

Capacity Building Policy as if People Matter:
An International Human Rights Approach

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Many definitions of capacity building have emerged since the latter part of the 20th century when the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) promoted capacity building to alleviate poverty as an international policy directive. Development was addressed as a primarily rural geographic, societal and economic phenomenon (Dobie, 2000). As important as this model is for the world's social workers, it is a limited construct.

Over time, the implementation and evolution of capacity building has gained breadth and depth. A definition from the field of lifelong learning is of particular interest. In their experience, "capacity-building includes developing the critical understanding to effectively challenge the vested interests of the powerful, identifying the spaces within which to promote social change" (Mayo, 2000,p.24).

Capacity Building as Means and End

All social development and capacity building, no matter how large the project, begins with individuals, with families, small groups, organizations and communities - the social work neighborhood. No matter who the constituency is, if

their development as human beings is ignored, we are remiss. Even if working at the country level, country is not an abstract concept. It is a "sum of individuals who develop a *consensus* vision" (Dobie, 2000, p.12). In the absence of a vision, policy direction is unclear and implementation difficult. People, in effect, don't 'own' the policy or program; it fails as the morale of the people fails (Dobie, 2000). Development, as social workers know, is not just a geographic, economic or societal concept. It is also about human development, emotional well-being and personal growth. Without attention to them, there can be no real social or economic development.

Speaking in the context of health promotion, Labonte and Laverack (2001a) make it clear that capacity building, in fact, is at once an individual and community enterprise - a means and an end:

There are elements of peoples' day-to-day relationships, conditioned and constrained by economic and political practices, that are important determinants of the quality of their lives, if not also of communities' healthy functioning (p.112).

They have identified these qualities as 'capacity,' crediting Amartya Sen (1999) with distinguishing between

constitutive and *instrumental* elements of human development. The latter may function to achieve a goal, while the former is an end in itself. Hence, while improved economics may be an honorable goal, the very process of getting there is capacity building in itself.

A UN Primer on Capacity Building and Social Inequities

Capacity 21, instituted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1992, includes educating facilitators to recognize the huge role of information "to help people to make better and more informed choices." The model incorporates modeling and learning to ensure that programs "adapt fluidly as conditions change, and as experience builds and contributes to the growing body of practical information on capacity building for sustainable development..." (Dobie, 2000, p.vi). The author notes that capacity development has largely failed over the years because the capacity of people were not developed in the process. They consequently remained just as dependent despite years of assistance.

Capacity 21 focuses on the reasons for failure and the targets of change. Social inequities, not surprisingly, were found to establish impoverished lifestyles that could not be rectified by programs in the absence of a combination of personal development and

policy change. By concentrating on social welfare and fighting poverty, the global supply of social capital is markedly increased. Sustainable development requires the integration of three domains, according to the UN - social, environmental and economic. It is time to add the psychological dimension to the equation. The stress of poverty and alienation is not experienced without emotional repercussions that in turn affect the ability to develop in other realms.

The right to development has focused on the external world to the omission of the internal. As we delineate the principles that are presented by others, we must responsibly translate the information to address all aspects of development. So when it is noted that we should concern ourselves first with the most vulnerable "in order to decrease the disparities in standards of living and better meet the needs of the majority of people of the world," (p.5) we can stretch our understanding to the psychological, social, economic and environmental conditions of those in poverty, who are most likely to be women and children. In fact, Dobie, the author, states that the full participation of women is essential to achieve sustainable development. So, too, are the "creativity, ideals and courage of youth" (p.7),

and "indigenous people and their communities" (p.8). The call is vast; the vulnerable populations familiar.

Agenda 21 is much more than a list of thematic actions. It is designed to prepare the world for the challenges of the new century. It addresses poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and environmental degradation as a set of inter-related issues. It represents the beginning of a global partnership for economically viable, socially just and environmentally sound development, not only for the present, but also for the future (Dobie, 2000, p.9).

This call to action emphasizes that their considerable experience reveals that people must be involved if development is to be successful. Such people are those "who understand what is needed, have the necessary information at their fingertips," and are part of an integrated group that has "participated in the vital decisions that affect them" (Dobie, 2004, p.10). In short, it is not just the leaders who must not be educated on the subject, but those who experience poverty, oppression and its collateral damage must inform the substance and process.

Poverty Policy Critiques: Implications for Women

In his critique of the poor people of India vis a vis globalization, Friedman (2004) argues that anti-globalization isn't the answer to world poverty. Rather, the globalization movement must develop an agenda to help the poor by improving governance. He suggests that through the use of the Internet and other tools that can spotlight corruption and mismanagement, "accountability, transparency, education and the rule of law" must become a reality that is applied to the oppression of the poor at the local level. Friedman concludes "that the most important forces combating poverty in India today are those activists who are fighting for better local governance" (2004, p.13). His suggestion is apropos to all parts of the world. Yet, it is admittedly one-dimensional. He never addresses the fact that it is women who are most likely to be poor, no matter what the country. Policies regarding poverty must not ignore them.

In the US, for example, studies suggest that earning capacity is the essential differentiating factor between people who receive welfare benefits for a short time and those who are long-term recipients. Mothers, the group most likely to live in poverty, tend to work when they are able to earn a life-sustaining wage. Those who cannot

tend to stay on welfare. Were welfare linked to mandatory skill-building activities, Besharov suggests that caseloads could be substantially decreased, while increasing the quality of lives (1996). Policies must come face to face with

gender inequality that perpetuates poverty and social deprivation and vice versa, creating a cycle of despair and demoralization that may be transmitted to the next generation (Bassuk et al., 2004, p.52).

Because of the reciprocal impact of this cycle, the United Nations insists that "anti-poverty strategies must deal with issues related to women's low status and lack of empowerment" in order to be successful (UNDP, 1998, p.72).

Capacity Building: A Feminist Systems Perspective

Social deprivation and gender inequality go hand in hand, for women are among the most socially deprived people worldwide. Bassuk et al. (2004, p. 52) calls their experience "a particularly pernicious form of oppression" because it integrates economic, social and political policies that have sweeping ramifications. Women's subjugation and inequity compromises not only their lives, but that of the entire community. Not only is

their capacity to thrive diminished, they are less able to support and care for their families and participate equally in community life. And I would add that until they are paid the life sustaining wages that they deserve, capacity building for the poor, though absolutely necessary, will never be sufficient. Social work couldn't find a better example of the systems perspective in operation. Respectful attention is given even to the psychological dimension.

Women in rural India have found that capacity building in their everyday lives serves as a route to building courage and confidence (Subramanian, 2003). Education for literacy in the context of development provides them with a basis of understanding and renegotiating the world. A sense of dignity translates to demand for services among women who share experiences, knowledge and strategies. In turn, networks are created that challenge, among other things, inequitable gender relations. Capacity building, in effect, revisits the feminist concept and success of mutual consciousness-raising, an ongoing process in which participants re-evaluate themselves and their life experience, their opportunities and possibilities. Feminist scholars long have advocated the importance of addressing structural

inequality as well. They recognize the intersection of gender, race and class that create interlocking systems of oppression. In India, the model is extended appropriately to gender-caste-class analysis.

In today's parlance, these feminist insights of yesteryear are now translated as capacity building principles and initiatives that allow for sharing, making commonalities recognizable and alternatives imaginable. Capacity-based groups are caches of information and support, even providing the possibility of pooling resources and organizing collective action. Capacity building includes formal training for the explicit purpose of educating women so that they can control their own lives. Bonds are forged in these forums that change the lives of the participating women (Subramanian, 2003).

Angeles (2003) reports that the rise of 'state feminism' in the Philippines has evolved with democratization in recent years. With the Canadian International Development Agency as a catalyst, local women's organizations have put into practice some of the most up-to-date international concepts. Among them is the recognition of the importance of their development in terms of social capital (women's contributions count), capacity building (how they can and must develop), and

gender mainstreaming (analyzing all policies and programs from the point of view of their disparate impact on women and on men).

Women in Development: A Critical Analysis

In post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe, the perspective and concomitant issues are a little different. Despite years of efforts by Women in Development (WID) scholars, advocates and practitioners, there has been little success in their capitalist US-based programs that were instituted in the early 1970s; nor has its successor, Gender and Development (GAD), fared any better. In fact, women's status has continued to decline in these countries, and feminist ideology never really caught on (Ghodsee, 2003).

After studying feminist research that explored the phenomena, Ghodsee came to the conclusion that the failures probably had more to do with WID ideology unrelated to women's development. The researchers found that the covert rationale for the WID and GAD programs was stemming the tide of Marxism in the developing world. Women's programs simply were tools to that end, dressed up in liberal development garb. They were never pro-women's advancement.

The imperative to integrate women into the development process, in fact, sprang organically from poor women's inherent need for development. It became clear that basic human needs had to supersede capitalist development. It is capacity building at the everyday level that must lay the foundation of women's development. We can learn from the lessons of failure. Women's development must not be manipulated by governments or anyone else; manipulation is the very antithesis of capacity building.

Micro-credit for Women's Development: A Critical Analysis

Micro-credit for the poor, and particularly women, has become a mantra throughout the world, and for good reason. Such programs, providing poverty relief by granting small loans to small businesses, have been touted as unusually successful since their introduction in the early 1970s by Muhammed Yunus in rural Bangladesh (Yunus & Jolie, 1989). Yunus, like his program heirs, found early on, however, that attention had to be paid to women's low self-esteem and personal development before economic programs could be put in place. Once they were given the opportunity to bond in groups, and their self-esteem was attended to, the women flourished, paying back their loans over 98% of the time, at a higher rate than

men. The trend continues to this day all over the world. But despite the rave reviews, there have been critiques of late that probably should be considered.

In Sri Lanka, according to Hyndman and de Alwia (2003), most international humanitarian organizations and development staff recognize that gender and the need for feminist analysis is just as relevant to men. (It may relieve them to learn that poor men are very much a part of Yunus' model. It's just that poor women are more prevalent and less likely to be granted loans by mainstream lenders.) The authors also call into question the assumptions that are implicit in funding women's projects close to home, so that they can care for the family while engaged in entrepreneurial ventures. Stereotyped roles, they declare, are only perpetuated by such predictable micro-credit policies. Women are inextricably linked to the private and gendered sphere of the home, to the exclusion of men. The authors' critique is worth consideration.

Isseries (2003), too, provides an assessment of micro-credit, targeting the very principles upon which micro-credit is based. Her concern is with their stress on the importance of self-reliance, efficiency and

economic independence, a surprising perspective until one examines her criticism.

The logic is that poverty can be alleviated through entrepreneurship and hard work undertaken by the disadvantaged individual. This is merely a policy version of 'bootstrap theory,' or economic individualism so prevalent in US political ideology. That is, anyone can make it if they work hard enough in the marketplace (Isseries, 2003, p.40). If they do not, it's their fault.

Social workers might be the first to agree with Isseries. Poor women themselves who are recipients of micro-loans long have pointed out the fact that they are expected to more than double their already overburdened workload. No one is sharing their childcare and home maintenance responsibilities when they assume the responsibilities of a small business. Chronic fatigue among women is a common health problem worldwide (Wetzel, 1993).

Another criticism concerns the very strengths of women, their excellent credit risk and unselfish use of profits. Yunus himself testified to a US Congressional Forum why a high percentage of his loans go to women. "Women have plans for themselves, their children, about their homes, the meals. They have a Vision. A man wants

to enjoy himself" (Goetz & Gupta, 1996, p. 55). This reality has been mirrored in micro-credit programs around the world. But instead of calling into question self-serving male behavior, it is accepted as "boys will be boys" behavior. It is an excellent example of lost opportunity. While it is true that women's capacity is expanded, that of men is not. It doesn't bode well for gender relations and families. That is not to say that any of these critics would want women to be rejected for loans as they have been in the past. The psychological development of boys and men must be addressed.

Capacity Building Leadership Considerations

In order to empower people, community leaders from all walks of life need appropriate education and training for capacity building, just as professionals do. What appropriateness means in practice, however, depends on the definition of capacity building and empowerment, who does the defining and according to whose agendas. While the very act of participation may be educational and empowering, it doesn't guarantee effective learning. Too often, apparent group consensus is in fact a byproduct of powerful influence and control (Mayo, 2000).

Such unchallenged agreement has been called "suspicious" by those who are students of the phenomena

of power relationships (Schuller, 1998). The facilitator must be aware of vested interests within the group and who may have been excluded, thus enabling the easy consensus. For example, empowerment that is conceptualized as a process whereby those with little power can participate with those with significant power may foster consensus without empowering anyone. Manipulation and placation may be more descriptive of the experience. Recall that capacity building, if it is to be empowering in reality, must include the development of critical understanding among community representatives so that vested interests can be challenged effectively. Only then can strategies for social change be promoted (Mayo, 2000).

Without considering human resources as social capital, nothing can be accomplished. That means that people must be well-trained, well-developed, well-appreciated and well-managed. It also means that they must be capable of innovation. Innovation is a strategic instrument of capacity building in the management of human resources in an age of globalization. Whether in reference to organizations, management, governance or public administration, all over the world innovation is key. But that quality, too, is not acquired in a vacuum.

A new generation of future-oriented, anticipatory individuals must be groomed who are capable of developing effective visions for their organizations. As individuals develop, so too do organizations that in turn foster capabilities within communities and governments, first locally, and ultimately creating a civilized world out of turbulence. That is the endgame, but we must always remember that it is the humanity of the individuals that make it all possible (Farazmand, 2004). Capacity must begin with them if it is to be realized at each level.

Plans vs Strategies

The UNDP presents a proviso for consideration, that of knowing the difference between a plan and a strategy. Plans, they warn in so many words, are a dime a dozen and should be scrapped. Strategies, on the other hand, must reflect the complex systems that underlie the development of a people and their countries. (The systems perspective lives.) A viable strategy must enable people to identify long-term needs, to be clear about what they intend to do, and to learn from experience in the process. That process is cyclical because one must learn what works and what fails, feeding back the information to revise the strategy accordingly (Dobie, 2000).

But Hacen in 1996 recommended that capacity leadership training should be part of a single overall plan, so that all participants work in harmony. (Perhaps we should call his overall plan a strategy and put the confusion to rest.) Despite nuanced differences depending on their roles and the country involved, many capacity building strategies are common to all. All, for example, emphasize "starting with people, not projects" (Simpson, Wood and Daws, 2003, title). The lessons of the California Wellness Foundation can provide a universal template for consideration (Compobasso and Davis, 2001, p.1):

1. Establish a foundation of trust
2. Define clear roles and responsibilities
3. Incorporate sufficient start-up time
4. Delineate specific goals and objectives
5. Provide sufficient resources to meet the goals and objectives
6. Select appropriate technical support providers
7. Implement effective needs assessment
8. Complement structure with flexibility
9. Employ meaningful monitoring and evaluation
10. Maintain effective communication

It is surprising how often programs neglect what would appear to be common sense, whether they're called plans or strategies.

Capacity Building as a Flexible Approach

Researchers, Labonte and Laverack (2001b), descriptively caution us *not* to try to create program models in order

to fix community capacity in amber, and then provide funders and agencies with precise metrics... Such an approach risks more political harm than good to the processes of healthy (socially just, environmentally sustainable) social change (p.136).

If history is an example, their concern is likely to go unheeded by funders themselves, particularly governments who like to see replicable models. That is not to say that there cannot be agreement about much theory, field-tested research and pragmatic information that can be useful to many, according to these Canadian researchers.

Still, Labonte & Laverack contend that improving capacity must never be thought of as a panacea to complex social and economic problems. They can never be a substitute for nations concerned with equitable

distribution of wealth and environmental sustainability. Their provisos sound very similar to those of feminists concerned with the 'bootstrap' mentality of micro-credit projects. When evaluating healthy communities, capacity measures should always look beyond the program-specific goals to the larger health determinants available to constituencies. As they say, "Not only should this approach improve health-promotion program evaluation. It should also improve its practice" (Labonte & Laverack, 2001b, p.137).

Participatory Action Research

Capacity training models, once sparse, have been proliferating, from African countries (Hacen, 1996; Reddy, 2000) to Canada (Joffres et al., 2004); and to Europe and the US (Bryant, 1997; Flourney, 2002; Furry, 2004; Rich, 2003), among others. Whether they are concerned with health promotion (Campobasso & Davis, 2001; Labonte & Laverack, 2001 a & b), human resources (Farazmand, 2004), sustainable development (Ceccon & Cetto, 2003), emergency situations (Hacen, 1996), racism (Reddy, 2000), post-conflict justice and reconciliation (Orr, 2002; Flourney, 2002), schools (Rich, 2003), or building organizational

capacity (Furry, 2004; Joffres et al., 2004), they share a call for participatory action research. All advocate multi-leveled approaches to ensure the inclusion of multiple social systems and individual experiences.

Participatory action research, originated by Kurt Lewin in 1946, grew out of the need to increase knowledge about social systems, according to Marsick (2003). She points out that action research may seem more demanding, but in the long run promises to be more successful. The reasons make sense. By including the vital input of stakeholders, the likelihood that studies will be implemented is increased. In the process, individuals, organizations and communities each develop capacities that enhance success and development at every level. Action research is a cyclical process that begins with "diagnosing a problem situation, planning action steps, and implementing and evaluating the outcomes" that in turn leads back to reassessment based upon the findings, and so it goes (Elden & Chisholm, 1993, p.124). The most important point, in my opinion, is the action dimension - the built-in application of the findings to more effective policy and programs

relevant to the real world of the participants themselves.

Capacity Building and Human Rights

An analysis of capacity building principles and practices leads me to conclude that it is a concept consistent with human rights values. It is important that a human rights approach to development be more than implied. Awareness must be front and center, for human rights violations are clearly present from families to communities and beyond. Human rights, therefore, should provide the underlying *raison d'être* for capacity building. Jonsson (2003) holds that a human rights approach to capacity development includes five broad components:

- 1) Responsibility as a Moral Imperative - acknowledgement that an individual or organization *should* do something about a specific problem;
- 2) Authority - the structure of power relations in society that legitimates action;
- 3) Access and Control of Resources - people must have resources in order to be in a position to act;
- 4) Communication Capability - people must have access to information and communication within a systematically functional network (too often lacking);
- and 5) Rational Decision-Making and Learning - analysis should inform

decisions and actions. Through strengthening capacity in each area, people are enabled to realize their rights. This may be the ultimate quality of life gift.

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