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RUNNING WITH CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT:

WACSI'S MARATHON EXPERIENCE



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About WACSI

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was created by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in the region. WACSI also serves as a resource centre for training, research and documentation, experience sharing and political dialogue for CSOs in West Africa.

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Objectives of WACSeries Op-Ed

- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy related to these issues;
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.

Running with Capacity Development: WACSI's Marathon Experience

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACBF	African Capacity Building Foundation
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
GIZ	German Development Cooperation
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WACSI	West Africa Civil Society Institute

Introduction

The foundation of every building is dependent on the kind of structure an architect envisions for it. Whether it is a storey building, a detached house or semi-detached house, certain critical structural considerations are identified and planned before the labourers excavate the land. Indeed, a storey building requires a deeper foundation than a detached house to support the enormity of its weight. Using a building plan as the blueprint, the architect identifies and assembles a technical working team of quantity surveyors, masons, steel benders, carpenters, tile layers and electricians to roll out their various strategies for the task ahead. When this is done, the architectural team sets off to the site with their tools to kick-start the development of the structure. When the structure is fully completed, it becomes robust and resilient to weather, providing warmth and comfort to its inhabitants. The systematic process involved in building a structure corresponds with any serious capacity development process.

Capacity development is a process and not an event. Any civil society organisation that is committed to developing a holistic sustainable framework to steer its capacity development needs is required to have a blueprint including technical expertise, practical tools and a hands-on strategy. Most civil society organisations (CSOs) working at various levels in an attempt to complement governments' development efforts, do not have fully-functioning skills for assessing capacity needs, designing and sequencing appropriate interventions, and measuring results. Without a strategic framework, any steps taken to address internal governance and operations would only contribute to a small fraction of the realistic dividends of efficient capacity development. Capacity development cannot be achieved without ownership and commitment to the process and clear objectives. Its gains can be accomplished through clearly defined, coordinated and properly monitored capacity

Capacity Development Is A Process And Not An Event

strengthening processes that focus on an organisation's new learning outcomes and their effective re-integration into programming. More importantly, the readiness and adaptability of CSOs to the ever-changing capacity development context requires a roadmap with a well-defined capacity outlook for stakeholders. West Africa Civil Society Institute's (WACSI) capacity development model is not a sprint; it is a marathon that requires time, stamina and consistency to be able to nurture a functional and sustainable organisation. The model comprises an iterative process from a needs assessment, training, technical assistance (mentoring and coaching), feedback sessions and documentation of change stories and lessons learned. WACSI's approach is to train organisational marathoners to achieve their mission.

I. FROM CAPACITY BUILDING TO CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

The terms “Capacity Building” and “Capacity Development” have been used interchangeably in several literature and discourses by development agencies, non-state actors and governments. Civil society practitioners have also used capacity building to denote the establishment of nascent structures, whether human or institutional capacity to address a challenge, while defining capacity development to mean the revamping of existing structures to promote the efficiency of operations. At WACSI, one perceives capacity building as capacity repairs and considers capacity development as an encompassing terminology that holistically looks at building all aspects of capacity with its moving parts (WACSI Strategic Plan, 2013-2017). The latter’s scope of definition is not only limited to human, technical and financial capacities but extends to include personal productivity capacity, operational capacity, equipment capacity and knowledge capacity among others.

Capacity building, on the other hand, may use reactive and “quick fix” approaches to address capacity gaps that spontaneously arise in the organisation. For instance, the resignation of a human rights CSO’s Executive Director may require that another employee manage the position as a stopgap measure until a substantive executive director is recruited. The recommendation that the person who is acting should take a short course on governance and leadership serves as a “capacity repairs” programme. In essence, it is logical to argue that the term, capacity building is an ad hoc intervention used to ensure continuity of the capacity development process.

An organisation which is simply building its capacity might do so by hiring consultants, outsourcing aspects of a programme of a CSO and employing the skills of interns whereas one focused on developing its capacity has a proactive approach aiming to strengthen all departments, systems, structures and people in readiness for prevailing challenges, future capacity threats and to achieve the strategic mission of the organisation.

II. PROMOTING CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

There have been various attempts by CSOs, government agencies, media and research institutions to define the term, capacity development. In many of these cases, the definitions of capacity resources, systems and tools are limited to the operational knowledge and scope of work of these organisations and their interactions with stakeholders. There are both variations and similarities among development professionals regarding the definition of capacity development. UNDP for example defines capacity development as “the process through which individuals,

organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time.”¹ This also includes technical support for capacity needs assessment, project/programme design, monitoring of project/programme activities and mid-term and end of project/programme evaluations.

To identify the common thread that effectively knits the varied definitions of capacity development, it is imperative to broaden the scope of a general definition by allowing it to accommodate different dimensions within the civil society sector. Additionally, the commonalities inherent in the working definitions of organisations in the international development sector should be aligned to a more comprehensive and inclusive definition. In achieving this, it is necessary to work within a conceptual definition that reflects the contextual realities of a specific grouping and integrates other established perspectives like UNDP’s above-cited organisational definition.

Therefore, at WACSI, capacity development is defined as a continuous, all-inclusive, consciously -driven, comprehensive process of supporting West Africa civil society organisations to achieve their mandates in the most effective, efficient and sustainable manner by implementing activities critical to increasing their programmatic effectiveness, and ensuring their long-term viability. These activities relate to several areas of work including: governance, leadership, aligning mission with strategy, administration and operations (including human resources, financial management, and legal matters), programme development and implementation, diversity, partnerships and collaboration, monitoring and evaluation, advocacy and policy change, positioning, and planning.

Capacity development also relates to leadership development, advocacy skills, training and speaking abilities, technical skills, organising skills, and other areas of personal and professional development. The definitive feature of WACSI’s capacity development process is to coach and mentor the different key civil society practitioners within the organization with hands on skills, knowledge through an experiential methodology to help them achieve their missions. The key elements mentioned in the definition, which all other definitions encapsulate are continuous, all-inclusive, consciously driven and comprehensive.

a. Continuous

This implies that the process is ongoing and forms part of the organisational culture. Top-notch technical knowledge or relevant sector-specific information is regularly documented, institutionalised and reviewed to guide behavioural change processes of staff. To ensure continuity, the organisation establishes a framework for skills and

UNDP, “Supporting Capacity Development: The UNDP Approach” <http://goo.gl/Yscb1Y>, (Accessed March 20, 2015)
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knowledge transfer. This eliminates any possibility of skills and technical capacity extinction. For example, at WACSI the Communication Officer's technical knowledge in website management and information dissemination is consciously replicated among other staff members to avoid institutional memory loss when he exits the organisation. This is an institutionalised practice in all the units of the organisation.

b. Consciously driven

This means the organisation's board and entire staff own the development vision, understand it and know the processes required to achieve it. This can only be achieved when board, management and employees consciously drive the recommendations and change management processes. An internally driven capacity development agenda stimulates employees' vigilance, commitment and loyalty to the cause.

c. All-inclusive

This requires all hands on deck. It involves the board members, the director through to the interns. The board, senior management, junior management staff, office assistants, interns and executive assistants should all be involved in capacity planning, and management and all staff should drive implementation, monitoring and reporting.

d. Comprehensive

This means all organisational resources such as capital, human, financial and non-financial resources must be committed to the process. It also involves using the capacity resources to minimise environmental threats and maximise opportunities for organisational growth.

Our experience over the years has reflected in our choice to use the term "capacity development" within our current strategic cycle (2013-2017) rather than "capacity building" given the importance of recognising the long-term process of capacity enhancement and adaptation.

III. FOUNDATIONAL INGREDIENTS OF CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

The foundational ingredients of capacity development are the different elements that work together to support the smooth functioning of any capacity development process. The three main ingredients of a capacity development strategy are human resource, organisational infrastructure and organisational culture. While some of these elements need a complete overhaul to operate effectively, others require a refurbishment of the malfunctioning aspects of their systems. The optimal performance of all ingredients of any capacity development process creates a competitive advantage for that organisation.

To ensure an effective capacity development process, skilled human resource, governing board, performance monitoring and management systems, as well as information and communication systems should be developed or enhanced to withstand any capacity development quirks, challenges and shocks that may hinder an organization from achieving its mission. The interplay among these ingredients is mutually beneficial and collaborative, making them resilient and robust. When enhancing organisational capacity, think of the human resource, organisational structures and culture as a heterogeneous unit of which the absence of one would pose a huge setback to building an efficient and effective capacity development structure.

a. Organisational Infrastructure

This represents the physical structures and tools that help to create a conducive environment in an organisation. This forms the different capacity assets or resources that the organisation must provide to support the effective functioning of its capacity development strategy. Some examples include the building, conference room, office workspace, information technology tools and other logistics. These are usually tangible organisational logistics that management provides for capacity development to thrive. For instance, the availability of conference room, laptops, chairs and a screen projector would facilitate staff training programmes and meetings within an organization.

b. Human Resources

Human resources form the most important part of the capacity development structure. The governance board, management and staff members are the most essential tools that combine technical expertise with organisational infrastructure, processes and systems to produce results. The board's oversight responsibilities include providing technical direction, advice and expertise for reconciling strategy with the organisation's traditional mission. Management serves as the liaison or conduit between the board and staff. They are responsible for the day-to-day management of people, systems and programmes. Staff work closely with management to coordinate, manage, operate and pool resources together to achieve organisational goals.

These human capital resources are able to identify and combine the right mix of resources, opportunities as well as manage threats because of their technical expertise, knowledge and training. Human capacity strengthening involves identifying and providing avenues for staff members to attend the right training programmes, motivating staff, encouraging initiatives, talent identification and management, winning trust and inducing their inclusiveness and ownership. The management philosophy that promotes and grows this essential component is

investing in people and making them the centre of the capacity development process.

c. Organisational Culture

Adopting an organisational culture that promotes openness, tolerance, transparency, accountability and respect for all, irrespective of race, gender, religion or affiliation is critical to building an effective organization. Cultural diversity has been one of WACSI's instrumental core values which is evident in its human resource. The institute's human resource has included Cameroonians, Nigerians, Ghanaians, Ivorian's, Togolese, Beninese, Burkinabè, Sierra Leoneans, Malians, Guineans and Liberians. Since varied cultures are encouraged by all including the board and senior management, it has positively influenced attitude to work, behavioural change and commitment to give one's best.

Employees who perceive their organisations as having great cultures are willing to identify with their organization as well as make sacrifices when they feel a sense of belonging. Stimulating an effective cultural environment for employees requires managers to unpack the psyche and vision behind the organisations' strategy, values and operational systems before any attempt to institutionalize such a culture. This refers to processes, procedures, work style and arrangements that must be put in place to facilitate the achievement of capacity goals. Core values, work ethic and systems should conform to global work blueprints and best practice standards. The cultural environment should support the foundational values of the capacity development agenda.

Every organisation has its own internal systems that drive its capacity development machinery. The cultural environment for capacity development may be favourable or unfavourable, bureaucratic or fluid, rigid or flexible, depending on the organisations strategic orientation and history. However, it must be noted that some aspects of organisational culture should be flexible to reflect new learning trends.

IV. TOWARDS A ROBUST CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

WACSI has positioned itself as the leading go-to organisation within West Africa that provides capacity development for civil society practitioners to work effectively and efficiently to achieve their mandate and to sustain their operations and their impact. Among WACSI's coveted achievements is how its civil society beneficiaries are gradually emphasising and expanding their knowledge and skills by investing in building their institutional capacities to achieve their objectives, deepen their approaches, and measure their milestones against projected goals.

At WACSI, we believe that a capacity development strategy that is responsive must address the specific needs of the different stakeholders (the primary one being the ordinary West African; man, woman and child) as well as be modelled after the leading practices, innovation and proven techniques within the development sector. The strategy should show an integrated framework that endures technical challenges, prevailing threats and future shocks without sacrificing stakeholders' value or interest. A borrowed strategy from a sister organisation working in the same sector could fail because the internal needs of both organisations and their specific mandates could be different. Therefore, all frameworks should be unique and tailored to a specific organisation.

All beneficiaries including direct, intended and unintended groups should be considered during planning, implementation and monitoring in order to gauge the full impact of the entire strategy. The Institute's strategy is therefore quite flexible but well-coordinated and focused. Genuine feedbacks are regularly incorporated and documented to reflect new learning outcomes and global performance standards. WACSI recognises that to be able to strengthen institutions to deliver quality work, soliciting the board's advice and the buy-in of management and staff are crucial to the maintenance and sustainability of the results. It therefore invests in employees to develop their specific skills set as well as ensure that they become multi-talented within the sector. One such investment for WACSI is the development of staff skills set in both Project Management, and Monitoring and Evaluation. The input of all is sought in its strategic formulation and review process, including that of interns and volunteers.

V. A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO ENHANCING CAPACITY

CSOs have different capacity levels, opportunities and threats, which must be assessed to appreciate their pressing capacity needs and the type of change management process to use. WACSI has, through its knowledge and practice, recognised the value of placing emphasis on the needs assessment process before any capacity development approach is recommended and implemented. This is a critical aspect of a full capacity development process, which includes several other steps. WACSI recommends the following:

a. Collecting Stakeholders' Feedback

People who hold different stakes, albeit big or small must be regularly involved in the strategic direction of a CSO. Creating viable channels or systems for receiving, evaluating and enhancing inputs or ideas to improve the delivery of capacity goals is crucial. Through surveys, fora or focus

group discussions new outcomes/knowledge are collected and discussed by senior management and the board before they are used accordingly. New learning outcomes could be solicited at different levels from stakeholders. Understanding the sources and contexts of these capacity outcomes helps management to redesign practical solutions to challenges. It must be noted however that feedback received may not always be relevant or readily useful to the learning experience of organisations.

b. Conducting Organisational Capacity Needs Assessment

This stage requires understanding the organisational psychology and physiological needs by examining it to ascertain its assets, tools, techniques, commitment as well as its preparedness to withstand any threats and challenges in the immediate and distant future. It involves a thorough search for opportunities and threats that relate to both the internal and external environment. This stage involves identifying the opportunities, strengths, weaknesses, competitors, hindrances and suitable approaches to enable the organisation to effectively undertake its mission.

c. Profiling Organisational Capacity Resources

Taking stock of all assets, opportunities and proposed solutions of the organisation and matching them against challenges, shocks and threats is a very important exercise. The resources could come from the organisation's internal or external environment. Other resources that is easily accessible are separated from those that are inaccessible or difficult to take advantage of. Following that, the organisation's resources and envisaged goals are prioritized into short-term, medium term and long-term. Classifying challenges and opportunities into different timelines helps the organisation to have a full appreciation of the kind of intervention or approach to use, and at what period to use it.

d. Identifying the right Capacity Development Intervention

After the organisation's resources have been profiled, the next stage is to pair them with the right intervention. This intervention could be staff training, new recruitment, restructuring a department, shifting resources from one department to another, and/ or committing more resources to a project. Other capacity building interventions include mentoring, coaching and succession planning. This stage also looks at aligning the organisation with productive partners and networks.

e. Tracking and Documenting Progress

Progress should be tracked, monitored and measured at every step. New learning trends must be documented

and re-integrated into the capacity development process while unintended outcomes should be managed. Capacity gaps and challenges must be discussed and documented with their corresponding mitigating strategies. Process monitoring is a key aspect of this stage. Capacity gaps and weaknesses that emanate from the process monitoring exercise should inform the change management process. It is advisable to engage in process monitoring rather than in results monitoring. When processes are monitored for standards conformance, outcomes such as crosscutting issues, potential threats or defective aspects are likely to manifest on time for redress and restructuring. On the other hand, during results monitoring, negative outcomes that emanate at the end of the process cannot be re-integrated into programming to produce envisaged results.

f. Initiating and Institutionalising Change Management Processes

With the advice and guidance of the Board, the staff and management must drive any effective change management process embarked upon. It must be internal, consciously driven and owned by staff members who are largely affected by it. New change management tools, systems and technologies must be introduced gradually to staff members and should be allowed some time to be incorporated into the organizational culture. Since people are uncomfortable with changing the status quo, it should be noted that some dose of resistance and grumbling would likely arise. An introduction of a new approach of working should not appear to downplay or ridicule the existing system, rather it should be seen as adding value or making work easier.

g. Integrating New Systems into Organisational Culture

New systems, learning trends and experiences produced by the change management process should be consciously incorporated into the organisational culture and institutional memory. The organisation should have an information management system to monitor, document, inform and help management to make effective decisions. In concert with the HR Manager, management should observe, report and share information on progress and setbacks that are likely to affect the organisation. This capacity enhancement monitoring should be done in accordance with strategy and mission of the organisation.

VI. MEASURING THE RESULTS OF ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

Most efforts at capacity development remain fragmented, making it difficult to capture multi-sector knowledge transfer and to draw general conclusions. Many capacity development activities are not established on rigorous needs

assessments and do not include appropriate sequencing of measures aimed at institutional or organisational change and individual skills building. At WACSI, we have recognised that what is needed is a more comprehensive and sustained approach, one that builds a permanent capacity to manage sectors, monitor progress and deliver better services. Finally, relevant skills are needed to track, monitor, and evaluate capacity development efforts. For example, the overall objective of WACSI's Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system is to develop an institutional framework for monitoring and evaluating the effective implementation of the Institute's mandate (WACSI's M&E Framework, 2015).

One definitive function of WACSI's M&E system is to monitor the implementation of the Institute's strategic plan and contribute to ensure it achieves its set targets. It has helped to identify the leading practices in assessing how knowledge and skills acquired during capacity development programmes are translated into attitudinal change, and individual and organisational performance. The system assesses whether the resources harnessed are adequate to effectively achieve desired goals; and to what extent lessons can be learnt and incorporated for informed decision-making and organisational growth. WACSI's M&E system seeks to address monitoring and evaluation at these levels:

1. Institutional level: assessment of internal processes aimed at organisational performance improvement; and
2. Programmes level: assessment of programme implementation strategies geared towards intervention effectiveness and social transformation.

WACSI has developed a course on Results-Based M&E to contribute to addressing the growing demand from stakeholders for demonstrated change. The course aims to provide non-profits with a better understanding of the role of effective results-based M&E as well as the ability to make it happen. CSOs have learned how to ensure that organisations and their stakeholders build on the results of their results-based monitoring and evaluation systems. The efficiency of the organisational capacity framework depends on the level of impact made in terms of productivity, improved human expertise, systemic efficacy and the achievement of its mission. Impact assessment on organisational capacity should be done by matching capacity inputs against actual progress or outputs. Each capacity resource should be able to produce its intended results.

In alignment with WACSI's primary goal of leading by example, great premium is placed on upholding the ethos of accountability, cost effectiveness and value for money during the delivery of its capacity development

programmes. Additionally, in an attempt to position WACSI as the pace setter for organisational sustainability, local opportunities and innovative strategies are explored to reduce over dependency on donor funding. It is imperative for organisations to measure their impact and effectiveness by matching their own performance against themselves, quarterly or yearly. For instance, if WACSI built and enhanced the capacity of 250 civil society organisations in 2001, it should expect to exceed the 250 in the subsequent year. When the organisations trained exceed 250, it means WACSI has performed well for that year.

Therefore, it may not be advisable to compare the performance of two CSOs working in the same thematic area because their capacity levels are different. The capacity maturity level of a CSO should be internally progressive at all times to be deemed productive or efficient. Comparing capacity maturity levels of two CSOs is not healthy and logical because of the different capacity assets, opportunities, threats and operating environment.

VII. SUSTAINING THE PACE

WACSI's commitment to sustain the capacity development pace with precision, responsiveness and speed is evident. The institute's arduous but rewarding task of supporting West Africa's civil society capacity development produces significant and sustainable results when its beneficiary organisations are committed to designing and promoting a robust strategy to achieve their long-term objectives. Building all facets of these organisations including people, knowledge, systems, teams and strategy while at the same time internalising best practices that promote better processes and programmes would spur growth and excellence within these organisations. This is the kind of investment that boards and senior management should make into their organisations' future to ensure sustainability, continuity and longevity.

More critical is the need to build effective teams and managers who are able to maintain, replenish and institutionalise relevant knowledge within the organisational memory and culture. Civil society capacity development is a gradual, customised and systematic process and not an ad hoc event. Its gains are incremental. Its dividends yield good value for money. The process calls for commitment from the board, management and staff members to initiate, own and drive capacity development activities to foster increased productivity in all segments of the organisation. At WACSI, winning the marathon race is to empower organised civil society and movements to become efficient, robust and consistent at achieving their mission with the ultimate goal of improving the lives of West African citizens.

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