

Capacity building: reflections on Eade's recommendations

'Capacity building' is a buzz phrase commonly used in development work, but what does it mean? In article titled 'Capacity building: who builds whose capacity', Eade dives into understanding the nature of capacity building and how it should be better approached.

Development practitioners from the Global North interchangeably use 'capacity building' programming as opportunities to 'train' Southerners. This creates a power dynamic that paints Northern practitioners as experts that are sharing their knowledge down to Southerners. Training coming from the North, however, should not inherently be considered the 'best' practices for development implementation. The information presented in these interventions seldom take into account the diverse factors that shape the Southern contexts with "NGOs taking too little time to understand the local political and cultural environment as well as the international policy context within which people, their organisations, and their governments are functionings" (Eade, 2007)—Only the Southerners can be true experts of their own functions and contexts. This gap in knowledge too often results in ineffective outcomes with no long-lasting impact. The waste in resources and time work against the sustainable development goals and expands distrust for development agencies by local community members.

This article is incredibly helpful for practitioners aspiring to shape projects with sustainable, participatory approaches. It gives insight into the failings of bottom-up accountability, urging for Northern development actors to "learn from their 'partners', not just [gather] 'stories and 'pictures'" (Eade, 2007). This learning should be spearheaded through the use of research and participatory tools, but as Cornwall and Pratt (2011) note "donor and development studies attention has returned to the macro level and to new aid instruments that focus less on public engagement". Northern organisations are not optimizing their partnerships to Southern entities if they fail to learn from their colleagues and fail to build joint understanding and accountability amongst all parties. By listening to partners, capacity building becomes a mutual activity: foreign organisations learn about the social contexts that may impact interventions while domestic organisations learn skills to support their local interests.

Reflecting on Eade's article, recommendations useful for development practitioners include: being humble, making a commitment and avoiding project 'tunnel vision'. As mentioned above, learning from others is necessary for developing participatory approaches in development. Development agents must humble themselves and recognise that they can learn from their partners about dynamics outside of the scope of the immediate project objectives to better shape outcomes that make a lasting impact. This requires a commitment for longer-term involvement as transfers of cultural and social knowledge is a slow process. Taking the time to build one's capacity on these factors means viewing projects interventions from micro-, meso- and macro- levels. From this reading, development practitioners should begin to remove their air of superiority and begin to listen more to the voices of the Global South.

References

- Cornwall, A. and Pratt, G. (2011) The use and abuse of participatory rural appraisal: reflections from practice. *Agriculture and human values*, 28(2), 263-272.
- Eade, D. (2007) Capacity building: who builds whose capacity? *Development in Practice*, 17(4-5), 630-639.