple and varied parts. Components are interacting continuously with one another; an organisation thus arises from the ways the parts affect, and are affected by, each other. Further, an organisation is composed of people, who bring potential, inspiration and struggles, each with their strengths, which build the elements out of which organisations arise. These elements take on the characteristics of those who build them. At the same time, members of the organisation are moulded by the organisation itself and their relationships to one another. In addition, the organisation affects and is affected by its environment—that is, the life of the organisation depends on its interaction with its ever-changing context and environment. An organisation can therefore be described as a living organism—a complex entity where capacity is always in a state of development, with multiple causes and effects. Existing capacity is affected by both

internal and external forces which make it change, evolve, stagnate, deepen, erode or stabilise. Even a period of relative stagnation is determined by an ever-changing interplay of forces (Ubels et al., 2010; see also Capra, 1996; Baser and Morgan, 2008; Flood, 2001; Ison, 2008; Morgan, 2005, 2006; Pasteur, 2006).

2.2 Facilitating deliberate capacity improvements

2.2.1 Capacity development as a political process

But what encourages an organisation to make deliberate efforts to develop capacity? Organisations change in response to their perceptions of how well equipped they are to deal with their external environment. This is not necessarily a simple question, however: there will be different perceptions of what is important, what the deficit is in terms of current capacity and how urgently the changes need to be made. This will mean that political pressure (in terms of the power relationships among individual decision-makers) is often key: if senior management does not perceive a problem there will be no political pressure on an organisation to change; it is unlikely that functional considerations alone will make it do so. And if there are very powerful reasons not to change (such as strong vested interests in maintaining the *status quo* (Jones et al., forthcoming)), then change is likely to happen only if change agents can build a coalition strong enough to overcome resistance through a combination of accommodation, appeasement and, in the last resort, defeat of opponents (Boesen, 2010).

People and organisations can have strong or weak incentives to change, develop and learn, as a result of their environment or internal factors. Like learning, capacity development takes place in people or organisations and cannot be forced on them (unless, in some instances, they are coerced into it). Outsiders can teach, and shape incentives for learning, but no more than that. If change processes are not owned and led by those whose capacity is being developed, they are unlikely to happen. Following on from the paragraph above, this means capacity development programmes need to be associated with a clear understanding of what is likely to happen if the organisation does not change—which needs to be shared widely by a 'guiding coalition' (Step 2 in Kotter's eight steps for leading change (Kotter, 1996)). Having said that, pressure from external actors can be an important incentive to change and develop capacity. And the power of values, expectations and norms will underpin or undermine the development of capacity (Boesen, 2010).

2.2.2 Understanding the context and how change happens

Woodhill (2010) argues that capacity development interventions often go wrong simply because the context is not well understood. Actions are taken based on false and unchallenged assumptions about what is going on and how change happens. Given the often intangible and invisible nature of capacity, the organisation cannot be understood by looking only at official mandates and goals, formal procedures and structures and other functional aspects inside the organisation. Any understanding needs to extend to the political dimension—the power, incentives, tensions and sometimes conflicts, which provide the energy and bring the motion, direction and change to an organisation, good or bad. While part of this political dimension is codified in the form of formal hierarchies, official values and mission statements, how real power is distributed in an organisation is rarely described formally. For instance, people may be aware of informal personal networks but these will not appear in organisational charts (Boesen, 2010). As such, variants of tools that analyse political economy elements within a system could be useful (e.g. Unsworth and Williams, 2011).

But the lens used to look at and understand an organisation in its history and context makes a big difference. Because capacity is produced or reduced by complex backwards and forwards interactions across organisational boundaries, different people within the 'system' will see different things. It is therefore important to draw on the diverse views and perspectives of different people. Furthermore, our picture of the 'reality' is rarely complete: we need to continually add pieces to the jigsaw and get a better view of what the 'whole' might look like (Fowler and Ubels, 2010).

Nevertheless, Collingwood (2010) suggests that an organisation be facilitated through a process that helps actors who have sufficient collective power and influence to develop a common set of ideas about what is happening in their organisation (what key actors, factors, spaces, relationships, power dynamics and culture characterise the organisation); create a vision of what they would like to achieve; make explicit assumptions and worldviews about how that vision is likely to come about (i.e. how change is likely to happen); and produce a practical strategy for achieving that vision. This can be done through a joint process of 'reading', which involves looking at organisations as organic rather than as inert vehicles delivering particular services or projects. Doing so can help clients to see and accept the organisation's potential to excel, the challenges it needs to confront and the processes of change required. Ultimately, the organisation comes to appreciate its own complexity. This may have helped in a case RAPID was recently involved in, as Box 1 elaborates.

Box 1: How long does it take to read an organisation? Assessing the context

In a project working with an Asian client, the external consulting team was asked (as is common in the early stages of a project or programme) to undertake a quantitative survey (lasting almost two months) to provide some broad hypotheses about the way in which the organisation engaged with policy. This was followed by a more in-depth qualitative needs assessment, undertaken by a different set of consultants flown in for a week. Although the assessment was carried out using an appreciative inquiry approach, with a variety of stakeholders consulted accompanied by the local project manager, he was subsequently unhappy with the report and the challenges we said the organisation faced.

This was not necessarily surprising, as this relatively quick diagnosis could not have produced a complete picture of the organisation's myriad components, their achievements and the forces that had come together to bring these about. It probably led to an, at best, partial understanding, one which failed to capture the organisation's highly dynamic and complex nature. Meanwhile, as the project continued, the consultants were not necessarily able to improve their understanding of the context sufficiently. Although the lead consultant had prior experience of living in the country and of working in the research organisation in question, with most activities taking place in short one-to-two week missions and training often held away from the main city, engagement with the context and the institution was limited mainly to certain actors during formal project activities. This certainly did not help in trying to build a strong and trusting relationship with the client. Spending more time in the early stages of the project helping the client to better 'read' itself—appreciating its own complexity as well as the challenges and opportunities this presented—may have been a better approach.

Reading an organisation requires an immersion in the context of the provider over several weeks or months. It also requires that people from the organisation are available and willing to undergo such a process. A well-known method for defining interventions is the appreciative inquiry approach, which focuses on identifying the best of what is already there in a system and finding ways to grow and support this, thus engaging 'possibility thinking' instead of 'deficit thinking' (Bojer, 2010).

2.2.3 Multi-actor engagement and dialogue

If capacity is the sum of interactions between different actors within a system behaving in often unpredictable ways, capacity must exist in the relations and interface between actors both inside and outside an organisation, often at different levels. Capacity develops as interactions between these actors progress; for instance, employees returning from a training event will have to deal with their team, manager or subordinates. As such, individuals and their interactions are sites of capacity which interventions must take into account. Approaches focused on single entities have tended to have limited impact, as they do not deal with actors and their relations with one another sufficiently. Hence, capacity development needs to focus not just on the capacities needed to achieve technical results but also on what it takes to build more effective and dynamic relationships that continue (Woodhill, 2010).

People have a strong inclination to collaborate with others, but only when they feel they are being treated fairly and justly. Otherwise, they may go on the attack, or they may withdraw and silently resist. Bringing together and connecting multiple stakeholders through dialogue processes will help them to enhance their shared vision, purpose and direction as well as providing better clarity on their roles and improving their ability to take decisions, thus releasing the energy to perform. As participants in a dialogue process listen to one another, trust, openness, connectivity and understanding increase, and

they become better at any resolving conflicts that may arise. They can come to recognise common concerns and interests that will help them to overcome differences in the pursuit of mutually beneficial solutions. Meanwhile, multi-stakeholder processes can help different actors to work more productively together (Woodhill, 2010). Box 2 provides an example of improving state capacity by connecting representatives from the state, communities and key interlocutors such as civil society organisations.

Box 2: Improving state capacity through multi-actor engagement

A project to improve the responsiveness of the state to citizen concerns and interests in some African countries found this could not be achieved by working with either party (citizens or the state) in isolation. Instead, attention had to be paid to developing relationships among elected representatives and citizens and, importantly, key interlocutors such as civil society, the media and traditional authorities. In one country, one of the implementing organisations organised meetings between citizens (particularly women and girls), local chiefs and elected representatives. This served to bring citizens and public office holders together to promote linkages between state and society based on dialogue with civil society organisations often acting as brokers of relations.

Furthermore, combining resources, connections, technical abilities, responsibilities, interests, perspectives, knowledge, different forms of power and ways of driving change leads to new types of capabilities. And progressive changes in relationships provide results not only now but also in the future, enabling people to collaborate and address challenges in a meaningful way. If such processes cannot be realised, as may well be the case in an organisation or system where the hierarchy is strong and elements of the organisation are atomised, the client may need to consider other ways of fostering collaboration, for instance less formal networks, consultative forums or other arrangements that call for less interaction and commitment (Woodhill, 2010).

But capacity also exists in relationships with oneself, so can be improved through better critical reflection. This can be addressed by investing in activities and processes that give people the time and space to develop themselves and their self-understanding; including feelings and emotions as a normal part of discussion and exploration in collaborative processes of change; and creating a trusting environment in which people can give and receive open and honest feedback (Woodhill, 2010).

2.3 Capacity development interventions

2.3.1 A range of interventions

Reflecting enhanced understandings of capacity improvement processes, traditional capacity development tools and methods such as training or improving organisational procedures have been complemented by newer approaches such as action learning; developing multi-stakeholder platforms; connecting actors and systems operating at different levels of governance (macro–micro gap); using information and media to help citizens to demand accountability; taking a value chain approach to understanding and improving a ‘system’; leadership development; and creating knowledge networks, among others. Box 3 reviews both conventional and more advanced approaches and methods.

The more recently derived approaches challenge practitioners to complement their teaching and advisory skills with more intensive methods of dialogue, brokering, facilitation and mediation. A vast and rapidly increasing number of dialogue tools, handbooks and case studies are available to practitioners seeking to increase their skills in understanding and facilitating these processes. These more holistic and system-responsive approaches go some way towards addressing the political dimensions of capacity we alluded to earlier and start to deal with the relations and interactions between actors within and across an organisation (Ubels et al., 2010).

Box 3: Types of capacity development services

Conventional

- Training and related workshop forms;
- Technical advice (often focused on specific systems and/or procedures);
- Support to project management;
- Support to lobby and advocacy work.

More advanced

- Action research and action learning, including pilots and laboratories;
- Knowledge brokering and networking;
- Various kinds of multi-stakeholder processes;
- Stimulating mutual and public accountability mechanisms;
- Coaching and mentoring;
- Change and process facilitation;
- Leadership development;
- Value chain development;
- Knowledge networking.

Source: Ubels et al. (2010).

2.3.2 The persistence of conventional approaches

However, in practical terms, training and workshops (often one-off) still tend to dominate, particularly in developing country contexts—see Box 4 – usually combined with technical advice and assistance in project management. These approaches tend to focus on the lower, and perhaps more 'visible', end of Kaplan's hierarchy (indicating that clients are often relatively risk-averse when selecting approaches) and, because of this, seem not to change the fundamental patterns in organisations – see Box 5. Much support is in the form of advice giving: 'trying to get organisations to make changes that consultants think will be good for them; rather than strengthening them through a form of facilitation which enables them to get to grips with their own business and thus developing the top elements [of the hierarchy]' (Fowler and Ubels, 2010: 16).

Box 4: Selecting approaches to building capacity

Key interventions selected by an Asian client to improve the way it communicated its research comprised the following conventional activities:

- A study tour to the UK;
- A seminar for directors and senior managers;
- A series of training workshops for junior researchers;
- The development of a how-to guide;
- Advice on the rollout of knowledge management software;
- Establishing roles and responsibilities for staff in a central communications unit.

The client dropped an initially proposed action learning component with a series of regular forums shortly after the project's start. This was not necessarily surprising, given that workshops and guides were a format that were more visible and with which the client was familiar. Moreover, given the consulting team's inability to speak the local language, providing a coaching function (which an action learning approach would have required), whereby consultants would, for instance, observe researchers at work and engage in a relatively intense dialogue, would have been extremely challenging (even with the most competent of interpreters). This raises a point familiar to many consultants: clients are often more risk-averse than consultants when it comes to implementing new ideas. Without investing considerable time building up trust in the relationship and in the process of 'reading' the organisation, projects may remain stuck in fairly conventional approaches to capacity building.

Meanwhile, despite the limited nature of more conventional approaches, they are not always well executed. For instance, study tours, despite often being rooted in well-resourced change processes, tend not to lead to any sort of change within organisations and often consume large amounts of financial resources, time and labour. Key ways to increase the likelihood of making an impact include ensuring that the context being visited is sufficiently similar for experiences to be relevant; leaving

enough structured time during the tour for discussion and reflection; and establishing a planned set of activities on returning home to disseminate new ideas and enable consideration of what and how the organisation could integrate new experiences/thinking into its work.

Box 5: Limitations of approaches that target a single actor

A series of work and 'write' shops for 50 junior researchers was the centrepiece of a project with an Asian client. These focused on encouraging researchers to write up research findings in short formats. Workshops lasted on average four days and were often located beyond city limits to avoid potential distractions. Interpreters were hired to mediate between trainers who were unable to speak the local language and the researchers. This was fairly straightforward during presentation sessions but fairly challenging during one-to-one support. Finding equivalent terms for jargon associated with research communication was not always straightforward. The language barrier also meant we were unable to provide feedback on work drafted by participants in the time after the workshops.

Interviews with researchers towards the end of the project suggested that, although they found the training useful and had spread the word about some of the learning to friends and colleagues, they had little space in their day-to-day work to further practise what they had learnt. Moreover, they had little power to decide how research was communicated: these decisions lay with research managers, directors of research centres and, on occasion, research funders/commissioners. Meanwhile, those interviewed suggested there was little enthusiasm among these actors to change the ways in which research was communicated.

Hence, in promoting changes in the way research findings were communicated, it would have been important to bring together all those involved in producing and communicating research, including research managers, directors of research centres and those from departments responsible for vetting and storing research, among others. However, doing so in a way that promoted genuine dialogue between different parties, given the strength of the hierarchy, would have been challenging. Furthermore, providing training for more senior staff would in all likelihood be deemed inappropriate: they would be unlikely to find the time or interest in being trained on issues seen as more appropriate for junior researchers. More creative ways, other than workshops, would have to be found, including coaching from senior consultants and involvement in knowledge networks.

Furthermore, even though they are limited in what they can achieve alone, workshop processes do not always generate maximum benefits. They tend to be more useful for attendants if they are participatory, building on the experiences and lessons of participants and enabling them to explore new approaches and ways these could be applied in their own context. Material should be tailored to the specific audience's needs and interests and efforts should be made to acquire feedback during and after the workshop. Surgeries or clinics which set aside time to allow participants to revisit issues with facilitators, expert guests and/or each other through one-to-one or peer support are particularly useful. In addition, workshop organisers should make sure there is some follow-up that goes beyond the dissemination of a workshop report.

2.3.3 Selecting interventions

In selecting interventions, Ubels (2010) suggests there is a need to choose approaches that are making a difference in similar contexts; to adopt forms of support that do not apply a single method rigidly but rather seek to combine different approaches as required for effective local change (e.g. combining training with coaching/action learning, some knowledge networking and support to multi-stakeholder engagement/dialogue to realise a specific outcome); and to promote longer or periodic engagement to support concrete change and application in a responsive manner.

Does this mean we always need large programmes covering several approaches? Not necessarily: small interventions such as a training workshop are still relevant. However, these must be understood and located in longer-term processes of change. For instance, workshops can be good for raising awareness on an issue, introducing new topics and developing skills. But transformative changes are more likely to take place when individuals have the space to test and reflect on tools, methods and approaches over a longer period of time and to engage with other personnel and colleagues from within an organisation who are critical to making change happen (Mendizabal et al., 2011). Hence, clients and consultants need to have short-, medium- and long-term ambitions and related timeframes in mind (Ubels et al., 2010). As we have discussed, they also need to bear in mind that capacity tends to

emerge over time, with causes unlikely to be predictable in advance. As such, a project's interventions are ultimately only part of a myriad of factors that might contribute to overall change (Ortiz Aragón and Giles Macedo, 2010).

2.4 Key points

To conclude this section, we summarise its key points:

- Capacity is a multidimensional concept, one which reflects the complex nature of human systems made up of multiple actors interacting with one another in often unpredictable ways and often affected by factors beyond the immediate context.
- Capacity development as a deliberate process is an inherently political one. If changes processes are not owned and led by those whose capacity is being developed, they are unlikely to happen (or, if they do, to be sustainable).
- Obviously, in supporting clients to improve their capacity, consultants should understand the context well. But better still, they should try to facilitate a process that helps actors with sufficient power and influence within the client organisation to understand what needs changing and how this likely to be achieved.
- Capacity development needs to focus not just on the capacities needed to produce technical results but also on what it takes to build more effective and dynamic relationships between different actors within a system (be it an organisation, a sector or a country).
- Despite the expanded repertoire of capacity development approaches, traditional approaches still tend to dominate, particularly in developing countries, perhaps because clients are more risk-averse in selecting newer tools. Nevertheless, practitioners should select approaches that do not apply a single method rigidly and seek to combine different approaches that promote longer or periodic engagement and address the needs identified.

The next section discusses what implications this has for the way in which capacity improvement processes are managed.

3. Managing capacity development projects

So capacity is a multifaceted phenomenon and is based on different competencies that combine and interact to influence the overall shape of a human system (Fowler and Ubels, 2010). This section discusses the importance of clarifying consultants' role in promoting capacity improvements in relation to the client (as well as the types of roles that might exist), and the implications of this for the approach they take to managing capacity development projects. It also considers what this means for the skills and abilities consultants need in managing capacity improvement projects and processes.

3.1 Negotiating client–consultant relations

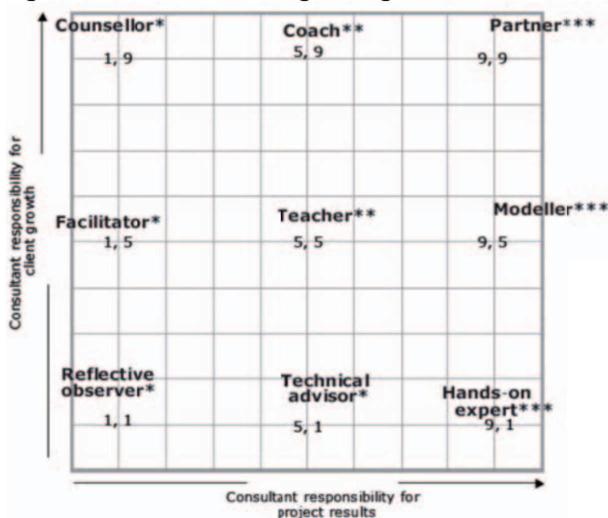
Champion et al. (2010: 58) suggest 'consultants [...] often talk about getting "burned". Usually it happens when the way the consultant's role has been structured leads to no-win situations.' For instance, a provider's initial view of the relationship and the intervention(s) that will be effective may in some instances differ from what the client thinks is needed or wanted (Box 6 provides an example of this from a recent case). Such situations are likely to end up with disappointing results (ibid.).

Box 6: Client–consultant relations

In a project with an Asian client, the relationship between the consulting team and the client started amicably but by the end became fairly strained. On one occasion, the consulting team sought direction from the funder, but this did not lead to any sustainable resolution. There may have been several issues at play here, but key among them was the confusion there was within the consulting team as to the role it was supposed to play in the project. The team had initially thought it would be partners with the client, having a say in decision-making with regard to the selection and nature of interventions. However, as the project wore on, it became clear the client expected the team to do what was asked of it. The lack of frank exchange about the consultants' roles during the project and for each task subsequently led to tensions within the consulting team and between the team and the client. This could have been eased by developing a clear understanding of the purpose of the consulting relationship from the outset, using the consulting role grid outlined below to examine what was needed for each task.

Setting out a clear understanding of the purpose of the consulting relationship can help to ensure a healthy relationship between consultant and client. The purpose can often be determined by the needs of the client. Champion et al. (2010) suggest clients have two types of needs: the need for results (such as manuals, workshops or a set of procedures); and the need to increase capacity to perform new functions or behaviours on a continuing basis – in other words to help grow the organisation. By constructing a grid, using the consultant's responsibility for producing results as the horizontal axis and the consultant's responsibility for growing the organisation as the vertical axis, Champion et al. identify specific consulting roles appropriate for a mix of services that consultants are expected to provide (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: The consulting role grid



Source: Champion et al. (1985), in Champion et al. (2010).

Figure 2: Typical role statements for the consulting role grid

Counsellor 'You do it. I will be your sounding board.'	Coach 'You did well; you can add this next time.'	Partner 'We will do it together and learn from each other.'
Facilitator 'You do it; I will attend to the process.'	Teacher 'Here are some principles you can see to solve problems of this type.'	Modeller 'I will do it; you watch so you can learn from me.'
Reflective observer 'You do it; I will watch and tell you what I see and hear.'	Technical advisor 'I will answer your questions as you go along.'	Hands-on expert 'I will do it for you; I will tell you what to do.'

Source: Champion et al. (1985), in Champion et al. (2010).

The nine roles of the consulting role grid reflect the options the consultant has in a given situation. Presumably, if a consultant and client assess the situation correctly, they are likely to choose the role that will be most effective for each task. For instance, with little responsibility for either results or growth, the consultant, as reflective observer, is least responsible for the tasks, whereas the client is the most responsible.

> 'The consultant's task is limited to feeding back observations and impressions. In spite of the low activity level of the consultant, this role can have a dynamic effect on a client system that is skilled in using such assistance. The reflective consultant can help clients monitor themselves on such ambiguous but critical indicators as trust, teamwork and openness' (Champion et al., 2010: 60).

At the other end of the scale, the partner role

> '[...] implies high responsibility for results and growth. It assumes that both the client and the consultant have the capacity to successfully perform aspects of the task and that both will share responsibility for the results. It also assumes that a big jump in the client's capacity to do the task is an important goal. The partner role means that the client is ready to learn in a hands-on way and that the consultant can teach effectively in this mode, as well as guide the task to successful completion' (Champion et al., 2010:59).

In roles that emphasise taking responsibility for an organisation's growth, consultants/providers need to avoid the temptation to do the work themselves, particularly when counterparts appear slow to move (Champion et al., 2010). Box 7 provides an example where skewed incentives among actors in the

client organisation led the consultants to take responsibility for producing results and face challenges in contributing to the growth of the organisation. A more frank exchange between the funder, consultants and client during the inception phase of the project may have helped in avoiding subsequent misgivings.

Box 7: Delivering results versus developing capacity

A consulting team funded by a major research donor was asked to provide capacity development support to a number of research organisations (clients) in Latin America, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East/North Africa, to help them to improve their research communications. The consulting team provided training on, for instance, developing a communications strategy and writing policy briefs, which the clients were then expected to go away and produce (with advice from the consultants). One client, given inadequate incentives, could not allocate staff time to produce these; instead, the consulting team took a 'hands-on expert' role and produced them on the client's behalf. Although the outputs drew on content produced by the client, and were useful in supporting the organisation's policy engagement, it was unclear whether it could produce them in future unaided. As such, the funder frowned on this practice – but the consultants felt there was no alternative.

But how can appropriate roles be selected without the benefit of hindsight? Once again, we turn to Champion et al. (2010), who suggest we consider four key areas to help us:

- The organisational situation: Where there is immediate need for results and capacity development, high intervention roles such as that of partner, modeller and hands-on expert are probably more appropriate. Where client capacity is already moderate to high, low intervention roles in the shape of counsellor, facilitator, reflective observer and technical advisor may make more sense.
- The characteristics of the client: Key questions here include the following. Is the proposed consulting relationship likely to achieve results the organisation needs? Will the client be helped to grow in the process in a direction that is in its long-term interests? Will the skills the client already possesses be used to their fullest extent? Are the skills the consultant possesses being used in the best way?
- The characteristics of the consultant: Consultants cannot take on the more results- or growth-oriented roles if they lack the experience, knowledge or confidence to do so. But if consultants are competent to take on various roles, they should consider willingness, interest and time factors. For instance, consultants ought to ask themselves 'do I want to serve this role?' A role that is unwanted will probably not be well performed.
- The client–consultant relationship: The level of trust and openness present often determines the extent to which the client and consultant can discuss relative roles. For instance, to what extent are clients prepared to negotiate the politics of capacity development processes with consultants/providers? Relationships rarely begin with the necessary trust to permit open discussion and negotiation of roles. Hence, Figure 2 above may provide a common language for clients and consultants to overcome initial barriers.

What steps can we take to negotiating our roles? Champion et al. (2010) suggests five steps for effective role negotiation for the client and consultant:

1. Clarify the organisation's need for results and growth;
2. Openly discuss the current capacities of the clients and consultants;
3. Identify an appropriate match between client needs and consultant capacities relative to the various tasks and client groups, using the consulting role grid;
4. Ensure all parties have the support they need to deliver on their accountabilities for results and growth; and
5. Both parties commit to respective roles and responsibilities in the consultation.

3.2 Selecting the most appropriate management approach

3.2.1 Context

Given the difficulties inherent in promoting capacity improvements, what approach should we take to managing capacity development projects? Van Ongevalle and Huyse (2010) remind us that the type of approach used should reflect the context and the type of information required. Most contexts a capacity development provider will be asked to work in will tend to be complex (unless they are working with machines at one end of the spectrum or on gyrating stock markets or changeable weather patterns at the other end), but this will naturally differ in form from one context to the next (Davies, 2010). In other words, the context will likely comprise multiple actors busy interacting with another, in ways that are often unpredictable and that are affected by factors beyond the immediate context.

3.2.2 Consultant responsibility

However, the level of responsibility delegated to a capacity development provider by the donor or the client can vary, as indicated earlier. For instance, at one end of the spectrum, a provider may be asked simply to provide inputs as a 'modeller', 'technical advisor' or 'hands-on expert' (according to the consulting roles grid). That is, for instance, providers may be asked to raise awareness of staff or to develop a set of organisational procedures. This will likely require delivering a training programme and/or the development of a manual, with the provider concerned mainly with the quality of the outputs and not necessarily with what effect these might have on the performance of the organisation (which may be in the hands of the client). But providers may also be asked to work with clients in partnership to deliver higher order outcomes and impacts, such as improving organisational performance and helping to adapt to changing contexts. The level of responsibility will thus determine the information needs (of the provider or indeed the client) and thus the type of planning, monitoring and evaluation systems they should employ.

3.2.3 Managing the delivery of outputs

If providers find themselves 'simply' needing to deliver outputs and activities (regardless of their effect on the environment), the logical framework approach (LFA) will likely suffice.[1] This breaks problems down into component parts, after which a linear plan of action is developed, characterised by a logical path from activities to outputs to outcomes and further to objectives and the overall goal. Although the LFA focuses on results at various levels – outputs (products, goods and services), outcomes (the short- to medium-term effects of intervention outputs) and impacts (the long-term effects produced by a development intervention) – capacity development providers asked to provide technical services can focus merely on the outputs – in terms of both quality and quantity. A manifestation of the LFA is the Project in Controlled Environment 2 (PRINCE2) approach to managing projects, which was used by a consulting team to deliver a number of outputs for the client, as Box 8 describes.

[1] See van Ongevalle and Huyse, 2010: 40–5 for an overview of this approach.

Box 8: Using PRINCE2

Under the guidance of PRINCE2, a project with an Asian client was managed in stages, with a number of documents produced at the start and throughout the project to set objectives and control the delivery of outputs. At the start, the team produced a project initiation document that provided 1) background to the project; 2) an overview of the project itself; 3) an outline of the 'business case'; 4) tolerances allowed for the project – the time beyond scheduled deadlines/milestones that activities could go on for; 5) an overview of the project team and the way it would be governed (in the shape of an organogram); 6) mechanisms through which the project would be 'controlled'; 7) the project plan; and 8) the plan for the first stage of the project. The end of a stage resulted in a report which outlined the original plan for the particular stage; performance against planned activities with lessons learnt; a short review of the stage; a review of whether there remained a business case, that is, whether the project was still worth continuing with; a review of the possible risks; and a plan for the following stage. This document aimed to help the client to assess progress and suggest changes along the way.

Each of the project activities, defined as a work package, was to be described in writing by the lead consultant according to a predefined template. The document was to be used to delegate the activity (such as a workshop or the writing of a toolkit) to a member of the consulting team to implement (who would then be known as a task manager). Each trip, lasting one-to-two weeks, during which activities (usually in the shape of workshops) were undertaken, resulted in a descriptive report of the activities along with initial reactions from various participants. This would be complemented by workshop evaluation forms (designed jointly by the consultant and the client) and filled out by workshop participants. These were usually analysed, with the high-level results translated into English by the client for the consulting team's scrutiny.

However, the approach was focused narrowly on describing and reporting activities and results against predicted and planned targets. Furthermore, the tendency was to monitor what was easily measurable, such as numbers of training workshops run, numbers of people trained, numbers of positive comments from workshop participants, number of policy briefs produced or the installation of a documentary management system. Time for critical reflection with the members of the client organisation was often squeezed out by the pressure to be productive (i.e. completing tasks and activities). Meanwhile, the PRINCE2 system seemed to be blind to the process of developing capacity, changes to the context and the project's unintended effects – both positive and negative – probably as no indicators were developed from the beginning to measure these. This is not to say that the issues were not discussed (in informal spaces over cups of coffee, in taxis, in lifts and in corridors), but the templates did not capture them. Given the complexity of the organisation, more reflective narratives that explored how results happened, insights into unpredicted results, what other actors found significant, what could be learnt at both individual and organisational level and how capacity development support could actually contribute to the realisation of 'results' would have been more useful.

3.2.4 Managing the delivery of outcomes

A critique of the LFA

If providers are responsible for promoting higher-order changes within the organisation, or if the client itself is seeking a suitable management system, the LFA or a derivative is unlikely to meet their needs. Although the LFA has been used to plan, monitor and evaluate projects of varying sizes aiming to improve different types of human systems (including organisations), there is a growing body of literature critiquing this approach (e.g. the latter half of Box 8 above highlights some of PRINCE2's flaws in managing complex change processes).

Underlying assumptions of the LFA (e.g. that complex problems can be broken down into components that can be addressed through linear pathways of change) stem from systems theories imported from engineering and the biological sciences. What systems theories have in common is the concept of an organisation as a whole with a boundary. The whole can be disaggregated into parts which, once improved, can bring about change to the whole system through cause and effect relationships. Management theories and strategies based on systems thinking imagine that change can be predicted in advance and promoted largely through the agency of managers designing solutions to problems (Mowles et al., 2008).

This is at odds with Kaplan's conceptualisation of an organisation as a living organism where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Moreover, the uncertain and emergent nature of capacity implies

that its development is unlikely to be a linear, well-planned and predictable process. Britton (2010) argues that, by requiring progress to be assessed against predetermined outcomes, which time and experience may demonstrate are unrealistic, organisations providing capacity development services can sabotage the very process they wish to support. The negative effects of this are experienced in different ways: at an organisational level in terms of frustration over unachieved goals and at an individual level as poor performance, as Box 9 suggests.

Box 9: Understanding how organisations change

The approach taken to manage a project with an Asian client seemed to assume – at least implicitly – that a linear connection existed between the various aspects of the capacity development initiative: the provision of inputs such as technical assistance and workshops would lead to the delivery of outputs such as trained researchers and the production of toolkits. These inputs and outputs were expected to lead to better performance (e.g. the production of more attractive policy briefs, which would lead to more policy-makers accessing and reading the organisation's research) and ultimately impact (policy-makers would use the organisation's research to improve policies and the lives of the country's population). The approach was thus rooted in the LFA. However, by the end of the project, it was clear that the outputs produced were not enough to improve organisational performance (although perhaps it was too early to tell). The interventions may have been the wrong ones, they may have been poorly executed or the assumptions that underpinned the overall approach may have been misleading. The full answer probably includes all three, but deciphering the extent to which each factor is responsible is almost impossible (particularly in the absence of a counterfactual). The explicit development of a framework of how change was likely to happen within the organisation may have helped at the start – based on an initial reading of the organisation. This could have been adjusted periodically based on observation and learning from involvement in the project, a point we return to in the text below.

Monitoring progress in relation to predetermined indicators (particularly those that have been developed because they are easy to measure and are activity-focused) detracts attention from less tangible and more relational behavioural and attitudinal dimensions of capacity and from broader learning from experience. In many cases, unanticipated results or insights may prove more important to capacity improvement processes than what was 'planned' (Watson, 2010). It is the appropriate interrelation and interaction between different components that produce the energy, confidence, productivity and resilience typical of a capacitated organisation. Thus, capacity development is likely to be a complex voyage of personal and collective discovery that evolves over time (Fowler and Ubels, 2010).

One might then argue that the LFA itself is not the problem, but rather the way it is implemented. Instead of using it in a rigid way, it should be used flexibly to help consultants to learn together with stakeholders about the effects of interventions and make adjustments along the way. Although the argument that LFA processes are now undertaken poorly (with log frames done badly) is a strong one, van Ongevalle and Huyse (2010) argue instead that it is the LFA's underlying assumptions that make it difficult for its users to learn collaboratively.

For instance, if organisations are at their core made up of actors and their relationships with one another, the LFA underrates this, which leads to under-socialised interpretations of causality, resulting in unrealistic programming. The LFA also tends to exclude data related to culture and context (or posits them as risks), and therefore does not provide space for an analysis of the informal interactions and external influences that can be the lifeblood of a successful development intervention. Moreover, in light of their requirements to report to their headquarters and politicians, donor agencies are keen to avoid project designs that are changed continuously by stakeholders and thereby deviate from agreed objectives. If changes are made, they usually require approval by actors right up the bureaucracy, taking considerable time and discouraging donors from providing space for learning and flexibility (ibid.).

On this point, Guijt (2010) argues that documents produced by planning processes are often (simple) theories about what people think might happen which turn into rigidly followed contracts that require proof of deliverables, which in turn is motivated by a need for accountability and driven by a logic that

views development as projectable change. Management processes thus lock down plans into watertight projects of change which assume capacity development processes as controllable.

> 'And yet, every day, the world surprises us with its unexpected twists of events, which arise out of multiple variables and strands of efforts. Conscious labours to make a difference are part of a maelstrom of societal change that is dynamic, unpredictable and non-linear' (Guijt, 2010: 279).

The importance of observing and learning

There is a need, then, to move away from strict control-oriented planning and monitoring towards more nuanced approaches which reflect not only the complexity of organisations but also the challenges of developing their capacities sustainably. Active observation of unanticipated changes, continuous learning and appropriate response become very important. Practitioners hence need to create room for themselves to operate beyond a fixed implementation agenda or narrow project document. They need to step back from an experience to make sense of it, understand what it means, learn from it and apply this learning to future situations. In the process, this can reveal 'less visible aspects of capacity such as values, legitimacy, identity and self-confidence as well as other non-monetary forms of motivation that may be critical to outcome' (Land et al., 2009: 5, in Ortiz Aragón and Giles Macedo, 2010) What does this mean in practice? Box 10 outlines key principles around monitoring and learning as outlined by Guijt (2008), along with practical implications.

Box 10: Monitoring and learning in practice

Guijt (2008) outlines key principles around monitoring and learning for which we identify practical implications for ways to manage capacity improvement processes.

- Be conscious of design principles and how they affect learning purposes: The key here is to use management meetings to ensure project design embeds learning and builds adaptive capacity.
- Pursue evidence about one's own performance: This needs to be done in the context of much more frequent assessments about where the project is going, so not necessarily asking 'have we done what we set out to do?' but rather 'have we adapted well to how circumstances changed since we began this task?'
- Seek cognitive dissonance: In practice, this means using new information to stimulate evolution, not to apportion blame for what has not been achieved.
- Take monitoring seriously: Use regular management meetings and see them as the way to institutionalise learning across the organisation – as an analytical rather than a reporting process.
- Work consciously with clarity about what learning constitutes and what learning purposes must serve: The idea is to carry out several strands of work at the same time and ensure cross-learning from all of them, rather than having a single monolithic project which is expected to do everything.
- Articulate one's own theory of change and align values: Be clear about whose agendas are being served and how.
- Facilitate up and down the chain: Build bridges between the client and the donor in terms of how the project goes forward. In this case, it needs to be ensured that both sides are happy with the fluid nature of the project and possible changes to the outcomes.
- Contribute to methodological development: Constantly think creatively about the most appropriate methods to use.

Mowles et al. (2008: 816) suggest that planning could then

> '[...] come to be a continuous process of recognition and reflection on action and the consequences of action that come to value the process of becoming as much as the outcome itself. Managers and staff would understand planning as a process of developing a deeper understanding of the game which is being played and the political constraints and opportunities that the game offers.'

Put differently, Rondinelli (1983) suggests projects become experiments where analysis, management tools and processes help in detecting both errors and successes and generate information that allows for modifications to the initial plan as opportunities and constraints appear during implementation. Interventions then 'become an expression of hypotheses and assumptions' and learning becomes an explicit outcome of activities (Jones, 2011: 35). Similary, Ortiz Aragón and Giles Macedo (2010) suggest that clients and consultants take approaches to learning that examine why people think that certain

approaches to capacity strengthening and overall change might make sense, by identifying and debating assumptions with regard to change and the conditions that might be needed for change to emerge (relating to power, culture, systems and actors) among those from multiple levels and with different perspectives. Box 11 provides some insights into what learning and continuous improvement mean in the context of managing a large capacity development project in Africa to improve responsiveness of the state to citizen needs and interests.

Box 11: Establishing and improving one's understanding of how change happens

In the case of a project to strengthen state–citizen relations in several African countries using an action learning approach, the starting point for identifying key interventions was a theory-based evaluation framework of voice and accountability projects developed by a prominent UK-based think-tank. Based on this, the project's focus was on improving the role of key interlocutors such as civil society, the media, elected representatives and traditional leaders. However, through on-going dialogue among project partners to capture, store and share information about the context, the strategy, the activities and their effects using tools such as: back to office reports, after action reviews, meeting minutes, telephone conversations and weekly email updates; the use of a relatively straightforward monitoring log by the team to record key activities and their perceived effects; and periodic face-to-face reviews among partners; the team's understanding of how change happened changed. It was realised that interlocution processes also included actors from within the state bureaucracy at both national and the sub-national level. As such, the team shifted the project's emphasis from organisations as interlocutors to the actual processes of interlocution, which broadened the definition of interlocutors to include a wider range of actors – with implications for key capacity development activities and their 'targets'.

So are there formal methodologies to managing capacity development projects in complex settings which encourage these sorts of practices? Watson (2010) suggests several approaches have been developed and refined. These include most significant change (Dart and Davies, 2003); the accountability, learning and planning system (Guijt, 2004); and outcome mapping (OM) (Earl et al., 2001). Common characteristics of these approaches are that:

- They involve structured interactions among stakeholders based on day-to-day experiences using 'work stories' as a means of 'making sense' of what is happening and why.
- They are not concerned exclusively with quantitative measurement but rather with creating consensus on what constitutes qualitative improvements that will contribute to the broad goals.
- They tend to demystify monitoring and evaluation and allow even the most vulnerable stakeholders to have a voice in periodic reflection. The capacities of stakeholders for critical analysis, debate and decision taking are thereby improved.

Outcome mapping as an appropriate management methodology

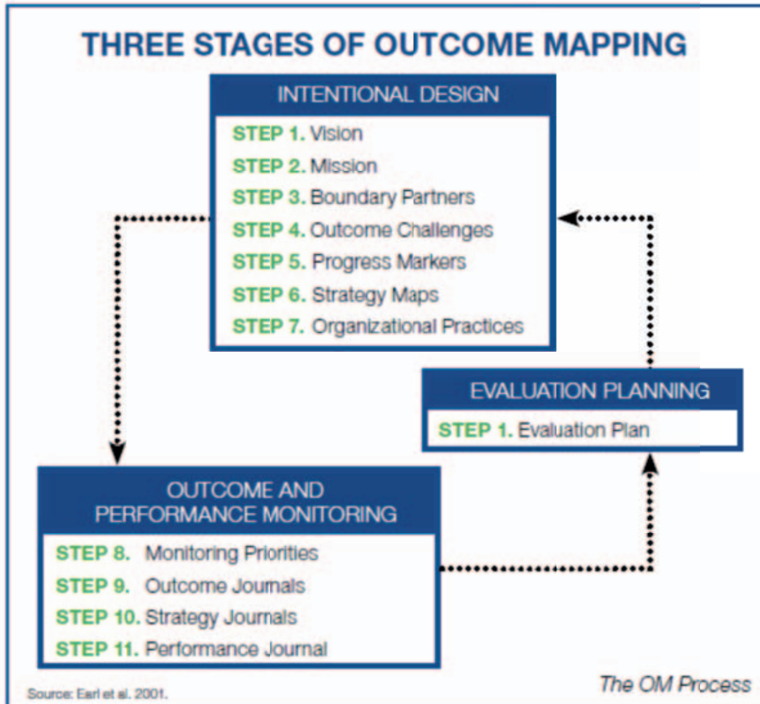
Of these, we think OM is particularly well suited to managing capacity development projects. OM is a set of tools and guidelines that steer project or programme teams through an iterative process (see Figure 3) to identify their desired change and to work collaboratively to bring it about. Results are measured by the changes in behaviour, actions and relationships of those individuals, groups or organisations with which the initiative is working directly and seeking to influence (Smutylo, 2005, in Jones and Hearn, 2009). Jones and Hearn (2009) suggest four key principles underlie OM:

- Actor-centred development and behaviour change: project aims and the indicators of success are defined in terms of changes in behaviour, interactions, mind-sets and motivations of actors.
- Continuous learning and flexibility: OM emphasises that management activities are cyclical, iterative and reflexive. They aim to foster learning on the actors and their changing behaviours, shifting contexts, the challenges involved in influencing social change and the direction the project is heading in. This creates space to make changes in, for instance, desired outcomes and strategies and helps to incorporate the unanticipated and surprising elements of change processes.
- Participation and accountability: OM emphasises involvement of stakeholders and their reflection on relationships and responsibilities and encourages two-way accountability. This is

particularly important considering we suggested (in Section 2) that consultants facilitate their clients to understand and address the context they work in.

- Non-linearity and contribution as opposed to attribution and control: OM acknowledges that processes of change are owned collectively and are the result of a complex web of interactions between different actors, forces and trends. Projects can only contribute to and influence processes of social change and cannot control specific outcomes and claim attribution.

Figure 3: The three stages of outcome mapping



Source: Earle et al. (2001).

In practical terms, taking this more flexible approach might mean that project management becomes more like team management, whereby the provider assembles a team with the right skills (see next section) and the client responds to the challenges and opportunities the circumstances present. However, this also becomes more risky for providers, as there is no guarantee that they can respond to every circumstance and subsequently they might be perceived by the client to be inadequately equipped (although this could be addressed by negotiating roles beforehand, see Section 3.1). This obviously has implications for funders, who are usually keen to know what 'their' money is being used for – a point to which we return in Section 4. Other challenges are that an OM-type approach might make the process more time-intensive where emphasis is placed on documenting progress regularly through journals. And in countries where top-down approaches are more common, capturing the opinions of different (and perhaps weaker, quieter) stakeholders may be challenging.

An organisational culture which promotes learning during projects

Putting more emphasis on observation and learning during project management processes may not be so straightforward, however. Consultants rarely work in a vacuum. The approaches chosen and actions taken are influenced by the culture of their own organisation, that of the client and, importantly, that of the funder. We return to issues concern funding practices in Section 4 but, on the culture of consultants, for instance, Ramalingam (2005) found that staff from 13 international organisations saw knowledge and learning as a 'solution looking for a problem' (p19) rather than a means to improve their working practices. And as van Ongevalle and Huyse (2010) suggest people rarely set aside enough time for project-related reflection, which is probably a symptom of a desire for people/organisations to maintain the *status quo* and not leave their comfort zone by changing their behavioural patterns.

So what can be done to promote more learning and reflection? In the medium to long term, an organisation may need to build its own capacity to change deeply engrained behavioural patterns – addressing various elements in Kaplan's hierarchy through a range of interventions. But in the short term, there are various straightforward actions people can take to improve learning at project and programme levels. The key is to identify existing 'rhythms' and 'spaces' (such as weekly team meetings and email updates) within regular management processes where learning can be made tangible (including reflecting on informal interactions that take place during fieldwork) and can be used to inform decision-making and future planning (using tools such as after action reviews and retrospects to structure interactions) through promoting open communication and feedback via good leadership.

3.3 Identifying and developing the right skills and abilities

As Acquaye-Baddoo (2010) argues, hard expertise alone (on, for instance, knowledge-to-policy issues) is not enough to make complex capacity development processes effective and their results sustainable. The various dimensions of human behaviour and relationships together with the multifaceted nature of capacity call for an appreciation of an eclectic field of work that draws on many domains of knowledge and disciplines, including organisational development and management science; multi-stakeholder processes and related insights from social and political science; pedagogy, behavioural psychology and group facilitation; change management and facilitation; and governance, public administration and institutional development.

To be able to understand and advise an organisation effectively, consultants need to be able to listen and observe effectively. Doing so can help them to identify patterns in an organisation's narrative, guide members to those issues that may need further exploration and encourage them to confront issues that seem to be glossed over as the story unfolds. Practitioners may also need to write more reflectively and utilise their facilitation skills to enable members of the organisation to develop a greater understanding of, and insights into, their organisation themselves (Collingwood, 2010). We also need to be aware of how own motives and mental maps influence our perceptions of events and dynamics in a complex change setting. This includes awareness of both the potential and limitations of our power to act or influence others. This 'self-knowledge' grows from open, critical engagement with others, a willingness to have one's assumptions challenged and regular self-reflection (Acquaye-Baddoo, 2010).

Supporting organisations to develop their capacities requires at least the fostering of trust and openness among actors, contributing to high levels of commitment to engage and act. This in turn requires an understanding of and empathy for the history of the organisation, relationships, power differentials and opportunities that will determine the potential for development and progress, which itself requires practitioners to spend considerable time in-country. The list of skills and abilities is already rather extensive: Box 12 provides an overview of the kind of qualities expected of a capacity development practitioner.

Box 12: The qualities of an effective capacity development practitioner

1. You articulate your own framework and ways of looking at capacity. You know key theories that underpin your analysis and choices and are conscious about what you are inclined to focus on and what you are not.
2. You select between or combine different roles as appropriate to the task and the client situation. You know what roles you are good at and which less so. You can help to clarify roles and expectations and select appropriate role choices.
3. You balance thematic understanding with change expertise. You consciously hold and develop expertise on 'both sides of the coin' in order to be effective in assignments and for the clients you serve.
4. You are able to deal with multiple interests, politics, conflict, inequality and value differences and your own position in these. You know and deepen your personal style in this respect and are clear about your boundaries, also to clients.
5. You have the skill of 'reading situations' and see the uniqueness of each client or assignment. You develop a sense for discovering the pattern of existing energy and bottlenecks to change.
6. You have developed your skills for interaction and listening and a clear sense of your personal qualities and pitfalls in this respect. You have mastered your own selection of dialogue techniques and methods.
7. You are able to help clients to develop connections between actors and levels. You have a repertoire of specific approaches or methods for doing so. If necessary and appropriate, you also actively facilitate, mediate, catalyse or broker new connections.
8. You have shaped your own approaches to measuring capacity development and demonstrating its results. You create clarity on this with clients and are able to hold different timeframes.
9. You balance and link accountability and learning aims. You are able to 'learn in action', adjust the course of action on the basis of experiences and exercise self-reflection.
10. You design, manage and review specific interventions. You fine-tune your interventions towards the needs, situation and dynamics of the client and other stakeholders. And you manage the relation with them in an accountable, transparent and ethical manner.

Source: Ubels et al. (2010).

But Acquaye-Baddoo (2010) suggests that an understanding of these issues is brought about not only through 'traditional' teaching processes, but also through

- Immersion over time in a particular setting where dealing with technical problems yields a contextualised understanding about what may or may not work;
- Participating alongside different stakeholders and mediating and negotiating the conflicting interests and power differentials that may exist;
- Developing relationships with key players and groups in a way that builds trust and enables more frank dialogue about the nature of the underlying issues that may help or hinder expected results;
- Continually testing technical and explicit knowledge against what is discovered about the more tacit knowledge that exists in the context; and
- Enabling different actors involved to become more self-aware about the complexity of the organisation in a way that improves their capabilities.

Large-scale capacity development work tends to be overseen by 'Northern'/foreign-based experts. While they may have excellent technical skills, they may, for instance, lack an in-depth understanding of the local context and may subsequently not be able to stimulate professional rigour and innovation among actors within the client organisation. Capacity development work could be improved considerably by working closely with local providers. If they lack expertise on content, they could have their knowledge and skills on this improved. There are several advantages in deploying local capacity developers either on their own or in collaboration with international/Northern organisations.

For instance, they may understand the local context and cultural sensitivities; speak the local languages; know the professional, formal and informal networks; enjoy legitimacy and recognition among peers; have knowledge of national institutions; be familiar with the work environment and able to command lower costs; and finally have a better rapport with national decision-makers who prefer to see their compatriots employed in-country rather than losing people to better-paid jobs abroad (Acquaye-Baddoo, 2010). However, if consultants happen to be foreign and based outside the client's context, immersion in context over considerable lengths of time (especially during a large multiyear

project) is vital in helping them to build strong relationships with key actors and to understand not only the concrete observable features of an organisation but also the more intangible dimensions and connections. Making the invisible tangible is vital, and understanding power, incentives, tensions and conflicts is unlikely to be achieved through a week-long trip.

3.4 Key points

- Developing capacity can lead to outcomes that are not initially obvious or clearly attributable. Negotiating exactly what the consultant is responsible for (e.g. outputs or outcomes) using Champion's consulting grid can help all parties to clarify what types of relationship are needed for particular tasks and what approach to managing the project they should take.
- If consultants are asked 'simply' to deliver outputs and activities, the LFA remains a useful project management methodology, enabling them to measure the quality of outputs against predefined targets. However, if consultants are asked to take some responsibility for achieving greater levels of capacity, they need to reflect on the effect of outputs and activities on the organisation/environment. Continuous or at least regular monitoring and learning become critical activities to capture both anticipated and unanticipated effects. Methodologies such as OM can facilitate this and help teams to gather information and make decisions about a project's contribution to relational change among actors with whom it interacts with directly. But for the project team to be reflexive learners, the client's, funder's and especially the consultants' organisations need to facilitate this through their own learning culture and systems.
- Promoting capacity development can be a difficult process: it needs an appreciation of many domains of knowledge and disciplines, including organisational development and management science; multi-stakeholder processes; related insights from social and political science; behavioural psychology and others. As with doctors and teachers, an understanding of these issues is not necessarily brought about through formal teaching processes. Hands-on experience is also crucial, through, for instance, immersion in context and learning by doing.
- Finally, capacity development services are often overseen by Northern-based organisations, with local capacity development providers playing a marginal role. While foreign organisations may have staff with excellent technical skills, they often lack, for instance, an in-depth understanding of the local context. Hence, there is significant merit in deploying local capacity developers either on their own or in collaboration with Northern counterparts.

We move on to the penultimate section to consider funding practices.

4. Implications for funders

In order to manage deliberate improvements in an organisation's capacity, clients and often consultants need to take approaches which emphasise continuous learning and flexibility, and may have to work towards outcomes that are not always initially clear, which they can only influence and contribute to. This has serious implications for funders such as aid agencies – the critiques of which are well documented (see, e.g., UNCTAD, 2000). This section describes some of the current practices of funders who invest in capacity development work and ends with some suggestions to improve such practices.

4.1 A critique of existing practices

Aid agencies' approaches tend to limit the outreach, quality and effectiveness of capacity development investments through their preference for short-term, supply-driven projects and programmes and an often overemphasis on managing for results. For instance, Box 13 highlights a case in which a project was in effect a tool for a funder to spend money and maintain influence among key political figures. This has underplayed the importance of understanding how results have been achieved and deterred many agencies from promoting the slow and hard-to-measure process of capacity building. Furthermore, many agencies have shown a tendency to hire expensive international consultants to fly in and give training through workshops as a form of technical assistance as well as providing resources for infrastructure development – focusing on the more tangible elements at the lower end of Kaplan's capacity framework (Leigh, forthcoming; Ubels et al., 2010).

Box 13: Capacity development and 'bigger picture' political economy issues

The plan for a fairly costly multiyear project to improve the way a research organisation in Asia communicated its research was informed almost entirely by a needs assessment and recommendations made by an international consultancy funded by an aid agency. The client – a local research organisation – did not engage with the design phase and probably did not ask for help explicitly—perhaps because it was unclear as to what problems it faced and how they could be addressed. The subsequent plan comprised four phases and featured an innovative action learning approach, with the client responsible for the delivery of a number of outputs. However, during the inception (with the approval of the funder), the client altered the implementation approach considerably in favour of a more conventional (workshopping) approach. However, the space afforded to the client may have been less to do with wanting to promote ownership and the effectiveness of capacity development interventions and more to do with 'bigger picture' political economy issues, whereby the project served as a tool for the funder to spend money and maintain links with key political figures within the country's government. Given its lack of engagement in the design process, whether the organisation actually wanted to embark on a capacity development process at all could be questioned.

The dominance of external funding has often made both clients and consultants more responsive to the priorities of funders than to what works locally. Donors often struggle to reconcile their programming priorities and internationally set budget cycles with local priorities and budget cycles, creating practical barriers to working through local institutions. For instance, when financing local institutions, particularly those affiliated with the state, they have preferred to deliver programmes through parallel delivery structures such as project management units rather than using the client's own structures and systems (Leigh, forthcoming). Funding capacity development programmes as projects that are separate from the on-going work of the organisation (and managed through a project management unit) makes it easier to track decisions and accountability for expenditure for the donor but makes it very difficult to embed results more widely.

The effects of parallel delivery structures are well documented, including the brain drain they promote, whereby employees from local institutions are often recruited to donor structures—often distorting wages. For instance, salaries can be raised in local institutions to attract personnel back, only to prevent the poorest performers from leaving and inflating recurrent budgets in the process. Staff from

institutions that are bypassed can feel de-motivated and be de-skilled in the process. Moreover, clients tend to have inadequate buy-in and on occasion limited strategic guidance and oversight over capacity improvement processes, as Box 14 suggests (Leigh, forthcoming).

Box 14: Parallel delivery structures

A project to improve the capacity of an Asian client was delivered by a project management unit set up within the organisation—a requirement made by the funder, rather than, say, asking one of the existing departments to manage the project. This probably reflected the funder's desire to see measurable results delivered by the unit. However, one could question the extent to which setting up such a unit within the organisation could feasibly ensure buy-in, oversight and strategic guidance from higher levels. Although most of the staff on the unit were recruited from the research organisation, it effectively isolated the 'change agents' from those whom they were trying to change. Moreover, while strategic decisions were made by the then-president of the organisation, without wider ownership/buy-in, any momentum the project may have established in all likelihood evaporated with a new president, with seemingly different priorities, having taken office. 'Results' were subsequently not as embedded in local capacities as they might have been. However, had the project been more deeply embedded, it might have been harder to execute activities (given the hierarchy and bureaucracy) and to attribute any changes to them directly.

4.2 Recommendations for funders

So what needs to change? Funders need to understand some of the issues we brought out earlier, including the uncertain and emergent nature of capacity and that capacity development inputs in the shape of standard training modules are not necessarily on their own going to help to achieve capacity improvements effectively. This might also mean that, rather than encouraging clients to fly in international consultants for a few days at a time, funders might agree to clients bringing in practitioners (local and/or international) on a longer-term basis as embedded employees to work alongside their employees. A shift in thinking is needed among funders on what capacity development is and how it works (Leigh, forthcoming).

Ownership of and responsibility for capacity development interventions by the 'client' seem to be crucial to their sustainability. Funders need to avoid prescribing standard solutions and, whenever possible, adhere to the client's own priorities and systems. Asking clients to make some form of contribution and/or co-investment could encourage them to take greater 'control' over the project and would also help in addressing power asymmetries between funder and client (Ubels, 2010). And, importantly, funders, consultants and clients all need to allocate enough time during the inception phase of a project (or, even better, during a pre-project phase) to considering the full ramifications of capacity building, not shying away from some of the more political aspects.

Given the multidimensional nature of capacity, building this effectively would probably involve funders providing clients with long-term flexible support (possibly as core funding) to deliver what clients think is needed when they think it is required—calling for a high degree of trust between the funder and client (Ubels, 2010; Ubels et al., 2010). Box 15, for instance, draws attention to a project where a funder provided a high degree of flexibility – in this case permitting the project team to modify the standard reporting log frame matrix. And in assessing the performance of clients (and consultants), rather than basing this on the delivery of outcomes (over which they have limited control), funders may be better off assessing them according to how best they interpreted and responded to the circumstances they met during the project/programme – that is, on their ability to improvise. Alternatively, funders can hold clients and consultants to account based on their principles of action (enabling adaptive responses to emerge), rather than on delivering a predefined plan (Jones, 2011).

Box 15: Donor flexibility around reporting requirements

The managers of a project aiming to improve state capacity in several African countries had to articulate the project plan and report on progress to the funder, on an annual basis, using a conventional log frame matrix (which provided an overview of the project logic, ways to follow up on progress and an analysis of the project risks/assumptions). The outcomes were primarily quantitative, including indicators such as the number of policies changed, but also included some qualitative indicators, such as the policy content that was altered. However, the programme team felt the matrix provided only a snapshot of the project and did not capture the more relational and actor-specific behavioural issues, which the outcome mapping methodology emphasises—with many stories going untold. Both the funder and the contract manager permitted the project team to change the reporting matrix to capture additional information. As such, after a couple of iterations, the original matrix featured additional columns that report on behavioural changes of key actors identified and targeted by the project. Moreover, as the project wore on, the programme team realised some of the initial outcomes the project was accountable for achieving were perhaps not the right ones. Once again, the funder and contract manager were flexible enough to allow for changes in the desired outcomes, provided there were clear reasons for doing so.

Given the challenges in promoting capacity development, funders could help to drive up standards and encourage higher levels of professional rigour and innovation among those who manage and implement capacity development programmes, through, for instance, support to more and better development and learning opportunities; communities of practice; ensuring minimum professional standards; and more information for potential clients about the kinds of capacity development solutions and support available. And, given their greater knowledge of the context, funders could encourage the growth and development of national (and sub-national) capacity development service providers (such as civil society and consultancy organisations).

4.3 Key points

Investing in effective capacity development processes thus entails the following:

- An appreciation of the often uncertain and emergent nature of capacity and the fact that capacity development inputs in the shape of standard training modules are not necessarily on their own going to help achieve capacity improvements effectively;
- Promoting ownership and responsibility of capacity development strategies. Asking clients to make some form of contribution and/or co-investment could encourage them to take greater 'control' over the project;
- Allocating enough time during the inception phase of a project (or, even better, during a pre-project phase) to working with clients and consultants to consider the full ramifications of capacity building, not shying away from some of the more political aspects;
- Delivering long-term and flexible support: long-term core funding and providing space to local organisations to deliver what they think is needed (drawing on both conventional and advanced approaches) when they think it is required can help them to respond to complex and changing organisational and environmental contexts;
- Assessing clients (and consultants if appropriate) according to how best they interpret and respond to the circumstances they meet during the project – that is, their ability to improvise – rather than with regard to delivering outcomes they have limited control over (given the emergent nature of capacity); and
- Considering different funding modalities, but avoiding project management units that are separate from the body of the client organisation in favour of a more difficult, but substantially more embedded, approach to developing capacity.

More broadly, we suggest funders encourage higher levels of professional rigour and innovation among those who manage and implement capacity development programmes and that they promote the growth and development of national-level capacity development service providers who are likely to have a better understanding of the local context than their foreign counterparts.

5. Conclusion: towards better practice

The paper has made it clear that capacity is a multidimensional concept, one which reflects the complex nature of human systems that are made up of multiple actors, interacting with one another in often unpredictable ways and often affected by factors beyond the immediate context. So what? Here, restating key points made throughout the text, we outline key statements and suggestions to help both consultants and funders to work towards more effective capacity development practice.

5.1 Capacity development as a political process

Capacity development as a deliberate process is an inherently political one. If change processes are not owned and led by those whose capacity is being developed, they are unlikely to happen (or, if they do, to be sustainable). Political pressure – internally or externally – is key – without which capacity is unlikely to improve sustainably. Unless an organisation has a clear idea of where it is going and why, capacity development efforts may well run into the sand.

Organisations change in response to their perceptions of how well equipped they are to deal with their external environment. Funders, consultants and clients need to allocate time during the inception phase of a project (or even during a pre-project phase) to consider the full ramifications of capacity building, not shying away from some of the more political aspects. During this, consultants can help actors with sufficient power and influence within the client organisation to understand what is happening in their organisation, develop a vision of what they want it to be in future and a strategy to help them to get there. In other words, they need to understand how organisational change happens and how they can best engage with it. Referring to Kaplan's framework, this may involve strengthening higher order elements such as the organisation's vision and mission, as well as improving individual skills and abilities to help the organisation as a whole achieve its goals.

5.2 Strengthening ties between key actors

Approaches focused on single entities have tended to be limited in their impact as they do not deal sufficiently well with actors and their relationships with one another. Hence, capacity development needs to focus not just on the capacities needed to produce technical results, but also on what it takes to build more effective and dynamic relationships between different actors within a system (be it an organisation, a sector or a country).

More advanced capacity development approaches such as action learning, knowledge networks and multi-stakeholder platforms have complemented the more traditional methods such as workshops and study tours. However, despite this expanded repertoire, traditional approaches still tend to dominate, particularly in developing countries, perhaps because clients may be more risk-averse in selecting newer tools. Nevertheless, practitioners should select approaches that do not rigidly apply a single method but seek to combine different approaches that promote longer or periodic engagement and address the needs identified. But without investing considerable time in building up trust in the relationship between client and consultant, and in the process of 'reading' the organisation, projects may remain stuck in fairly conventional approaches to capacity building.

5.3 Clarifying the consultant's role and selecting an approach to manage change

Developing capacity can lead to outcomes that are not initially obvious or clearly attributable. Negotiating exactly what the consultant is responsible for (e.g. outputs or outcomes) using Champion's consulting grid can help all parties to clarify what types of relationship are needed for particular tasks

and what approach to managing the project they should take, and allow for structured discussion of the internal political issues.

If at one end of the spectrum, consultants are asked 'simply' to deliver outputs and activities, the LFA remains a useful project management methodology, enabling them to measure the quality of outputs against predefined targets. However, if consultants are asked to work with the client (in partnership) and take some responsibility for say, achieving greater levels of capacity, they need to reflect on the effect that outputs and activities have on the organisation/environment. Continuous or at least regular monitoring and learning become critical activities to help consultants together with the client capture both anticipated and unanticipated changes (if any), confirm, improve or reconfigure the project team's understanding of how change is likely to come about and respond appropriately.

Where consultants are responsible for outcomes (such as changes in capacity) as well as outputs (such as workshops and manuals) the OM methodology provides a set of steps and tools to help to manage the process. These help teams to gather information, and make decisions, about a project's contribution to behavioural change among actors the project has direct interaction with. It encourages reflexive practice, continuous learning, flexibility, participation and accountability. However, for the project team to be reflexive learners, the client's, funder's and especially the consultant's organisations need to facilitate this through its own learning culture and systems.

5.4 Developing the right skills and deploying appropriate personnel

Promoting capacity development can be a difficult process: it needs an appreciation of many domains of knowledge and many disciplines including organisational development and management science; multi-stakeholder processes; related insights from social and political science; and behavioural psychology; as well as being able to listen deeply and understand how consultants' own motives and world views affect their perceptions of events and dynamics within a particular setting. Like for doctors and teachers, an understanding of these issues is not necessarily brought about through formal teaching processes. Hands-on experience is also crucial, through, for instance, immersion in context and learning by doing.

Furthermore, capacity development services are often overseen by Northern-based organisations, with local capacity development providers, although growing in number, still playing a marginal role. While foreign organisations may have staff with excellent technical skills, they often lack, for instance, an in-depth understanding of the local context and cultural sensitivities; are unable to speak the local languages; or may be unfamiliar with professional, formal and informal networks.[2] Moreover, Northern consultants building capacities of Southern organisations can, if not carefully managed, reinforce existing power and knowledge asymmetries. Hence, there is significant merit in deploying local capacity developers, either on their own or in collaboration with Northern counterparts.

5.5 Investing in effective capacity development processes

All this has serious implications for funders such as aid agencies. For instance, questions need to be raised about whether funding capacity development programmes as projects that are separate from the on-going work of the organisation (and managed through a project management unit) really deliver sustainable results. Channelling funding through these sorts of units makes it easier to track decisions and accountability for expenditure to the donor. However, the fact that they are run in parallel with the rest of the client organisation means it is very difficult to embed results more widely.

As such, we think that investing in effective capacity development processes entails the following:

[2] www.snvworld.org/en/ourwork/Pages/LCDF.aspx.

- An appreciation of the often uncertain and emergent nature of capacity and the fact that capacity development inputs in the shape of standard training modules are not necessarily on their own going to help achieve capacity improvements effectively;
- Promoting ownership and responsibility of capacity development strategies. Asking clients to make some form of contribution and/or co-investment could encourage them to take greater 'control' over the project;
- Allocating enough time during the inception phase of a project (or, even better, during a pre-project phase) to working with clients and consultants to consider the full ramifications of capacity building, not shying away from some of the more political aspects;
- Delivering long-term and flexible support: long-term core funding and space for local organisations to deliver what they think is needed (drawing on both conventional and advanced approaches) when they think it is required can help them to respond to complex and changing organisational and environmental contexts;
- Considering different funding modalities, but avoiding project management units that are separate from the body of the client organisation in favour of a more difficult, but substantially more embedded, approach to developing capacity; and
- Assessing clients (and consultants if appropriate) according to how best they interpret and respond to the circumstances that they meet during the project – that is, their ability to improvise – rather than with regard to delivering outcomes they have limited control over (given the emergent nature of capacity).

More broadly, we suggest funders encourage higher levels of professional rigour and innovation among those who manage and implement capacity development programmes and that they promote the growth and development of national-level capacity development service providers who are likely to have a better understanding of the local context than their foreign counterparts.

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