Chapter 2

Institutional capacity building amid humanitarian action

Ian Christoplos

2.1 Introduction: the gap between theory and practice

It is difficult to find anyone in the humanitarian sector who is openly against building local institutional and human-resource capacities. Humanitarian proclamations, plans, programmes and procedural guidelines abound with statements about the array of benefits that the sector will gain when local organisations and nationally recruited personnel take their rightful place in the system. These declarations stress the importance of making investments to ensure that this happens.

It is equally evident that capacities are not being built or utilised at the pace that these claims would imply to be essential. Past ALNAP Reviews of Humanitarian Action note that evaluations show that agencies are failing to live up to their commitments to build the capacities of their local partners. The 2002 and 2003 Reviews drew attention to a long list of examples of over-reliance on international staff for tasks that could be managed more efficiently and effectively by local staff and organisations. Headquarters' declarations of the importance of developing and utilising local capacities were being quietly forgotten in field-level operations. With some notable exceptions, there are few indications that the 'business as usual' of humanitarian operations led by international staff, is actually in question. Local institutional capacity building is not a central feature of humanitarian action today because, although local capacities are useful, they are generally not thought to be essential.

The poor performance in building local capacity is widely acknowledged and it is not the purpose of this brief overview to accumulate further documentation of this failure. Neither is this review intended as a call to grand reform the humanitarian system so as to put local organisations in the driver's seat. Other more extensive surveys in recent years have presented powerful arguments for such an overhaul (Kathina Juma and Suhrke, 2002; Smillie, 2001; Africa Humanitarian Action, 2004). Perhaps the main message of these studies is that a long-term perspective is needed, with longer-term funding, partnerships and engagement in processes bridging the divide between humanitarian and development programming. All these are essential components of a genuine commitment to ensuring that local institutions take on leading roles in humanitarian assistance. There is no indication that such a fundamental change is coming.

These reviews have presented Southern/Eastern perspectives (Kathina Juma and Suhrke, 2002; Smillie, 2001). For better or for worse, ALNAP is dominated by Northern organisations and therefore any attempt to speak on behalf of the South and East would ring hollow. ALNAP's added value is rather in being able to contrast Northern perspectives with this Southern/Eastern critique within an analysis of the internal dynamics of the humanitarian system. These different perspectives need to be brought together if a more constructive process is to emerge.

There are real trade-offs that must be managed between the need for immediate service delivery and longer-term capacity building for service provision. Northern agencies have valid interests in using capacity building amid humanitarian action as a means to save lives more efficiently. They also have a responsibility to ensure that local and national actors are ultimately better able to take charge of their own humanitarian work. Difficulties arise because these short- and long-term goals generally require different strategies, partnerships and funding mechanisms. These differing and sometimes conflicting goals need to be managed better if the sector is to match its rhetoric with on-the-ground programming choices. There is a need to be much clearer about the question of 'capacity building for what?'

The supply-side, media-driven, short-term and neutrality-focused orientations of humanitarian response are unlikely to change, even though these are all major impediments to a stronger emphasis on local institutional capacity building. Some of these factors relate to the composition of the system, others to humanitarian principles. All have been debated extensively elsewhere – and those debates will not be repeated here. The key point here, regarding capacity building, is that donors, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and other stakeholders need to fit capacity-building initiatives into the existing humanitarian system.

The institutional imperatives of running a humanitarian organisation are just as real as the needs of disaster-affected people. The search for practical means to optimise combining capacity building with providing assistance and protection requires that the 'needs' of higher-level sectoral stakeholders be assessed, analysed and respected (Slim, 2004). A radical handover of responsibilities to local partners is unlikely to occur as long as international organisations are being held accountable for their ultimate operational performance and are reliant on funding structures and media exposure that emphasise what they themselves have achieved. This review asks whether it is possible for the sector to perform better in its engagements with local

organisations, even if much of the overall architecture of the humanitarian system is accepted as a problematic fact of life.

That said, some fundamental aspects of current practice must be questioned. Above all is the tendency within the sector to focus only on capacity-building inputs in the form of training, supplies and modest project components attached to relief and protection projects. If the sector is to progress in building local capacities, it will need to take a closer look at whether these training courses and other inputs have actually led to the intended outcomes in terms of improved performance, better adaptation to local realities and sustained preparedness for future emergencies. A primary objective of this review is thus to reflect critically on how the sector could better assess the outcomes of investments in local institutional capacities.

This review is partially based on a set of five case studies of capacity building that have been prepared for ALNAP after an open request to Full and Observer Members. It also draws on a variety of evaluations, reports and studies within the current debate in the sector about the role of local institutional capacity building before, during and after humanitarian operations.

It has not been easy to obtain a clear picture of the outcomes of capacity-building efforts by an examination of agency reports, reviews and evaluations. The humanitarian sector has a strong tendency to provide training and other human-resource and institutional support, and then leave, without looking back at what happened to the organisations and individuals whose capacities were ostensibly 'built'. The sector has begun to take a closer look at the outcomes and impacts of its efforts in providing assistance and protection in recent years, but has not applied many of its new evaluation skills to its investments in capacity building. There is a tendency to respond to criticism with calls for more training inputs, rather than through critical analysis of what capacities were built through past training, how these capacities were utilised and sustained, and, above all, what impact these capacities have had on humanitarian performance.

One reason why international agencies may not be eager to analyse the outcomes and impacts of their capacity-building efforts is that these objectives are widely seen as a conundrum. In policy documents the need to build local capacities is usually phrased in rather grand terms of building civil society, achieving sustainability and creating local ownership. Field personnel, however, see these objectives as far

beyond what they can hope to achieve with existing resources. There is little sign of any 'paradigm shift' in efforts to support and build local institutional capacities. This can be interpreted as implying that there may be a quiet consensus among operational agencies and donors that these objectives are unlikely to be achieved. Capacity building is something that appears to be nice if it happens, but is not seen as being indispensable.

2.2 Where do we stand on institutional capacity building?

In order to get a grip on the slippery topic of humanitarian capacity building it is important to start by looking at some of the new issues on the agenda and where these fit into the old 'toolbox' of capacity building support. This section describes how the declining security of international staff members has forced the sector to consider a greater role for local institutions. At the same time, a hardened climate of distrust has sometimes emerged between international and local 'partners', along with renewed attention to corruption and allegations of links to warring parties.

Capacity building has a natural place in disaster cycles, and in the past this provided a logical basis for deciding who should have their capacity built to do what, and when. The actual ebb and flow of investments in capacity building have regrettably not followed this seemingly self-evident cycle. Agencies need to scale up considerably to meet the demands for large-scale response. The search for local 'surge capacity' means that institutions are rented rather than built. Resources and time for investments in skills that are needed before a disaster paradoxically tend to be more readily available in the aftermath of a major disaster, just when local agencies are laying off staff at an equally frenzied pace.

Perhaps the most obvious issue in local capacity building is one that many agencies do not discuss at all. Nationally recruited staff members are in the majority in most humanitarian organisations, but they are often all but invisible in human-resource management. Too many agencies still implicitly look on expatriates as the norm.

2.2.1 New pressures – new relationships?

The capacity-building agenda is changing. In addition to long-standing commitments to build on local capacities, new pressures to turn over responsibilities to local partners are arising due to declining security and changing international roles. Northern agencies are more frequently being forced to build capacity reactively, when international personnel are withdrawn for security reasons. Therefore the sector is necessarily becoming more reliant on local organisations and personnel. In the past, a reliance on weak and under-resourced local partners was perceived as an obstacle: agencies with a flexible international human resource base were able to mobilise faster and more efficiently than those which had to build their response strategies on requests for collaborative support from counterpart institutions in the South and East. Now, by contrast, the quality of local operational capacities frequently determines whether an INGO can establish a presence at all.

Another past justification for internationally led operations was the assumption that foreigners provided a visible assurance of neutrality, impartiality and independence. Whereas international personnel were once viewed as a guarantee that warring parties would perceive humanitarian action as being humanitarian, this is no longer the case. The obvious alternative is to rely more on national and local capacities. 'Acceptance' has been recognised as a key to enhanced security, and having local organisations at the frontline of humanitarian action is one way to achieve enhanced acceptance (ECHO, 2004). This is not always the case, as the current experience in Darfur has shown, but is a trend that has been important in many contexts.

Increasing reliance on local capacities seems to involve shifting danger to non-international staff.[1] Most agencies include nationally recruited staff (NRS, or national staff) in security planning and training but their 'partners' are given less support, and also face greater security risks. Temporary evacuations of national staff members (and preferably their families) may be possible when conditions deteriorate, but this is not usually possible for the staff of local organisations. One observer notes that 'local staff are first-tier targets whom we only give second-class protection' (Barrs, 2004). This is an area where further research is needed, as most agencies pay very little explicit attention to the special situation of national staff (People in Aid, 2005; Van Brabant, 2001), and even less to their responsibilities to local partner organisations.

Withdrawal of international staff may merely be seen as generating a need to find ways to use local staff and organisations to run programmes that continue to be managed by 'remote control' from the North. Alternatively, if an outside agency must genuinely rely on local organisations for more than cheap labour, it must take a major degree of responsibility to ensure that appropriate capacities exist for independent and critical thinking. In many cases, key capacities for *leading* humanitarian action are weak among local and national partners. The Cuny Center has proposed a structure for 'Locally-led Advance Mobile Aid' that would combine the advantages of local organisations with newer forms of 'field craft' for flexible and rapid response linked to the mainstream humanitarian aid architecture (Barrs, 2004). This concept has been used for many years by the Red Cross and other organisations in developing capacity to mobilise 'first-aiders' and 'action teams' for response to natural disasters, but has not been fully adapted to the demands of operations in chronic conflict.

2.2.2 The impasse on transparency

Working against the trend towards greater local responsibility is that of new structural forms of distrust. For example, Islamic humanitarian organisations have been branded as supporting terrorists. It has been noted that these accusations have frequently been grossly exaggerated, but are not entirely without substance (Benthall, 2003). Local partners in West Africa have been found engaged in sexual exploitation, abusing their power over the communities they serve.

Corruption is certainly rife in the subcontracting of humanitarian assistance to local organisations, but there is often an impasse between INGOs and agencies in the South and East. The INGOs cite corruption to justify their slowness to allocate greater responsibilities to local organisations, while the organisations in the South and East claim that the Northern organisations want to keep projects to themselves. They argue further that concerns about corruption are an insufficient and self-serving excuse for the wholesale marginalisation of local organisations (Mwangi Kagwanja, 2002). Academic critics of the humanitarian system also frequently share this view of corruption as an issue of secondary significance.

This impasse between grave concerns about transparency on the one hand, and plausible accusations of vested interests on the other, has failed to stimulate much

analysis of how actually to confront corruption. Instead, there is a tendency to turn to quick capacity-building fixes as a way of addressing this deep structural problem. For example, some attempts to address sexual exploitation rely on codes of conduct tied to short workshops for national staff. There are reasons to suspect that the use of awareness-raising workshops is an insufficient response to problems that are entrenched in intra-societal norms and power relations.

Training may be a weak tool to deal with the 'community leaders' who exploit their communities in refugee camps. They act as they do because they have the power and opportunity to do so, and because existing norms permit their actions. Northern partners' lack of monitoring and a readiness to look the other way may facilitate this abuse. The problem is the inability and limited will to confront abuses, rather than a lack of awareness or knowledge. Nonetheless, training has often been a centrepiece of what is proposed to respond to the problem among local partners. There is a tendency to grasp at training as the only tool available to deal with faults in civil society in order to show that something is being done, without critical analyses of the likely outcomes of such training and its relevance within local institutional processes. The top-down nature of such 'solutions' has been recognised by local trainees.[2]

We need to find better ways to ensure that capacity-building investments are targeted toward 'good' local institutions, and avoid feeding corrupt and uncivil society. The tendency to focus on inputs, such as training, rather than outcomes and impacts of local capacity building, has not facilitated this. Methods have not been developed to determine better where, when, how and (above all) which capacities should be built. Despite a growing understanding of how corruption and sexual exploitation have become embedded features in political, social and economic institutions (Duffield, 2001), the potential abuse of the power that comes with control over aid flows still tends to be seen as an unfortunate aberration in discussions of capacity building.

2.2.3 Traditional humanitarian engagement in capacity building

In traditional approaches to disaster management, local capacity building is primarily seen to be something that should happen *before* emergencies. These investments include mitigation and preparedness, early warning systems and strengthening of relief skills. Sometimes the objectives are even broader. In disaster-prone countries and regions, the strengthening of local NGOs in general is sometimes seen as a disaster-preparedness measure, regardless of the specific skills involved. Without belittling the quality and importance of current efforts, these investments are modest, at best. There is a structural 'preparedness deficit' (Stoddard, 2004) in the humanitarian system.

Methods are being developed to measure and therefore justify the importance of disaster-preparedness investments (Benson and Twigg, 2004). The primary target group for the data produced through these methods is the development community, and herein lies the primary reason behind the preparedness deficit. The humanitarian community may see the need for better disaster-preparedness, but its reactive bias has meant that it is rarely ready to take a role in meeting this need (Benson et al, 2001). Neither does it have the funding structures required for the long-term capacity-building investments that preparedness demands. Disaster mitigation and preparedness *must* be anchored in local institutional capacities. By contrast, the engagement of local organisations is *optional* in humanitarian response. After a major disaster it is often forcefully argued that many more lives would have been saved if preparedness had been a major priority of donors (La Trobe and Venton, 2003) and NGOs (Benson et al, 2001). However, repeated cases of unfulfilled post-disaster promises to invest in risk reduction show that hindsight is a glaringly ineffective driver for public policy commitments.

Although development spending on risk reduction is rarely triggered by humanitarian imperatives, the response to the Indian Ocean tsunami may become an exception. Massive investments will be made in building capacity for reducing future disasters, but it is not yet clear how far the humanitarian community will be involved in these programmes or how steadfast the commitments from the development community will prove to be. The outcomes of the plans currently being made for risk reduction initiatives will be the biggest test ever of whether commitments to building capacities for risk reduction can be realised and sustained.

Box 2.1 The World Conference on Disaster Reduction: a new form of commitment?

The World Conference on Disaster Reduction, held in Kobe, Japan in January 2005, exemplifies the challenges and opportunities of galvanising a commitment to building capacities in preparation for the next disaster. If the plans for early warning systems in the Indian Ocean region are to be effective, enormous efforts will be needed to ensure that local organisations have the capacity to alert communities and take appropriate action. Past experience has shown that building such capacities is not easy, and sustaining them is even harder, especially where disasters are infrequent.

The next question will be how to maintain these commitments. Critics have lashed out against the lack of concrete targets that came out of the Conference. One observer describes the outcomes as a 'vague framework and a wishlist' (Ben Wisner, cited in Radford, 2005). It may prove to be a challenge jointly to the development and humanitarian communities to keep these vague commitments alive. The 'moral imperative' (Jan Egeland, cited in Bisiaux et al, 2005) in investment in capacities for disaster reduction is in many respects a humanitarian imperative, but it is probably not the humanitarian community that will ultimately provide the cash.

Instead of preparing, there is a tendency to try to 'catch up' through capacity building *during* and after emergencies. Since ALNAP is primarily concerned with humanitarian action, this review puts emphasis on capacity building during emergencies. This is in contrast to where investments probably should be made (before), and where they are actually concentrated (after). Local capacity building during emergencies tends to focus on development of human resources through training, rather than helping to build institutions. The latter requires more lead time, to ensure that efforts to build capacities are in line with what the local institutions want to have developed and to make certain that inter-institutional roles are coherently defined. Disaster preparedness is therefore a topic that receives greater attention before and after a disaster, even if the technical content of much of the training provided (e.g., relief skills) is similar to what is provided during disasters.

It is ironic that most investment in humanitarian-related institutional capacities is probably made *after* major disasters. Experience after Mitch and elsewhere has shown that donors, development banks, local civil society and (especially) national governments often make genuine and concerted investments, but that the international humanitarian community itself has a relatively modest role to play in capacity building after disasters (Benson et al, 2001). After a disaster, humanitarian agencies are often active in advocating for building capacities for preparedness, mitigation and early warning, but are less active in doing the work.

This does not mean that humanitarians are failing, but rather that other actors are capable of moving forward in these areas on their own. This is important in reflecting on much of the criticism of the humanitarian sector's efforts in capacity building. It may be better to acknowledge that many forms of capacity building related to humanitarian response are best managed by other actors who are going to be around to monitor, support and (ideally) be held accountable for institutional outcomes. In Central America the majority of local NGOs that have tried to strengthen their capacities for risk and vulnerability assessment, preparedness and relief response are primarily development-oriented. They have developed these skills through national and regional networks, with international technical backup (CEP-ALFORJA, 2002). This is not to say that these processes have been sufficient to prepare better for future disasters (that remains to be seen), but rather that these processes occur in non-humanitarian arenas.

Another reason why development actors lead in post-disaster capacity building is that these efforts have become a key component in exit strategies. A major review of local capacity building led by the Humanitarianism and War Project found that its data were unavoidably skewed toward initiatives to strengthen recovery-related skills, management skills to take over projects of departing INGOs and other efforts to deal with the aftermath of conflict (Smillie, 2001). Disaster-management capacities may not be on the agenda because the agenda has moved on. Partners that have been working together on relief projects for years are assisted to adapt to new and different demands. Capacity building is a particularly important aspect of exit strategies in many basic public services. In health in particular, massive service structures are frequently 'handed over' to local authorities, with little or no account being taken of the capacities needed to manage them and cover recurrent costs. These capacities require engagement in areas such as state revenue and tax policies, that are of course well beyond the capacities of humanitarian capacity builders, but this does not justify these issues being ignored.

Box 2.2 Reworking a partnership to scale up: Oxfam and the KSCS in Darfur[3]

In response to the Darfur crisis, Oxfam has restructured its ongoing collaboration with a local partner organisation, the Kebkabiya Smallholder Charitable Society (KSCS), with which it has worked since 1992. Before the current crisis, Oxfam supported the KSCS in its work with rehabilitation of schools and agricultural development. With the current emergency the KSCS found itself unable to continue its regular programmes. Oxfam was having difficulties bringing in international staff due to visa and travel restrictions. Both wanted to become more active in humanitarian operations, so a new form of relationship was established.

Oxfam saw hygiene and health promotion as the greatest priority and, although the KSCS had no previous capacities in the health sector, it agreed to retrofit the organisation's capacities for humanitarian work. The KSCS was encouraged and assisted to apply its pre-existing skills in community mobilisation in an entirely different sector.

The relationship that developed was driven by the needs of the population, the structures and skills that Oxfam determined were most important to meet those needs, and the areas where the KSCS was seen to have a potential for developing increased capacities. It was a different kind of 'partnership' from the one Oxfam had maintained for development work, and was seen as most appropriate for the prevailing circumstances.

2.2.4 Scaling up local capacity

When a major disaster strikes, the demand for local human and institutional capacities grows exponentially. A major focus of capacity building during emergencies is often to build financial and administrative capacities to manage rapid scaling-up (Valid International, 2004) and to ensure that the monitoring and reporting skills of local development organisations are adapted to the needs of the humanitarian system. The capacities of local partners in development work are often retrofitted to deal with a ballooning workload.

There are two major obstacles to capacity building during emergencies.

1 Time: it is usually quicker for an organisation to send in its own already experienced (international) staff than to assess skills, identify training opportunities, provide training and integrate administrative systems of local and international organisations.

2 Cost as overheads: whereas capacity building before and after a disaster can usually be addressed in discrete projects, the on-the-job nature of capacity building during an operation means that these costs may fall under the category of 'overhead' which must be minimised in order to appear competitive in the humanitarian marketplace (Salomons et al, 1998).

Although these 'excuses' are frequently heard, neither of these obstacles is inevitable. International staff can be chosen with mentoring and coaching skills that can be used to build capacities. Donors are often far more flexible than NGOs claim with respect to integration of capacity-building costs in plans and budgets, especially with sectoral programming.

The evaluation of the DEC Southern Africa Crisis Appeal found that funding to local partners grew by an average of 250 per cent (Valid International, 2004). This scaling-up also tends to mean that staff members do not have time to take advantage of capacity-building opportunities. They are too busy to attend training or restructure administrative procedures. The crisis means that they struggle to *expand* their capacities rather than building them. Organisations buy capacities through recruitment rather than building the capacities of core staff. There is a frantic rush to hire new temporary personnel that overrides the need to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the core organisation to deal with the expanding workload.

Scaling up is just one side of the story. Presumably, the same organisations that expanded their capacity by 250 per cent had to retrench just as much afterwards, a challenge that has received far less attention. Local partners are often desperate to find some way to retain as much as possible of the staff and infrastructure they have accumulated during an emergency. The problem is that it is inherently very difficult to 'build' an institution that is undergoing a radical downsizing. This conundrum of trying to take advantage of capacity-building opportunities while flows of resources for operations are drying up has been described by Smillie and Todorovic (2001). Their study from Bosnia describes how opportunities for capacity building arose at a point when donor priorities where being overhauled and local NGOs were struggling more to adapt to declining aid flows than to 'develop'.

2.2.5 Nationally recruited staff

A major focus of local capacity building during humanitarian operations is naturally on the nationally recruited staff of INGOs. Since these efforts are seen as contributing directly to the effectiveness and efficiency of the INGO itself, the organisations have valid and vested interests in seeing to it that such capacities are strengthened. This is particularly important where there is inter-agency competition. Cheap and effective national staff members give competitive advantage, especially when tendering procedures are in place. Despite these seemingly obvious financial incentives, a recent review shows that the vast majority of agencies have no specific policies on the role and needs of national staff, despite the fact that the situation of these personnel differs enormously from that of international staff (People in Aid, 2005).

Expatriates remain the focus and norm for human resource and institutional development efforts, despite the fact that they are almost always vastly outnumbered by national staff members. There are, however, some examples of innovative practice within specific operations. A positive trend is the use of national staff from one Southern country in operations in another Southern country. Oxfam moved some staff from its offices in the Horn of Africa to Zimbabwe during the drought operations, thereby expanding the concept of partnership and creating a healthy blurring of the national–expatriate dichotomy (Valid International, 2004).

Such procedures are nothing new for humanitarian federations. The IFRC has a policy of striving to 'work like a federation' by drawing on strengths within the Red Cross Movement, wherever they exist. Some 'participating' (Northern) national societies fund delegates from Southern/Eastern societies to work in operations within their regions as a way of both providing more appropriate support and also to help build their capacities for when they return to their own national Red Cross Society. Indeed, the dichotomy between international and national staff has a very different dynamic in federations that have been built upon local civil society, such as the IFRC or many faith-based federations. A similar structural shift may eventually occur over time in traditionally Northern-dominated federations, such as Oxfam or Save the Children, as capacities and power gradually grow among Southern and Eastern partners.

2.3 Deconstructing the capacity-building agenda

As mentioned above in the Introduction, the humanitarian sector has a tendency to develop its rhetoric to grand levels in order to meet the expectations of its benefactors, while still accepting business as usual in relations with beneficiaries. There may be perfectly good capacity-building going on, but it is difficult to identify what institutions are really being built, when the target groups of 'communities', civil servants and national staff are left indistinct and undefined. This is exemplified by vague terms such as 'partnership' and 'ownership' that hide the practical needs to guarantee that the humanitarian community as a whole is ensuring that disaster-affected people are receiving high-quality services and protection. Populist terminology about partnership and overambitious expectations about the impact of a simple training course are obstacles to frank understanding of how best to achieve intended outcomes in humanitarian performance.

Perhaps the humanitarian sector should not be concerned with institutions at all. Given the boom–bust cycles of humanitarian action, the individuals who have their capacities built are sensible enough to go out and find job satisfaction as best they can. They may be 'poached' by wealthy agencies, they may become ministers, they may decide to sell buckets to the NGO they worked for yesterday. It is nothing short of patronising for the 'humanitarian international' to decry these choices.

2.3.1 Community capacities

Many capacity-building initiatives are directed at 'communities' rather than organisations. The sector has difficulties in dealing with the problematic nature of defining and relating to 'communities' in a conflict setting. One recent evaluation notes that 'There is little policy analysis within UNHCR that addresses the peculiarities and limitations of the idea of "community"' in refugee settings' (CASA Consulting, 2003, p 43). Confusion is compounded when organisations that have a traditional service provision focus at local levels are treated as if they were 'community-based', and vice versa. In these areas rhetoric has a strong tendency to become detached from reality, with a result that training is poorly tailored to the tasks, roles and professions of the trainees. A service provider needs very different

skills from a person who is a client of these services, even though both may need new capacities if more innovative and locally relevant services are to be provided, and if service providers are to be made more accountable to their clients.

There is a tendency to conflate discussions around the building of organisations' capacities with the strengthening of communal capacities. Indeed, both may be part of civil society, but the objectives and indicators required to create coherent, focused and realistic plans requires an acknowledgement of the differences involved. An emergency may result in a more or less 'community-based' organisation restructuring itself into a 'local NGO' as it scales up and takes on responsibilities for channelling considerable resource flows from the international community to beneficiaries. In addition, many participatory approaches apply a combination of building capacities within organisations and building capacities within communities with the intention of finding synergy between the inside knowledge of communities and the outside knowledge of operational agencies. A starting point to encourage these processes is an acknowledgement of the differences between a range of insiders and outsiders.

2.3.2 Partnership

Many agencies claim to see their capacity-building efforts within a framework of 'partnership', but the nature and meaning of partnership can be very varied. Partnership in development cooperation tends to imply long-term commitments, promotion of local ownership and above all an explicit acknowledgement that these institutional goals are being promoted as desired outcomes of collaboration, and not just a means by which to get food into the mouths of hungry people. The equality and autonomy of Southern/Eastern partners is both a means and an end objective of development 'partnerships' (Widmalm, 1999).

Apart from some occasional hyperbole, this is not a self-evident definition in the humanitarian sphere. Some agencies do not seem to have thought through what they mean by partnership in humanitarian action. Others have extensive and detailed guidelines and administrative structures (UNHCR, 2003). On the whole, humanitarians tend to see partnership as a means for improved and more efficient service delivery, and give little attention to questions of equality and autonomy. The former is seen as unrealistic and the latter as undesirable.

Box 2.3 Community participation and institutional capacity building[4]

Many agencies combine participatory methods for bringing in community perspectives with efforts to strengthen the capacity of national (and international) staff to understand local needs and the political economies of the conflicts in which they work.

In Darfur, Tearfund has experimented with a method that combines 'Participatory Disaster Risk Analysis', a method it has used in natural-disaster contexts, with a participatory version of the UK Department for International Development's 'Strategic Conflict Assessment'. The process used combined community assessments with a series of workshops where national and international personnel jointly mapped and analysed the nature of the conflict in which they were working and designed approaches that fitted this enhanced understanding. The 'capacities' that were built included a more multifaceted perspective among all staff members and a greater consensus on ways to proceed.

It became clear during the process that national staff, especially the more junior members, had the most extensive understanding of many of the key issues. The international personnel, therefore, had their capacities built, both in terms of knowledge and through developing a respect for the perspectives of their colleagues from Darfur. This included the information that was discussed, and also what was not discussed. The national staff feared reprisals if there was open criticism of their government, and were cautious about what they could discuss in these forums. It was important for the international staff to understand that their own colleagues were also subject to local political realities.

In Afghanistan, Aide Médicale Internationale (AMI) has worked to develop a capacity among its national staff members to perform their own participatory evaluations. Over a series of years and through different evaluation exercises, AMI has made a conscious effort to improve the quality and the perceived relevance of evaluation efforts by engaging national staff in the design, application and dissemination of evaluations. This has included learning about logical framework approaches, basic evaluation concepts and in using evaluation results to produce reports, operational guidelines and academic papers, thus raising the profile of this work both internally and in the international community in Kabul and beyond.

UNHCR states that 'Partnership is not an end in itself, but rather its value should be measured in terms of impact on the well being of the refugees.' This instrumental approach has created some conflicts with implementing partners that give priority to the development of local and regional capacities for independent initiative (Vine Management Consulting, 2002). There is an inherent contradiction in all aid partnerships in that equality and autonomy are endorsed only where both partners share the same values and norms (Widmalm, 1999). Northern partners almost always have the power to step out of any relationship where their norms and values are questioned. Southern partners may have few alternatives but to accept what is offered. This imbalance of power leaves little room for genuine equality and autonomy.

Box 2.4 Benefits from joint working on transparency standards in the DRC

It would be overly simplistic to assume that the tensions between equality and autonomy on the one hand, and the demands of Northern partners for norms of transparency and effective service provision on the other, would inevitably lead to deadlock. IRC's experience in Eastern DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) shows that constructive solutions are possible if these issues are dealt with openly and jointly. They found that it was possible to bring together flexibility and rigorous adherence to transparency standards as long as dialogue was used to ensure that all parties were aware of why these standards were used and how they could be met (Dijkzeul, 2005, p 6).

IRC's demands thus came to be seen as not just a matter of responding to donors' finicky requests, but as part of jointly building efficiency, accountability and ultimately credibility among other potential partners and donors. This effort was supported by an unusually thorough monitoring and evaluation structure that stressed impact on partner organisations. This helped make apparent the reasons for the onerous demands of IRC, along with the potential benefits of compliance.

The ubiquitous training of local partners in financial management or proposal-writing may be motivated at first by a rather selfish desire on the part of Northern agencies to make their Southern/Eastern partners more 'presentable' to potential donors. It may even be part of a search for more cost-efficient management structures while retaining control. One UNHCR evaluation refers to training of implementing partners as a way to 'prepare the way for UNHCR to play more of a supervisory than substitutive role' (Groot, 2000, p 1). In the long-term, however, these skills may nonetheless contribute to autonomy and equality. Credible financial management and ability to prepare logical frameworks may be preconditions for local organisations to apply eventually for funds directly from donors and thereby cut their Northern 'partner' out of the contract.

2.3.3 Institution building or contributing to the human resource pool?

National and local staff get on with their lives even if the capacity-building agenda does not always suit their needs. They may not like the ups and downs of the project cycle, but they need to survive and have careers to develop (Smillie, 2001; Christoplos, 1998). The erratic nature of their career paths in jumping from project to project is in some ways similar to the careers of international humanitarian staff. This is why humanitarian staff in the North, South and East are generally quick to jump to another organisation if a better-paid, more stable or more intellectually satisfying opportunity comes along. This leads to the question of whether institutions can really be built, or if investments primarily just strengthen the pool of human resources. Institutional nomadism[5] may be a way of life in the sector. In a particularly moving account, Turay (2001) has described his journey through the battlefields of Sierra Leone as a freelance 'capacity builder', moving from project to project, and workshop to workshop to finance a search for his family. His case is extreme, but in essence is not fundamentally different from the careers of many of his colleagues.

If people are moving around and local organisations are constantly gaining and losing staff, this suggests that capacity-building objectives should reflect an emphasis on human resources rather than just organisations. There is a tendency to focus on the down-side of the inability of local organisations to retain staff, but perhaps this needs to be balanced by a realisation that there is an up-side as well. Nomadism includes career paths that may be even more valuable than work within

the partnerships of humanitarian assistance. Perhaps it is a sign of successful capacity building when the individual nomad leaves the sector for other fields and types of organisations. If a trained logistician uses his or her capacities to go into grain trading, is it a loss or something to be applauded? If a programme officer leaves an NGO to become a politician or a consultant, is that a loss? Does not experience in a variety of organisations provide an enriching 'capacity-building experience' in itself?

Box 2.5 Poaching versus professional mobility[6]

After the fall of the Taliban, the human resources of virtually all local NGOs and even many modestly resourced INGOs were pillaged in Afghanistan. Incoming agencies, desperate for educated English-speakers, bid against each other to obtain staff. Few would deny that this caused significant damage to Afghan institutions that were already weak in many respects. It is not equally clear whether this damage will prove to be long term. The 'poachees' may bring the skills (and increased financial stability) that they developed with their new employers back with them to Afghan organisations as aid flows diminish. Furthermore, can this phenomenon be decried when there are far fewer complaints about international workers who feel free to follow market signals in their careers? Perhaps employment conditions for staff of local and national organisations should be made attractive enough to withstand the onslaughts of the humanitarian industry.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) has struggled to develop Afghan human-resource capacities in their organisation before and after the fall of the Taliban. In the post-Taliban period, one major challenge has been to establish policy research as a desirable profession that can attract educated individuals despite higher salaries and benefits in other sectors. Some observers have complained that AREU has been too slow in turning over responsibilities to Afghan staff, while other organisations have offered salaries that have made it extremely difficult for a think-tank such as AREU to attract well-educated and experienced Afghan staff.

Box 2.6 Food-security monitoring in North Darfur – new organisations, same staff[7]

North Darfur is typical of many semi-arid areas in Africa. Acute food insecurity is an ever-present threat, usually occurring when there have been a number of consecutive years of drought. The importance of regular monitoring of food security in Darfur became apparent during the severe drought-induced famine of 1984/85. In the aftermath of that famine four innovative initiatives were established:

- Save the Children UK (SC-UK) set up a monitoring and information system, principally to plan and target the ongoing relief operation. This was wound down in 1986 when donor funds were withdrawn.

- Shortly afterwards, the UK government funded a project to strengthen Darfur's Regional Government in the wake of the famine. A team of international technical advisers was seconded to the Agricultural Planning Unit (APU) to work with their Sudanese government counterparts to design a low-cost food-security monitoring system based on monthly market monitoring and an annual pre-harvest assessment. Early warning of acute food insecurity was one of the principal objectives of the system.

- This was supplemented by the Sudanese Red Crescent Society's (SRC) Drought Monitoring Programme, based on information collected by its network of grassroots volunteers.

- In 1988 Oxfam GB set up a low-cost nutritional surveillance system to complement the market and agricultural data collected and analysed by the APU.

There was a period of close collaboration between these three institutions, which gave North Darfur an effective food-security monitoring system by the end of the 1980s.

The fragility of the system's institutional base, however, soon became apparent. In 1990 support (and international personnel) were withdrawn from the APU for political reasons shortly after a military coup in 1989 had brought to power the

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Box 2.6 Food-security monitoring in North Darfur – new organisations, same staff *contd*

current government of Sudan. By 1991 the food-security monitoring system had virtually collapsed. It was poorly funded by Regional Government, key Sudanese staff left government employment, and key resources like vehicles were moved to other government departments. Staff allowances were unpaid. Due to declining resources and trust in the political neutrality of local institutions, the SRC and Oxfam GB programmes also faded away during the early 1990s.

After a short gap, SC-UKaccessed European Union funding to establish a new food-security monitoring system, building on the APU experience. It used the old APU questionnaires and the same low-cost approach to monthly market monitoring. SC-UK further developed the system by applying the food economy methodology that the agency was developing and experimenting with in a number of countries in Africa. Realising that they seemed to be over-estimating annual food-aid needs in the years 1995 to 1997, the team further refined the food economy zoning that now underpinned the monitoring system in North Darfur. More recently the team has been faced with the challenge of refocusing its methodologies from drought to conflict. From 1993 until 2004 SC-UK's food-security information system was run by national staff from Darfur with technical support from international staff in the regional office and from the UK.

In the last few months of 2004, SC-UK lost four staff members in Darfur's violent conflict. By the end of 2004 the agency had decided to withdraw from the region. The food-security information system had to be closed down and the staff running it made redundant. At the time of writing, another international NGO is considering how it may take on a scaled-down version of the system to ensure that food security continues to be monitored throughout the current crisis.

This story of a stop-start food-security/early-warning monitoring system could be read as a familiar tale of institutional instability and discontinuity in a changing and at times hostile political environment. The story, however, is not so simple. Behind the collapse of projects there is a remarkable continuity of personnel in challenging conditions, and capacity building at an individual level with powerful results.

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Box 2.6 Food-security monitoring in North Darfur – new organisations, same staff *contd*

Although the institutional home of the food-security monitoring system has changed at least three times, some of the Sudanese personnel running the system have remained constant. The APU took on at least one of SCF-UK's data analysts in 1986. When so many of the APU staff left regional government, a number of them joined SC-UK and Oxfam GB. Those joining SC-UK were the ones who established the food-security information system and remained associated with it for the next 10 years. If another international NGO becomes the institutional home for the system in 2005, it will probably also take over some of the staff.

Thus, this is a story of building expertise and experience in national personnel who remain committed to an area of work and have continued to engage in it even when the institutional context has changed. The relative 'stability' of SC-UK's tenure of the monitoring system from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s played a big role in building a cadre of experienced and knowledgeable Sudanese professionals. An impressive database on food security in North Darfur has been built up over the last 15 years. The presence of two international NGOs during a period of hostile relations between the Sudanese government and Western donor governments has certainly helped to protect the independence of the food-security monitoring system.

Paradoxically, building and investing in capacity at an individual level may be more 'sustainable' than institutional development, especially when the political and institutional context is turbulent and uncertain. The international aid community is so focused on assumptions that capacity building has to be institutional that the impact of building a strong national cadre of personnel who may move from one institution to another is overlooked. Tracking the career paths and contributions of these individuals could help refocus attention on the effectiveness of their personal capacity-building efforts, especially in difficult political environments where organisations and projects come and go.

2.3.4 Transcending the training fix

Capacity to perform well in humanitarian action is dependent on more than knowledge. Institutional norms and rules must be in place if organisations and individuals are to be accountable for their work. Institutional incentives, opportunities and sanctions must be influenced to ensure that humanitarian values are central to decision-making processes. Networks need to be developed for advocacy, joint analysis and fundraising. Mundane material support, such as office supplies and communications facilities, may be an indispensable first step in enabling a partner organisation to operate effectively. All of these are areas where local organisational capacities often need to be built. Yet, these aspects of capacity building are given relatively little attention. For many agencies, there is only one tool in the toolbox of humanitarian capacity building – *training*.

When asked about their views on the 'training fix', actors from the South and East present an overwhelming sense of exasperation (CASA Consulting, 2003; Valid International, 2004; Smillie and Todorovic, 2001; Turay, 2001). This focus is criticised as being a way for Northern agencies to show that they are 'doing something' about capacity building without taking broader responsibilities for ensuring that the resulting 'capacities' are relevant, internalised or applied. At worst, training events are seen as constituting cultural imperialism and as being driven by the desire to provide token evidence that the 'capacity-building box' has been ticked when reporting to donors. If there were a genuine commitment to ensuring that training made an actual contribution to capacities, it would be expected that agencies would proudly display evidence of the outcomes in terms of organisational reforms, efficiency and enhanced performance. This review has actively searched for such evidence, but with very meagre results.

What then keeps the training fix at the centre of capacity-building efforts? An anthropological study of the 'workshop mentality' in family planning programmes in Nigeria found that there were a number of mutual interests underpinning faith in training (Jordan Smith, 2003). For donors, workshops confirmed the 'Western model' of change, whereby concepts that are presumed to be more 'rational' replace 'traditional' views. Furthermore, workshops provide visible inputs that can be quantitatively measured. Workshops are popular with local actors for different reasons. The participants can improve their credentials, and workshops are also important networking venues where the 'institutions' that are built may not be the

same as donors had envisaged. 'Communities' may be invited to participate in order to become enlisted as clients of the local organisers, and not to be 'empowered' as claimed in project documents.

Box 2.7 Training cannot replace educated staff: the effects of HIV/AIDS

The piecemeal training projects of the humanitarian sector may be especially inadequate in response to the impact of HIV and AIDS on human-resource planning. There is a massive shortage emerging in the pool of educated service providers, above all in Southern and Western Africa. Schoolteachers and nurses are dying at a far faster rate than young graduates are being educated (Coombe, 2002). Although statistics are not available, the same can be assumed to be true for the staff of local NGOs and humanitarian organisations (Goyder and Chimedza, 2003).

Recommendations and policies for responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic inevitably call for NGOs to do much more, especially at community level and through local organisations sensitive to socio-cultural factors. From a human-resource perspective, the sector may instead need to face up to having to make do with less. In many countries, it may soon be necessary to plan how to develop the capacities of personnel with, on average, a far lower educational level.

2.4 Building whose capacities, and for what?

If the institutional landscape cannot simply be moulded by humanitarian capacity builders through a quick training course, it is then important to survey the existing institutional terrain more closely in order to choose priorities that are meaningful for both sides of the partnership. International humanitarians may not always have sustainability on their agendas since they need capacities right away and may not be around to monitor what happens after the big operations. Local people, however, have a different perspective: they cannot use the humanitarian imperative as an

excuse to move on to the next international disaster. For them, some sort of continuum must be found, even if its progression is not reliable.

The services of local nurses, administrators, logisticians and extension agents are often still in demand when the emergency is over. But the flag waving over their clinic may suddenly be changed to the national flag, and they may be struggling to earn a profit running a private truck fleet rather than dispatching aid convoys. This means that their capacity-building priorities almost inevitably involve building institutions that are anchored in civil society, governance and the private sector. They seek to adapt their skills to new demands emanating from civil-service reform schemes, businesses and their communities. They need to find livelihoods for both themselves and their beneficiaries as humanitarian flows dwindle. If they are looking to the future, they may realise that these changes are coming and be planning their own 'exit strategies' from humanitarian structures right from the start of the emergency.

Local priorities may therefore not be the same as those of the international humanitarian agencies. That does not mean that a consensus must be found between the two, but rather that there is a need to take into account that the local and international branches of the humanitarian sector will by nature have differing priorities and principles.

2.4.1 'Sustainability' in capacity building for humanitarian action

Many of the critiques of humanitarian capacity-building efforts point out how well-known lessons from the development sector in how to build sustainable institutions have not been applied in the humanitarian sector. This raises the question of whether these lessons from the development sphere can or should be applied. It is not self-evident that 'sustainability' is a valid and viable goal for humanitarian capacity building, where the legitimacy of key institutions is in question and where staffing levels are subject to massive fluctuation. Sustainability must be built on legitimacy and the establishment of viable objectives. In the aftermath of a disaster the prospects for legitimacy and viability differ enormously from that encountered in most development contexts.

When looking at why sustainability has not emerged, the humanitarian sector has been criticised for its undue focus on programme delivery rather than institutional development.[8] However, the humanitarian sector has to give priority to service delivery in an acute emergency when people are dependent on receiving those services fast. When saving lives comes first, many may question whether the humanitarian sector really has an overriding responsibility and capacity to contribute to development processes. This review does not presume to contribute to the debate on humanitarian principles, but it is essential to stress that the definition of humanitarian agencies' roles in capacity building cannot be separated from how humanitarian principles are defined and applied.

A growing concern of agencies in the South and East is that increasingly complex demands for 'quality control' are outpacing their abilities to build the human and financial capacities that are needed to enhance the quality of their work. They are worried that they cannot afford to compete in a humanitarian marketplace where ever-more onerous rules are being set. These frustrations about calls for quality have been expressed by Africa Humanitarian Action:

> Improving performance, in theory an admirable goal, has spun out of control. The northern aid community is currently caught up in a search for perfection that is producing a growing amount of studies, conferences and processes and is calling for increasingly sophisticated administrative and financial procedures. (Africa Humanitarian Action, 2002)

However, where these demands have been dealt with openly, and have included generous and steady investments in helping partners shoulder these daunting burdens, partners may realise that they will have a comparative advantage over other weaker organisations (Dijkzeul, 2005). Workshops that merely raise awareness about *what* the new demands for quality consist of may be just demoralising. Far more comprehensive investments are needed, to develop capacities to *implement* improvements in quality and accountability.

There is unfortunately a lack of such firm commitment to building capacities to live up to quality demands within the sector. Pointing this out, and calling for 'more commitment' is unlikely to move the agenda forward. Instead, there is a need to unpack the reasons behind the lack of commitment that relegates capacity building to a lower-priority agenda. Weak commitment has not been investigated, partially

due to expediency (as exemplified by the emphasis on training fixes) and also because of a failure to take a clearer stance on if and how capacity building is expected to contribute to sustainability and performance. Human-resources investments are being scrutinised and structured when it comes to international agencies' own staff, but one evaluation describes such efforts as 'fragmented and unfocused', 'wavering' and 'uncertain and indecisive' when provided for implementing partners (Groot, 2000).

2.4.2 Building civil society or contracting cheap service provision?

Much of the critique of capacity building in humanitarian action is based on assumptions that the building of civil society is by nature more important, sustainable and even more noble than the strengthening of capacities for 'mere' service provision. These normative assumptions can be questioned. The Red Cross Movement, arguably the most widespread and sustainable local humanitarian structure in the world, has been built on an unabashed service-provision ethos which remains the basis of its core capacities (IFRC, 2000). The deeply rooted commitments to first-aid and ambulance services in the Red Cross may seem archaic for many 'modern' INGOs, but it is such services that have kept the movement strong in many countries where other 'designer' NGOs have disappeared quickly after their donors have withdrawn. First-aid and ambulances may do more to build legitimacy than participatory exercises and community awareness-raising (Christoplos, 1998).

As mentioned above, one of the key conceptual choices in addressing capacity building is whether or not these efforts should strive to contribute to civil society. Many argue that there is a fundamental need to shift away from seeing local organisations as 'implementing partners' operating as public-service contractors, towards seeing them instead as a link to local civil society (Quinn, 2002). INGOs frequently see their exit strategies as being based on assisting their national staff to establish 'sustainable' local NGOs and thereby use the skills they have developed through formal and on-the-job training to build their own country's civil society. Officially, many view the rebuilding of a forceful civil society as the genuine core of capacity-building efforts. Programming realities, however, indicate that practical commitments do not always follow normative rhetoric. Smillie and Todorovic write:

> Donors (and many international NGOs) characterize their interest in supporting local NGOs as an investment in a strong, pluralist, socially integrated civil society. And yet what was happening in Bosnia at this time was something entirely different: in funding donors essentially sought – and found – cheap service delivery. (Smillie and Todorovic, 2001, p 33)

Some see the call for developing civil society through humanitarian capacity building as a populist folly that disregards the realities of these organisations' inherent relationship with the international community (as a weak recipient of their largesse) and with the societies with which they work (as powerful brokers controlling access to humanitarian resource flows) (Harvey, 1997). It may not be impossible to build local civil society through humanitarian assistance, but is far more complex than is often portrayed in plans for reinvigorating civil society after and amidst conflict.

Aid is an extremely blunt tool with which to stimulate the local processes upon which civil society must grow. Popular narratives about civil society 'rising from the ashes' after conflicts and disasters may be rooted more in the imagery of the aid system than in the political economies in which these organisations operate. Many of the civilians that are running civil society in conflict and post-conflict situations are indeed being found to be armed and dangerous (Jensen and Stepputat, 2001). Communities are notoriously jealous of the capacities that are being built among, for example, ex-combatants or hostile ethnic groups, and see such investments as unfair at best, and threatening at worst.

2.4.3 Is governance a relevant issue?

Humanitarian performance has rarely lived up to agency rhetoric with regard to building the formal capacities of civil society. When it comes to governance, there is not even much rhetoric. It is therefore a paradox that the grandest efforts in building governmental capacities in the world in recent years have been mounted amid humanitarian action. Huge sums have been invested in developing public-sector capacity in Kosovo, East Timor, Haiti and Afghanistan. New programming is getting under way in Southern Sudan and Haiti (again). All of this has been in parallel with humanitarian capacity building in the same countries. The modest efforts of the humanitarian agencies do intersect with the mammoth capacity-building projects underway next door, whether they like it or not.

For local partners it may not even be a question of next door, but rather another folder on their desk. International humanitarian agencies may be uncomfortable with investments in governance, but local nurses and schoolteachers are often participating in both humanitarian and developmental capacity-building projects. The ground rules for user fees, public/private roles and other basic structures are being changed, and local organisations, more often than not, have no choice but to follow along. Despite overwhelming differences of principle, scale and duration, humanitarian capacity building needs a clearer set of ground rules on how it relates to the sphere of governance if it is to remain relevant in the eyes of local actors. The choice of *how* to deal with these issues will be determined by a given organisation's interpretations of humanitarian principles, perspectives on linking relief and development, and ideological stance. UN agencies will have fundamentally different rules of engagement in governance processes from those of NGOs.

A central question regarding investments in governance for humanitarian action is how to deal with the lack of political will that many states, especially in Africa, have shown to (re)shoulder their responsibilities (Kathina Juma and Suhrke, 2002). Capacity building in governmental institutions is a dead letter where states have become so accustomed to being bypassed by international humanitarian agency that they take their own marginalisation for granted. Capacity building is not a solution for states that remain eager to turn over responsibilities to the international community and that have themselves contributed to the dismantling of their own capacities for humanitarian action (Mwangi Kagwanja, 2002).

2.4.4 The private sector

The private sector may be one of the largest investors in capacity building in humanitarian emergencies and recovery. It is also the most invisible. Capacity development tends to be portrayed almost entirely as a choice between building either civil society or the public sector, but a *de facto* privatisation of local humanitarian engagements is well under way. If capacities are to be built among those that actually do the work, it is time to take into consideration the market forces that are increasingly shaping local humanitarian response.

Local procurement is a driving force in capacity building. The local private sector in many disaster zones is struggling to take advantage of whatever opportunities are on

offer. Transporters and traders gear up to meet the demands of aid agencies. Construction companies and well-drilling firms build their capacities to service both humanitarian operations and the demand for reconstruction from disaster-affected communities and individuals. The range of tasks performed by many local NGO partners bears a far closer resemblance to consulting firms than to civil society. Capacity-building training itself is often provided by local contractors.

For the most part, international humanitarian agencies tend either to turn a blind eye to these privatisation tendencies or are inherently suspicious. For many, capacity building is perceived to be about strengthening our 'colleagues' in civil society, not greedy merchants. In any case, the private sector is expected to be able to build capacities on its own, and for the most part it undoubtedly does get on with business without any 'capacity-building projects'.

There are a few areas in which a more constructive approach is being taken to exploring how aid can both use private institutions and also contribute to strengthening service-provision markets. In agricultural rehabilitation there is a growing shift away from seed distributions, which have been accused of undermining the agricultural-input markets upon which private entrepreneurs and their clients depend. Alternative interventions are being tested that are intended to support institutional environments for traders and farmers to meet through seed fairs and similar activities (Sperling et al, 2004; Christoplos et al, 2004). In Afghanistan NGOs such as Catholic Relief Services and consulting firms such as the Central Asia Development Group are providing even more direct support to the private sector to reconstruct the 'value chains' that link poor farmers and traders to national and international markets.

Outsourcing of services is increasingly acknowledged as a way to enhance efficiency, while allowing humanitarian agencies and local civil society to concentrate on developing their core competencies. Management of truck fleets is an area in which the private sector has obviously greater skills and efficiency (Cottam et al, 2004). The UN looks positively toward such 'public/private partnerships' as a way both to increase appropriateness of response and also to build local capacities. OCHA (2004) states 'The ultimate objective of such partnerships is not only to enhance humanitarian living standards through relevant and appropriate resources and technology, but also to build national capacity on the ground.'

Irrespective of one's views on the privatisation of humanitarian response, it should come as no surprise that there is a humanitarian marketplace in the South as well as in the North. Concerns about the nature of the marketplace have often been raised regarding the relationships between donors and Northern NGOs (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Ambiguity and Change, 2004), but the position of Southern agencies in these market transactions has received less attention. The bilateral project modalities by which 'we' build 'their' capacities tends to disguise the nature of the markets in which Southern/Eastern agencies compete as subcontractors and how this competition affects their own internal capacity-building efforts. Northern NGOs may complain that they are being 'forced' into being subcontractors, but there is little evidence that they are attentive to similar concerns from those local agencies that they are in turn contracting (Valid International, 2004).

This has significant implications for justifying investments in capacity building. Most donors expect that Northern NGOs should cover their own institutional and human-resource investment costs. INGOs justify internal investments in quality partially on expectations that they will yield benefits through stronger capacity to attract financing. It is worth asking if the market for services from partners is following the same rules. If the humanitarian sector is striving for a system where even local contractors compete based on merit on a 'level playing field', does this not imply that it would be better to provide a higher level of funding to Southern agencies that provide higher-quality services and thereby encourage them to choose their own capacity-building investments?

There is virtually no current empirical research on this 'business case' for capacity building, i.e., whether internal investment in quality is a wise financial strategy for Southern/Eastern agencies or whether Northern partners just want cheap, low quality service provision. The *de facto* association of capacity building with supply-side investment from the North has thus far overshadowed the need for strategic thinking about how the system can adapt its *demands* for local capacities in such as way as to provide concrete incentives for local organisations to build their own capacities. This would mean reversing efforts to avoid inflation in rates paid to local contractors through uniform payment scales (which rarely function in any case) to instead promoting the payment of a significant premium to agencies and individuals that demonstrate higher quality of work.

2.5 Conclusions: from rhetoric to realism in institutional capacity building

These findings point to the need to bring a pragmatic realism into discussions of capacity building. There is a need to find a way of living with boom–bust cycles, poaching and uncivil society in human-resource and institutional development without giving up on finding improvements to the current poor state of affairs. Humanitarian investments in capacity building are valuable, but rhetoric gets in the way of assessing just how valuable it is or could be.

Box 2.8 Between naivety and cynicism

Danida has recently developed a methodology for evaluating public-sector capacity-development programmes that seeks to find a middle ground 'between naivety and cynicism' (Boesen and Therkildsen, 2004). It explicitly rejects the naive platitudes that tend to surround capacity-building efforts, while at the same time trying to avoid the cynical rut of assuming that our efforts are pointless, and that aid inevitably has no positive impact on local institutional processes. It stresses the need to differentiate between what factors affecting institutional capacities can be *influenced*, and what factors should only be *appreciated* (acknowledged and taken into consideration). The harsh political economy of institutional change amid conflict, and the limits of short-term humanitarian funding indicate that much of what promotes and obstructs local institutions has little to do with the toolbox used in humanitarian programming. This differentiation between aspects of institutional development that can be influenced, and those that must be appreciated, would seem highly appropriate for the humanitarian sector.

In order to determine what can be achieved and how, it is necessary to accept the different needs and goals of different stakeholders in capacity building. It has been stated that 'The philosophical, corporate and operational roots of the humanitarian apparatus are inescapably Western and Northern' (Ambiguity and Change, 2004, p 57). Does this mean that local institutions will remain supporting actors in the

grand scheme of things? If one is to judge based on current investments in institutional capacity building, there is no significant indication that 'business as usual' is being called into question in the North. With some very notable exceptions, capacity building is primarily promoted on grounds of increased efficiency and security, through partners who are expected merely to implement priorities chosen from above. Attempts to turn over the humanitarian agenda to 'them' are still relatively few and far between.

If capacity building is to be more than something that is tacked on to the main humanitarian agenda, a rethink is needed about what aspects of the system should be 'appreciated', and what could and must be fixed. Efforts such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative have shown that the structure of the international humanitarian system can be reformed, but thus far there is little agreement about how to do so with regard to a refocus on building (and utilising) local capacities. A concerted reform effort would seem first to demand a less rhetorical consensus on what system is both desirable and feasible.

The area where realism is most essential is the need to ensure that immediate humanitarian effectiveness is not sacrificed to long-term developmental goals. Local capacity is inevitably patchy, and in many cases less mobile than the international system. Community-based and civil society organisations cannot be parachuted into other communities and societies without losing the very comparative advantage that they had in the first place. An overenthusiastic proclamation of a shift to reliance on such organisations and goals could result in a triage of only working where there are capacities that can be built upon and eventually made 'sustainable', while ignoring places where local capacities are frail or ephemeral.

Local communities are the first to come to the aid of disaster-affected people, but that does not always mean that their capacities can always be reinforced, expanded or made sustainable. An acceptance of such triage would be a dangerous development (de Torrenté, 2004). Disasters are, by definition, events that overwhelm local capacities. The best way of defending humanitarian principles while also ensuring that local capacities are supported and utilised is to transcend polemics by looking more closely at what has worked and what has not.

If it is accepted that the humanitarian imperative 'comes first', then the will for more significant and sustained investment in capacity building should not be expected to

come from vague platitudes about how 'important' it is, but rather on solid and critical analyses of whether capacity building yields results for disaster-affected people. The declaration in the Code of Conduct that 'We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities' is not enough. 'Attempts' must show concrete evidence of success. Evaluations have repeatedly shown that many attempts have been unsuccessful (ALNAP, 2003). If there is no evidence that local capacity building actually saves both lives and money, then capacity building will never amount to more than a collection of tack-on components to mainstream programming, motivated by a vague guilty conscience about a half-forgotten item in a code of conduct.

The essential role of local organisations is undisputed with regard to reconciliation, peacebuilding and reconstruction. There is also significant research showing that investment in local preparedness capacities 'before' an emergency is wise (Benson and Twigg, 2004). Pointing to these findings is obviously not enough to push the agenda forward. Humanitarian agencies are happy to leave these responsibilities at the door of peacebuilding and disaster-preparedness specialists.

Many have claimed that the use of local human and institutional resources is also more efficient and effective for humanitarian assistance (Salomons et al, 1998). However, there are currently more arguments and anecdotes than rigorous evidence to back this up. Hard data are needed to document the relative effectiveness of local organisations in humanitarian operations, and investigation is needed to scrutinise issues of corruption, efficiency, scaling up and speed – the standard 'excuses' that international actors use to justify their failure to build upon local capacities. Answering the tough questions with evidence instead of polemics would go a long way towards transcending the current impasse.

2.5.1 Key messages

New pressures on the capacity-building agenda

Key message 1 — More reliance on local staff and organisations

The humanitarian sector is no longer expatriate-led, nor should it be. Agencies are being pushed by security and financial realities, and pulled by their own normative commitments, into relying on local organisations and nationally recruited staff. Capacity-building priorities are being driven by the need to adapt to these new realities. It is getting harder to brush aside capacity building as a secondary priority.

Key message 2 — The impasse on transparency

Distrust over fears of corruption and differing values are inevitable in the new relationships that are emerging between international humanitarian actors and local partners. To some degree, this is inevitable due to weak financial management in fledgling organisations and to cultural differences. Distrust can result in paralysis, but it need not. Capacity building is one tool with which to find constructive solutions, although mere training is not enough. A comprehensive commitment to institutional change is required, and this is not always feasible within the structures of humanitarian response today.

Key message 3 — The place of capacity building in different phases of the disaster cycle

There are different opportunities for capacity building in different phases of disaster and through different forms of funding. The sector could benefit from a more transparent assessment of when different forms of on-the-job and more formal capacity building are possible, and when they are not. A clearer placement of capacity building in planning structures could provide a basis for more consistent and lucid arguments about the benefits of capacity building as a component of humanitarian work. Also, especially in connection with disaster preparedness and risk reduction, the role of development actors may be more important than that of humanitarian agencies.

Key message 4 — The realities of 'scaling-up'

Scaling-up for larger operations may appear to be a driving force promoting capacity building – but usually it is not. In emergency situations, the pressures of time and

the need to get the work done mean that capacities tend to be bought or rented rather than built. People are usually too busy to attend training and restructure their organisations. Time and resources are often more available after a major operation; but then different obstacles appear, as organisations are scurrying to scale-down or to shift into development programming. The capacities that are built after an emergency may not be related to humanitarian response.

Reconstructing the agenda

Key message 5 — What are partnerships?

There is a need to define more explicitly what is intended and implied in 'partnerships'. Coherent capacity building is reliant on open acknowledgement of the sometimes differing expectations of Northern and Southern 'partners'. A central question is whether equality and autonomy for all partners are genuine objectives, or if there is an expectation that 'implementing partners' in the South will merely run programmes that are managed from the North by 'remote control'.

Key message 6 — Building capacity in organisations or in people?

Approaches to capacity building are largely constructed on implicit assumptions that institutional stability is a realistic objective. This is regrettably not possible in the boom–bust world of the humanitarian sector. People have their capacities built, and then move on to organisations where they can best use their new skills and where they are offered better conditions. This does not mean that capacity building is impossible, but rather that investments often contribute to strengthening the wider pool of human resources, rather than contributing to a steady development of the specific organisation being supported. 'Poaching' of highly qualified staff does damage Southern/Eastern institutions, but these individuals should have the same rights as their Northern colleagues to develop their careers as they choose. The experience and skills that they develop after they have been 'poached' will in most cases be fed back into local organisations after large operations are phased out.

Key message 7 — Civil society versus service provision

The capacities, mandates and commitments of most humanitarian agencies are weighted towards building capacities for service delivery. This should not be seen as morally inferior to supposedly more 'sustainable' investments in civil society. Service delivery is at the core of the humanitarian imperative. The legitimacy of so-called

civil society organisations in crisis situations is dependent on their concrete performance in helping disaster-affected people. A strong and 'sustainable' commitment to supporting local capacities on the part of international humanitarian agencies will only come about when there is clear evidence that these investments result in improved provision of services.

Key message 8 — Capacity building needs a new approach to relief versus development

Humanitarian agencies are primarily present and active during emergencies. This creates a conundrum since capacities should be developed *before* a disaster happens, and resources are generally available for such investments only *after* disasters. This implies that it is neither correct nor effective to place undue blame on humanitarian agencies alone for failing to build local capacities for humanitarian action. Building local capacities for disaster preparedness and risk reduction requires the involvement of actors engaged in recovery and reconstruction. Strict adherence to standard categories of humanitarianism and development prevents a constructive approach to capacity building.

Moving the agenda forward

Key message 9 — Accepting differences in norms, mandates and capabilities

The core objectives of local capacity building are to increase the effectiveness, efficiency, acceptance, relevance and sustainability of humanitarian action. All of these objectives are valid, but each agency – Northern, Southern or Eastern – has a different spectrum of capacities and mandates and a different set of commitments for achieving these varied goals. Some may be primarily interested in cheap service provision, others in ownership and empowerment. Coherent, focused and realistic programming demands that these different objectives are separated. Everyone cannot and should not try to do everything. A more transparent discussion of who could, should and would be willing to promote these different objectives is essential to ensure greater realism and broader ownership of the capacity-building agenda.

Key message 10 — Empowerment is not yet on the agenda

The current supply-driven emphasis of capacity building is a reflection of the Northern agenda. For the most part, capacity building is an activity where 'we' are building 'their' capacities to serve 'our' needs. Training alone will not lead to empowerment, and the predominance of short training inputs in humanitarian

capacity building indicates that there is little readiness on the part of Northern agencies to give up genuine control of the humanitarian agenda. If the tables are to be turned, this will require new structures that make it worthwhile for Southern/Eastern agencies to invest in their own capacities for their own purposes. The so-called 'business case' – that quality and accountability should yield a dividend in the humanitarian marketplace – means that agencies working to empower themselves should see concrete benefits from their efforts. This will require Northern agencies to reflect on their partnership strategies and the signals they send regarding respect for and responsiveness to locally defined priorities. Quality and independence on the part of Southern/Eastern agencies are not yet sufficiently rewarded in the humanitarian system. A more fundamental rethink is needed if the ultimate goal of capacity building amid humanitarian action is to go beyond merely accessing cheap service provision.

Notes

1 One study found that 74 per cent of the deaths of humanitarian workers by 'non-accidental, intentional violence' are of national staff, a figure that is probably much higher since these fatalities may not be as accurately recorded, especially among staff working for local organisations (King, 2002).

2 Over 5000 personnel were trained in sexual exploitation issues in Southern Africa, an initiative that some national staff rejected as cultural imperialism (Valid International, 2004).

3 Based on case study by Vivien Walden: 'Building capacity in a humanitarian environment: How do we prevent overload?'

4 Based on case studies by Valéry Ridde & Martin Bévalot: 'Humanitarian NGO capacity building process: a case study in program evaluation (Afghanistan), and Tony Vaux: 'Learning from local staff and local communities: Tearfund experience in Darfur.'

5 The term 'institutional nomads' has been used to refer to the cliques of 'uncivil society' that have emerged in Eastern Europe as part of the transition process (Wedel, 2003). The basic concept seems applicable in a less negative sense in describing the career paths that the humanitarian system tends to encourage in the North, South and East.

6 Based on case study by Lucy Jones: 'AREU's experience with capacity building'

7 Based on case study by Margie Buchanan-Smith, 'Food security monitoring in North Darfur – an institutional relay race but the runners remain the same'

8 'funding has become increasingly tied to immediate and tangible programme implementation with a lack of funding for organisational core costs' (INTRAC, 2004, p 5).

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