

# Capacity Development BRIEFS

SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND LESSONS LEARNED

## PUTTING EVIDENCE TO WORK: LINKING POLICY AND PRACTICE IN CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

By Thomas Theisohn, Mark Nelson, and Janet Awimbo

*One of the major challenges facing the international development community is creating a capacity development (CD) architecture built on solid evidence. In this CD Brief, the authors argue that, although a significant body of evidence on CD is being produced, the knowledge is poorly captured and managed. As a result, CD practice and policies fail to take full advantage of lessons and experiences that could lead to better results. Addressing these challenges is the basis of the three-year strategy of the Learning Network on Capacity Development (LenCD), a broad partnership of practitioners and donors dedicated to improving the outcomes of capacity development initiatives. The strategy has three key pillars: evidence, practice, and policy. The aim is to create a more professionalized CD practice and transfer CD learning into the mainstream of development.*

After many years of conflict and economic decline, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is now trying to put itself on a path of recovery. But even before that journey begins, DRC faces a major roadblock.

The DRC is not only receiving a large flow of assistance from a multitude of donors, but has bountiful natural mineral wealth and potential. Yet, the population remains one of the poorest in Africa with a per capita income of less than \$300 a year. The basic structures of the state have virtually collapsed during the long years of conflict and internal decline. And creating working institutions across 11 provinces and a territory the size of Western Europe is a massive challenge that almost no one knows how to tackle. "Capacity development is an urgent priority for us," said Planning Minister Olivier Kamitatu Etsu recently on a visit to Washington, D.C. "It's the key to our development."

The DRC is just one country among many that face similar challenges. Improving the effectiveness of capacity development support is a \$25 billion question—roughly the amount of international development assistance that goes to enhancing capacity. More than 100 countries pledged to improve the way that money is spent at a major conference last year in Accra, Ghana. But moving from these policy pro-

nouncements into improved practice on the ground requires a concerted effort to learn from the growing body of evidence on what does and does not work. To support this effort, the Learning Network on Capacity Development (LenCD) is creating a multipartner platform to strengthen the links among evidence, practice, and broader international development policy.

### The Open Window

Two key agreements on aid effectiveness, the Paris Declaration (2005) and the Accra Agenda for Action (2008), opened a window of opportunity that requires that both developing countries and donors work together to make CD efforts more effective. The two agreements together represent a major change in the business model for development cooperation and, in particular, for how capacity development is understood and delivered (see box 1). Yet, a number of challenges

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must be addressed for this change to take hold on the ground in practice.

### Issue 1: Evidence

Although the practice of CD has long been hampered by a lack of agreed definitions and quantitative indicators to measure progress, a significant body of research and evaluations are now available that can inform how CD is carried out on the ground. The challenge is not only to continue adding to the quality and depth of the CD knowledge base, but to make that body of knowledge less fragmented and more easily accessible.

Recent developments among CD practitioners are contributing to the effort to develop a body of knowledge that can be used to understand what does and does not work. The World Bank Institute, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and others are developing assessment tools and results frameworks that contribute to the comparability of CD efforts across countries, programs, and sectors. A growing cadre of professional CD specialists is starting to use a similar language to describe CD interventions.

Yet, the global CD knowledge architecture needs strengthening through better knowledge management tools and capture of experiences. Although many operational agencies have sought to address this issue, evaluations and reports remain difficult to find and poorly catalogued. Another priority is integrating knowledge from the plethora of CD initiatives such as Capacity.org, CD Net, Capacity Collective, Intrac, Impact Alliance, Development Gateway, Train4Dev, and the international financial and development institutions.

### Issue 2: Practice

Similar problems of fragmentation plague the practice of CD on the ground. Capacity development is recognized as the major development objective of a majority of development programs (two-thirds of World Bank projects, for example, include CD in the statement on overall development objective); however, the way that those development objectives are addressed vary across a huge array of practices and approaches. Many use only training and technical assistance as the main instruments, while other more successful approaches are emerging from efforts to address the enabling environment, political economy, and other motivational factors that drive progress and create incentives for change.

From the country perspective, multiple vertical programs accountable to individual donors must be turned

into a more horizontal approach in which champions focus their energies on contributing to a country's overall development objectives. It is at the country level—the epicenter of action—where judgments can be effectively made about the appropriateness of interventions and the degree to which they contribute to the whole. Collective processes at the country level, such as the United Nations Joint Programme on Capacity Building Support to Zanzibar, are real opportunities to build cross-sectoral, multistakeholder capacity to address gaps in institutional capacity.

### Issue 3: Policy

Lessons learned through evidence can be a powerful way to shape policy at the country and international levels. Some progress has been made in the aid effectiveness agenda, but this needs to be translated into national and sector policy as well as into the operational policies of international financial institutions and other development partners. In the DRC, for example, many of the projects and programs of various development agencies contain CD elements, but little effort has been taken to coordinate these programs or build links among them. Many of these CD issues cut across sectors and involve reforms that are outside the purview of any one sector or program.

The fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2011 will provide a new opportunity to take stock of progress and significantly strengthen benchmarks in coming years. These multipartner forums, which

#### Box 1: An Ambitious CD Agenda

From paragraph 14 of the Accra Agenda for Action —

“Together, developing countries and donors will take the following actions to strengthen capacity development:

- Developing countries will systematically identify areas where there is a need to strengthen the capacity to perform and deliver services at all levels—national, subnational, sectoral, and thematic—and design strategies to address them. Donors will strengthen their own capacity and skills to be more responsive to developing countries' needs.
- Donors' support for capacity development will be demand-driven and designed to support country ownership. To this end, developing countries and donors will i) jointly select and manage technical co-operation, and ii) promote the provision of technical co-operation by local and regional resources, including through South-South co-operation.
- Developing countries and donors will work together at all levels to promote operational changes that make capacity development support more effective.”

Source: <http://www.accrahlf.net>.



**Table 1: Shift from Supply to Demand Implies Significant Leap**

From	To
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supply-driven approaches, often packaged with funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demand-driven approaches with a choice of relevant services</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transfer of knowledge or “delivery” of training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting the acquisition of knowledge and learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External agency-driven delivery systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjusting to contexts and multiple partnerships on the country level</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results measured as outputs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact through multistakeholder processes</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vertical systems built around the requirements of service providers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Horizontal systems primarily servicing the needs of country-level decision making and learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outward accountability to boards and funders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Downward accountability to country stakeholders</li> </ul>

in 2008 included large representation from developing countries and nongovernmental organizations, have been critical to raising awareness of frequently disjointed practices and behaviors that have worked against effective capacity development.

### Closing the Learning Loop: The Role of LenCD

LenCD intends to play a central role in this ambitious capacity development agenda. The network, built on a partnership of donor agencies and practitioners from South and North, has helped establish a collective learning process that now spans many countries and official development agencies. Today, LenCD is seen by many as a network that can tap into knowledge, convene a broad array of constituencies, provide substantive advice, and give legitimacy to a collective learning process that transcends ideological differences. It has also preserved its independence from more institutionalized intergovernmental processes and maintained an ability to add an authoritative voice to the CD debate.

LenCD initially began as an open learning network for collaboration among donors (see box 2). The network has now evolved to include practitioners from partner countries and donor countries alike. By its very nature, LenCD is a partnership effort in which many partners implement their own CD programs. The network provides a platform for development practitioners to converge across institutional boundaries and to promote collective action, complementarities, and synergies. Its strategy is to start modestly to promote concrete change in practice on the ground, distill and disseminate lessons, and bring back relevant knowledge to inform policy decisions.

### Strategic Pillars of the LenCD Strategy 2009–11

Figure 1 illustrates how LenCD will organize itself in the next three years to address practice, evidence, and policy, and to forge the links that will help inform and enhance all three pillars of its strategy.

For pillar one on “practice,” LenCD will support regional and local initiatives to help change CD practice on the ground. A CD Learning Initiative is a key part of this effort. The learning effort will be a joint project among an array of partners. Intra-regional knowledge exchanges (both virtual and face-to-face) will be led by regional working groups that will analyze demand and identify opportunities. In the first year, the main focus will be on Africa. The approach will establish links with African institutions and networks, take stock of ongoing efforts to strengthen these institutions and networks, and help formulate an action plan for the future.

#### Box 2: LenCD and Aid Effectiveness

LenCD’s earliest work was done in partnership with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee and focused on the Paris High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2005, at which LenCD provided technical advice and organized the roundtable on capacity development. LenCD was also instrumental in guiding research and organizing consultations for developing the reference paper “The Challenge of Capacity Development: Working Towards Good Practice.” DAC adopted the paper in 2006 as collective guidance on capacity development. In an effort to build a broader community of practice on CD issues and reach out to practitioners in the South, in October 2006 LenCD organized the Nairobi Forum “Addressing the Paris Declaration: Collective Responsibility for Capacity Development.”

For the Accra High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in September 2008, LenCD supported the organization of a DAC preparatory workshop (Bonn, May 2008). The workshop “Capacity Development: Accra and Beyond” contributed to setting a priority agenda for action on capacity development that informed debates in Accra and helped shape the relevant sections in the Accra Agenda for Action. These concepts were embodied concisely in the Bonn Consensus (May 2008) and more substantively in the “Perspectives on Capacity Development for Accra and Beyond.” LenCD carried these messages to Accra with a marketplace display, outreach materials, and a side event. Full documentation can be found at [www.LenCD.org](http://www.LenCD.org).

**Figure 1: Pillars of the LenCD Strategy 2009–2011**



Pillar two on “evidence” is intended to strengthen evidence and facilitate dissemination of knowledge on good practice. Synthesizing existing and tacit knowledge in the network will be clustered around the priority areas that have emerged in the Accra Agenda for Action. Existing and emerging evidence will be made accessible through virtual “resource corners,” the “wisdom of the crowd” captured through face-to-face and virtual meetings and synthesized into learning modules. The themes will include the following:

- Civil society and private sector engagement, ownership, and accountability
- Technical cooperation, quality standards, South-South cooperation, and strengthening the demand side of capacity development
- National, sector, and thematic strategies
- Enabling environment and incentive systems
- Country systems, including aid management, public finance management, procurement, and results-based management
- CD in fragile situations
- Conceptual and methodological issues, including measurement of CD

Pillar three on “policy” will promote integration of CD into mainstream development policy, including aid effectiveness. Particular attention will be paid to LenCD helping the CD debate to move from the currently small group of activists into the mainstream of other development agendas. Efforts under this pillar will tailor products to support policy decisions and guidance, in particular, in further shaping the aid effectiveness agenda. LenCD will organize an annual global forum in conjunction with and relevant to other mainstream events. In particular, it will seek close collaboration with the aid effectiveness agenda and specific inputs for policy guidance and synthesis in preparation for the 2011 High Level Forum.

For more information: [www.LenCD.org](http://www.LenCD.org) or e-mail: [contact@lencd.org](mailto:contact@lencd.org).

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