

Applying systems thinking to capacity development

Systems thinking is back on the agenda

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In recognition of the inadequacy of many capacity development efforts, policy makers and practitioners are constantly searching for more effective approaches. [1] The prevailing linear, project-based and social engineering approaches have failed to acknowledge the importance of system dynamics and the interrelationships between organisations. 'Systems thinking' is not new, but it has had little impact on the concept and practice of capacity development. Yet consideration is again being given to this body of thought. Systems thinking is back on the agenda.

In this context, ECDPM recently organised two workshops as part of the study on 'Capacity, Change and Performance'. The workshops brought together policy makers and practitioners from aid agencies and developing countries to discuss the idea and practice of systems thinking and their relevance for capacity development. [2]

Enriching the capacity development discussion

- Cause and effect relationships are not always linear; they are frequently complex, delayed in time, and unpredictable.
- Planning. Many successful systems have not had an overall plan, but have evolved through incremental adaptations.
- Objectives. Many CD processes do not have measurable objectives, but are guided by implicit intentions and ideas that adjust to emerging situations.
- Interconnections among the components of a system, such as organisations within a network, are important and can give rise to valuable synergies.
- Feedback is critical for learning and self-awareness, but the form it takes is culturally determined and cannot be applied in a standardised manner.

The workshops recognised the importance of emergence – the process through which elements of a system combine and interact over time to create a more effective whole. The question is to what extent external inputs can encourage emergence, and when they should be provided.

A complementary tool and perspective

Systems thinking challenges many assumptions about the need for planning, objectives and control, and the ability of external agents to influence local change processes. In so doing, it offers several insights that may help to broaden the understanding of complex development processes.

First, by looking at interventions as part of a network of interacting systems and sub-systems, systems thinking can contribute to the change management strategies supported by external agencies. By focusing on 'emergence' as a process of change, it recognises that specific CD outcomes cannot be simply engineered through the delivery of external inputs. Interventions need to be flexible and able to adapt to future, usually unforeseeable, system behaviour.

Second, a systems approach can be used as an explanatory analytical tool, both to understand the context of interventions, and to identify factors that facilitate or frustrate CD processes. It can therefore enhance capacity assessments (e.g. for programme formulation) while offering an alternative approach for evaluating interventions, helping to explain why things happened the way they did, and what lessons can be learned.

Finally, systems thinking offers a different perspective on the roles of monitoring, evaluation and learning. It highlights the importance of creating space within systems for learning, self-organisation and adaptation. It can, for example, help distinguish the different roles of monitoring and evaluation – both to satisfy donors' accountability requirements, and to meet the need for internal learning as the basis for adaptation and change.

Systems thinking carries several implications for development cooperation, calling for further policy discussion and exchanges with practitioners. It requires a better understanding of local contexts, more flexible time horizons, a willingness to accept risk and to think in terms of incremental strategies, and a review of monitoring and evaluation approaches. Equally important, it will need to be translated into tools and methods that can help practitioners to do their work more effectively.

Systems thinking is an approach for developing models to promote our understanding of events, patterns of behaviour resulting in those events, and even more important, the underlying structure responsible for that behaviour. In order to address a particular situation it is only through an understanding of the underlying structure that we will be able to identify appropriate leverage points to effect change within the system.

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[1] Senge, P. (2005) The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. Currency Doubleday.

[2] Morgan, P. (2005) The Idea and Practice of Systems Thinking and their Relevance for Capacity Development. ECDPM.