Introduction

A country's successful development hinges on having sufficient capacity. While financial resources are vital, the infusion of money alone is not enough to promote sustainable human development. Without supportive laws, policies, strategies and procedures, well-functioning organizations, and educated and skilled people, countries will continue to lack the foundation to plan, implement and review the initiatives that are needed to deliver on development results. Capacity development helps to strengthen and sustain this foundation. It is the "how" of making development work better.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supports countries in developing the capacities they need to achieve development results. A key component of its approach is the use of capacity assessments to analyze desired capacities against existing capacities and to inform the formulation of a capacity development response.

UNDP has developed a methodology for conducting capacity assessments that is systematic and rigorous, yet flexible and adaptable to various capacity assessment situations. The methodology consists of the UNDP Capacity Assessment Framework, a three-step process for conducting a capacity assessment and supporting tools. Since the launch of its methodology in mid-2006, UNDP has supported capacity assessments in countries around the world for a variety of purposes - from incorporating capacity development into national development and poverty reduction strategies; to formulating sector and thematic capacity development responses; to identifying capacity issues to be addressed in Common Country Assessments and UN Development Assistance Frameworks.

This document captures lessons learnt from UNDP's experience with capacity assessments to date. It is organized along the different steps of the capacity assessment process: 1) mobilize and design; 2) conduct the capacity assessment; and 3) summarize and interpret results.

Step 1: Mobilize & Design

During the "mobilize and design" phase, relevant stakeholders are identified and mobilized to plan the capacity assessment. Specific activities during this step are:

- Clarify objectives and expectations with the primary client
- Adapt the UNDP Capacity Assessment Framework to local needs
- Determine the data & information collection and analysis approach
- Determine how to conduct the capacity assessment (team, location)
- Plan and cost the capacity assessment (based on team composition, design and duration)

Step 2: Conduct the Capacity Assessment

During the second step of the capacity assessment process, the plan designed during the first step is carried out. The capacity assessment team determines the level of desired capacities and assesses the level of existing capacities.

This can be done through, for example, focus group discussions, self-assessment questionnaires, or one-on-one interviews.

Step 3: Summarize & Interpret Results

During the third step of the capacity assessment process, the capacity assessment team summarizes inputs and interprets results.

The findings of the capacity assessment are captured in a capacity assessment report which details the stakeholders involved, the process and tools used, and the capacities and issues covered. The results Inform the formulation of a capacity development response.

Lessons Learnt

- **Promote strong client and stakeholder involvement.** Strong support from the assessment client and key stakeholders is crucial. The client needs to drive the capacity assessment process and communicate openly about its objectives and results to other stakeholders. This promotes ownership of the process and its results, and commitment to the broader capacity development agenda. Stakeholder involvement also helps ensure that the assessment meets local needs, so that its results are relevant and useful.

- **Set clear objectives.** During the "mobilize and design" phase, it sometimes becomes clear that the client is not necessarily interested in a capacity assessment per se but in another similar type of exercise, say a functional review or a training needs assessment. These and other types of analyses, such as a organizational design or risk assessment, may complement or lead to a capacity assessment, but it should be stated clearly that they are not the same.

- **Adapt for "best fit."** The interplay among three related elements – scope, time and cost – drives the design of a capacity assessment. It is important to involve stakeholders at an early stage in balancing these three elements in designing a capacity assessment such that it addresses the specific context and offers the best fit. Narrowing the scope of the assessment is one way to keep down the costs and the timeframe; engaging a broader coalition of partners to support the assessment another. Rushing an assessment should be avoided at all costs since it leads to frustration and dissatisfaction with the results.

- **Use capacity assessments for different purposes**. The primary objective of a capacity assessment is to generate an understanding of capacity assets and needs. But it often serves other purposes as well. Capacity assessments have been used, for example, to build consensus among stakeholders about the direction of change and how best to move forward.

Lessons Learnt (contd.)

- **Plan the assessment carefully.** Political dynamics, election and national holidays influence the availability of those managing or participating in the assessment and need to be factored into the assessment work plan. Time should also be reserved for the preparation of supporting tools, especially if they need to be translated.

- **Pay attention to the composition of the capacity assessment team.** Having a representative of the client on the capacity assessment team can be useful; they can provide an inside perspective and learn how to conduct a capacity assessment. But they are often not sufficiently available because they are expected to provide support to the assessment in addition to their regular job. When thinking about team composition, it needs to be considered if members will have sufficient time, transportation, etc., to carry out the assessment properly and within the agreed timeframe.

Practical Tips

- **Conduct a horizon scan**. This can be an effective way to sketch the political, institutional and organizational context and to stimulate a discussion with a client about the role capacity development can play in meeting organizational and national development goals. A horizon scan generally covers information about the organization under assessment, such as its mission, vision, organizational structure, activities, budget, human resources and operational procedures. The scan may also include relevant government policies, strategies and plans, laws and regulations and relevant international agreements and standards.

- To clarify the purpose and scope of the assessment, **use key design questions** that have been found to resonate with capacity assessment clients: Capacity for why? Capacity for whom? Capacity for what?

- Use the UNDP Capacity Assessment Framework as a way to structure a discussion of potential issues, or "jump start" a discussion of scope. It **need not be used in its entirety**. Regardless of how it is used, however, it should be adapted as the situation requires.

- **Conduct a scoping mission**. This type of mission, prior to a full-fledged capacity assessment, may help to identify whom to engage, what to assess and how. This mission can also be used to prepare relevant supporting materials such as assessment worksheets.

Lessons Learnt

- **Use existing data & information.** A considerable amount of data & information may be readily available, for example in the form of policy and legal documents, project files, organizational charts, statistics, procedure manuals, as well as previous analytical, evaluative and survey work conducted by governments or researchers. Using such existing resources reduces the amount of inputs to be collected. There is no need to "reinvent the wheel" or duplicate what others have already done.

- **Collect the optimal amount of data & information.** Collecting too many inputs may unnecessarily complicate the analysis. There is also little point in collecting a wealth of data & information if there is insufficient capacity to analyze and interpret the findings or if they will lead not to an actionable agenda.

- **Use multiple data & information sources.** Collecting data & information from different sources and triangulating the results strengthens the validity and objectivity of capacity assessment results. Although time-consuming to collect, feedback from beneficiaries, partners, donors can bring an important perspective.

- **Develop the capacity assessment tool collaboratively.** The capacity assessment tool, whether it is an interview guide, a self-assessment questionnaire or worksheet, should be developed in a participatory manner to reflect the interests of various stakeholders and technical and functional expertise as needed, and to be put into language that is understandable by the people asked to complete the tool.

- **"Zoom out" if needed.** Most capacity assessments take the organizational level as their entry point. But such assessments often cover the enabling environment as well, albeit sometimes only through informal discussions. Understanding the enabling environment can help identify the root causes of a capacity issue.

Lesson Learnt (contd.)

- **Manage focus group discussions carefully.** Focus group discussions are a popular and useful way to collect inputs for an assessment. Their effectiveness depends to a large extent on group composition. For example, putting civil society and government representatives, or managers and employees, in the same group may hinder the free exchange of opinions.

- **Pay attention to cultural norms, values and traditions.** Capacity assessments are not conducted in a vacuum. Cultural norms, values and traditions can influence the process and the results. For example, exerting direct criticism or bringing together men and women in the same room may be considered inappropriate or even unacceptable in certain cultures.

Practical Tips

- **Design "neutral" questions.** Questions should be designed such that respondents are not (un)intentionally guided towards certain responses. In addition, it is often helpful if the assessment is facilitated by an external facilitator, or someone who does not have a direct stake in the assessment results, or at a minimum by a mixed team of "insiders" and "outsiders."
- **Launch the capacity assessment with a kick-off meeting.** This provides an opportunity to clarify objectives and create buy-in for the process among those expected to participate in the capacity assessment. During the meeting, it should be clarified that it is an assessment of capacity, not a functional review or a risk analysis, and that it focuses on capacity assets and needs, not resource needs. If a self-assessment is to be used, the kick-off meeting can be helpful in making sure that all participants understand the methodology and what is expected of them.
- **Pilot an assessment.** To demonstrate the effectiveness of the UNDP Capacity Assessment Methodology and develop the capacities of national partners to undertake further assessments, try starting with an assessment in one specific unit or department before scaling up to an entire ministry.

Lessons Learnt

- **Don't expect surprises.** A capacity assessment does not usually generate 'surprises' but may help to confirm priorities, build consensus on the way forward, and define an action plan.

- **Seek different perspectives.** When summarizing and interpreting the results of the assessment it is often not enough to approach them from a technical perspective. The political perspective also needs to be given due consideration.

- **Expect conflicting views.** Although multiple sources of data & information increase the validity and objectivity of the assessment results, they often produce conflicting views. The findings of self-assessments are particularly tricky in this respect, since different people will interpret the questions in different ways. An assessment team can conduct additional interviews to double check certain findings.

- **Organize a validation workshop.** Once the initial results of the assessment are available, the assessment team prepares a report detailing its findings. Before finalizing this report, the team can decide to organize a validation workshop to seek feedback from a broad group of stakeholders and create consensus. Experience shows that results are often adjusted during this workshop. To avoid influencing the participants, during the workshop it is best if the client plays only a facilitating role and does not provide comments or suggestions.

- **Wait until the end to prioritize capacity development responses and follow-up actions.** Capacity development is an inherently complex and often political process. Identifying priority areas for capacity investments is therefore best left to the end to prevent the process from being skewed by stakeholder interests.

Practical Tips

- **Look for patterns in the capacity results.** Are there consistent results within a specific functional capacity? Are there trends across two core issues? This sort of analysis may help generate useful information for use in the formulation of a capacity development response.
- **Structure a validation workshop** so that everyone has a chance to be heard. For example, after a presentation of the findings in plenary, go into break-out groups around a particular issue.
- **Keep the target audience(s) in mind** when presenting the capacity assessment process and/or its results. Asking the following questions can help:
  - Are the findings and messages intelligible for most stakeholders?
  - Is there room for feedback from the audience?
  - Is the focus of the presentation tailored to the interests of the audiences being addressed?

Resources on Capacity Assessments

- UNDP Practice Note on Capacity Assessment (October 2008)
- UNDP Capacity Assessment Methodology User's Guide (November 2008)
- UNDP Capacity Assessment Supporting Tool (November 2008)
- Online course on Capacity Assessment (currently available for UNDP staff only)
- One-page snapshots "Capacity Assessment in Action"
- A Week in the Life – Conducting a Capacity Assessment Scoping Mission
- Sample terms of reference, capacity assessment questionnaires, etc.