

Service delivery and state capacity

Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium

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Preface



The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) aims to generate a stronger evidence base on state-building, service delivery and livelihood recovery in fragile and conflict-affected situations. It began in 2011 with funding from the UK's Department for International Development, Irish Aid and the European Commission.

At the centre of SLRC's research are three core questions, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception period in which the consortium set about identifying major evidence gaps:

- To what extent and under what conditions does the delivery of basic services and social protection contribute towards state legitimacy in fragile and conflict-affected situations?
- How do external actors attempt to develop the capacities of states in fragile and conflict-affected situations to deliver better services – and how fit for purpose are the dominant approaches?
- What do livelihood trajectories in fragile and conflict-affected situations tell us about how governments and aid agencies can more effectively support the ways in which people make a living?

From 2011 to 2016 – the duration of SLRC's first phase – the consortium implemented packages of quantitative and qualitative research across eight countries affected by fragility and conflict to varying degrees: Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sri Lanka and Uganda.

This paper is one of a series of 'synthesis reports' produced at the end of SLRC's first phase. These reports bring together and analyse all relevant material on SLRC's overarching research questions, with a view to drawing out broader lessons that will be of use to policy

makers, practitioners and researchers. There are five in total:

- [Service delivery, public perceptions and state legitimacy](#). A synthesis of SLRC's material on the first overarching research question above.
- [Service delivery and state capacity](#). A synthesis of SLRC's material on its second overarching research question.
- [Livelihoods, conflict and recovery](#). A synthesis of SLRC's material on its third overarching research question.
- [Markets, conflict and recovery](#). A more focused synthesis of the role that markets and the private sector play in processes of livelihood recovery. It links to and informs the 'Livelihoods, conflict and recovery' report.
- [Tracking livelihoods, service delivery and governance](#). A synthesis of SLRC's cross-country survey findings, drawing on two rounds of data collection with the same respondents.

Although specific authors were responsible for the analysis and writing of each synthesis report, all must ultimately be considered products of a collective, consortium-wide effort. They simply would not have been possible without the efforts and outputs of SLRC's various partner organisations. They include the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in the UK, the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in Sri Lanka, Feinstein International Center (FIC) at Tufts University in the USA, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan, Disaster Studies at Wageningen University (WUR) in the Netherlands, the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), Focus 1000 in Sierra Leone, and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

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Acronyms and glossary



CDC	Community Development Council, Afghanistan	M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
DDD	Doing development differently	NGO	Non-governmental organisation
DFID	UK Department for International Development	NSP	National Solidarity Program, Afghanistan
DHMT	District Health Management Team, Sierra Leone	OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
DIIS	Danish Institute for International Studies	OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo	PDIA	Problem-driven iterative adaptation
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management	SLRC	Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium
EPTA	Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance	TAB	Technical Assistance Board
GNI	Gross national income	TAC	Technical Assistance Committee
HLF4	Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness	TWP	Thinking and working politically
ILO	International Labour Organization	UK	United Kingdom
INGO	International non-governmental organisation	UN	United Nations
LGCDP	Local Governance and Community Development Programme, Nepal	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
		US	United States

Contents



Acronyms and glossary	iii	Boxes	
Executive summary	v	Box 1: SLRC research finds narrowly operationalised capacity development	11
1 Introduction: state-building, service delivery and capacity development	1	Box 2: SLRC research finds capacity development with a primary focus on technical support	14
2 Methodology: synthesising SLRC evidence on state capacity	3	Box 3: SLRC research identifies ‘disrupting’ effects of power and politics at the sub-national level	15
3 The political nature of capacity development: a short history	5	Box 4: SLRC research finds a lack of focus on relational aspects of capacity development	16
3.1 The early origins of aid and capacity development: technical assistance (1940s-50s)	5	Box 5: SLRC research finds a tendency for government-centric capacity development	18
3.2 Beyond the state: from citizen participation to structural adjustment (1960s–80s)	6	Box 6: SLRC research finds a ‘missing middle’ phenomenon in support for formal governance	20
3.3 Bringing the state back in: governance and ‘national ownership’ (1990s-2000s)	7		
3.4 Conflict, fragility and the state-building agenda (2000s onwards)	7		
4 Key findings	9		
4.1 Training is the default tool of capacity development	10		
4.2 Power and politics are central to how services are delivered, but capacity development often focuses on technical aspects	14		
4.3 Capacity development tends to focus on (parts of) the state, overlooking ‘alternative’ capacities and how people use services in practice	17		
4.4 Engaging with ‘systemic capacity’ remains an ongoing challenge	21		
5 The political economy of aid drives flawed capacity development	24		
5.1 Good ideas often do not filter into practice	24		
5.2 Staff are hired for technical skills rather than contextual or conceptual knowledge	25		
5.3 Short timeframes to support long-term change processes	25		
5.4 A focus on the tangible and quantifiable	25		
5.5 The push for results and a diminishing appetite for risk	26		
5.6 Accountability for aid is to donor publics, not beneficiaries	26		
5.7 Projectising social change	27		
6 Conclusion: from building capacity to supporting social and political change	28		

Figures

Figure 1: Focal points of capacity development 22

Executive summary



Every year a quarter of all international aid – approximately US\$15 billion – is spent on capacity development. Its designated purpose is to strengthen recipients’ ability to manage their own affairs successfully, and to render unnecessary any outside assistance from aid agencies.

Part of what drives this substantial investment is the state-building agenda, which has emerged and evolved in recent years to become the overarching framework for international engagement in places affected by fragility and conflict. In these contexts, external assistance is not just about improving ‘basic’ development outcomes. It is also expected to strengthen state (often government) structures, where weaknesses are typically framed as both a cause and a consequence of political violence and underdevelopment.

By defining state fragility as a problem or lack of capacity, capacity development thus becomes the primary solution. But despite this idea’s continued dominance, results in practice are frequently disappointing. Why is this so often the case?

What we did

Over a period of six years, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) has conducted a series of studies on state capacity in eight countries,¹ focussing on the ways in which international actors attempt to build the capacity of states in fragile and conflict-affected situations to deliver services – typically considered a ‘core function’ of any modern state. The studies are diverse in nature, ranging from community-level governance in Afghanistan to health-sector strengthening in Sierra Leone.

This report synthesises the findings of these studies, drawing out cross-cutting themes that help us understand both the ways in which capacity

development in such contexts is currently undertaken, and the assumptions, challenges and trade-offs that underpin this practice.

What we found

From this analysis, we begin to see the narrow and largely apolitical ways in which capacity development is operationalised. **Four key synthesis findings** emerge:

- 1 Training is the default tool of capacity development
- 2 Power and politics are central to how services are delivered, but capacity development often concentrates on technical aspects
- 3 Capacity development currently focuses on (parts of) the state, largely overlooking ‘alternative’ capacities and how people use services in practice
- 4 Getting beyond the system’s ‘units’ to engage with ‘systemic capacity’ remains an ongoing challenge.

These findings may not seem surprising to those familiar with capacity development and state-building. Indeed, part of what is remarkable about the continuation of capacity development for several decades – as well as the vast sums of aid money it attracts – is that so much is already known about its limitations. To understand why these limitations persist, we must examine the nature of the system that sustains this quandary: namely, the aid industry itself.

Unpacking the political economy of the aid industry reveals a range of factors that limit capacity development’s effectiveness. This includes the fact that while good ideas exist about how to improve capacity development, they often do not filter into practice. Staff are often hired for their technical skills rather than their contextual or conceptual knowledge, which reinforces the

¹ Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, South Sudan and Uganda.

tendency to treat capacity development as the transfer of technical skills. Further obstacles are presented due to programmes' short timeframes and the focus on tangible and quantifiable results with minimal risk. Too often, capacity development ends up projectising what are essentially processes of social change.

What it all means for policy

So, what does this mean for the future of capacity development, particularly within the state-building agenda? SLRC's research, and indeed the wider literature, suggest that fundamental changes are needed. At the same time, however, constraints imposed by the political economy of the aid industry challenge the possibility of alternative approaches. While this scenario might not provide much in the way of hope and optimism, we put forward **five recommendations** for ways forward. Specifically, the aid industry should:

1 be prepared to change ways of thinking and working in order to 'do' capacity development better

2 accept that capacity development is about politics, and think and work politically to negotiate this

3 start from an understanding of how people use services in practice, recognising existing capacities and limitations

4 think about capacity as not just tangible building blocks, but as the glue that holds services together

5 build the capacity of the aid industry to develop capacity.

These recommendations centre around the deeper need for a **re-politicisation of capacity development**, to acknowledge that it is ultimately about fostering social and political change. This has always been the case, and the focus of capacity development shifts with wider political winds. Yet because it remains cloaked in value-neutral technocracy, the fundamentally political nature of capacity development is obscured. To overcome long-standing limitations, this report suggests that politics must be brought to the fore.

1 Introduction: state-building, service delivery and capacity development



The failure to deliver basic or core state functions – public services, economic opportunities, security and social order – is often considered a marker of state fragility. Conflict is seen to undermine a state’s capacity to deliver these ‘goods’, in effect weakening or even stripping away pre-existing administrative competence. From this perspective, one of the central challenges facing state-building practitioners and policy-makers is how to redevelop or, in some cases establish, a state’s capacity to deliver its core functions.

State-building is thus often operationalised as a huge exercise in capacity development. According to some, this is precisely how it has been approached in practice for a number of years (Hamieri, 2007; Petersen and Engberg-Pedersen, 2013; Teskey *et al.*, 2011). In the words of Petersen and Engberg-Pedersen (2013: 20), for example, capacity development is ‘perceived as the main road to peacebuilding and statebuilding’. As such, the evolution and expansion of the international state-building agenda can be seen as reinforcing capacity development as a pillar of the aid system.

Despite dating back to at least the 1950s (see section 3 for a short history of the concept), capacity development remains at the forefront of development policy, constituting one quarter (US\$15 billion) of global aid expenditure each year (Guy, 2016). But the fact that the concept and practice of capacity development has existed for nearly 70 years is not the remarkable thing. Neither is the vast international investment that it attracts year after year. Rather, what is remarkable is that such significant efforts towards capacity development continue to be made, despite our knowledge of the limitations of dominant approaches.

What accounts for this state of affairs? Why, as some have put it, does capacity development ‘so consistently fall short of [its] emancipatory promise’ (Clarke and Oswald, 2010: 1), particularly when it is often defined in hugely ambitious and transformative terms?² Is it that the aid industry is still unclear about how to ‘do’ it well, particularly in difficult environments characterised by conflict and fragility? And why have we not learned from past mistakes?

² The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2006), for example, defines capacity as the ‘ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully’. Capacity development, therefore, refers to ‘the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time’.

In synthesising a series of empirical studies by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), this report aims to shed light on these questions. The SLRC is a six-year (2011-16) cross-country programme, primarily concerned with better understanding processes of state-building and recovery in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nepal, northern Uganda, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Sudan and Sri Lanka. One of the SLRC's overarching research questions asks whether international attempts to build state capacity to deliver services, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected situations, are achieving positive outcomes (see section 2 for a short overview of the relevant studies). As part of this research, the programme has sought to examine the ways in which external actors engage with states and practice capacity support. The ultimate question is: to what extent might we consider the current and dominant models 'fit for purpose'?

In this synthesis report, we argue that capacity development needs to be 're-politicised' to reveal its biases and limitations in the places that it is deployed. This is not to say that no progress has been made from capacity development efforts. In some cases, there have been clear improvements in individuals' or organisations' ability to deliver public financial management, healthcare and other services. But there is cause for reflection on the persistent limitations and overlooked implications of dominant approaches to capacity development.

In particular, we show that the way in which capacity development is practised tends to overlook the underlying power, politics and systems that prevent the delivery of quality services. Very often, grand efforts to rebuild states and societies boil down to training or providing equipment and resources. Admittedly, these are much easier to engage with than less tangible, measurable aspects of capacity such as power and politics. But, for all

the ambition with which capacity development is talked about, particularly through the lens of state-building, we find a far less elaborate set of practices when we look at its implementation. This is the subject of section 4, where we draw on the SLRC material to establish four key 'synthesis findings':

- 1 Training is the default tool of capacity development
- 2 Power and politics are central to how services are delivered, but capacity development often concentrates on technical aspects
- 3 Capacity development currently focuses on (parts of) the state, largely overlooking 'alternative' capacities and how people use services in practice
- 4 Getting beyond the system's 'units' to engage with 'systemic capacity' remains an ongoing challenge.

In section 5, we examine some of the root causes of this status quo – and the disinclination to deal with the 'stuff' that really seems to matter. We focus on the aid industry's political economy, with a number of what we might term 'aid heuristics' emerging that prevent learning and suppress alternative approaches.

Having covered both the lessons learned from the empirical material as well as the political economy constraints to better practice, we conclude in section 6 with five recommendations for the aid industry. Our aim is to put forward ideas for the future of capacity development, so that, given the right circumstances, it can become operationally fit for purpose. Indeed, if we are to have any hope of changing the way that we *practise* capacity development, the first and most important step is to change the way that we *think* about it.

2 Methodology: synthesising SLRC evidence on state capacity



SLRC has sought to understand what building capacity to deliver basic services in conflict-affected areas actually entails. As part of this, the Consortium has examined the ways in which international actors engage with states in order to build or develop the capacity to deliver these services.³

The SLRC programmes that have addressed the question of state capacity have approached it in slightly different ways, depending on the context. This makes writing a synthesis report somewhat challenging, so we have framed our analysis around the role of capacity development in improving service delivery and its role in processes of state-building. While this does not answer a discrete research question, it is an effective way to bring together the varied material and draw out general themes and recommendations from the relevant studies. In the analysis that follows, we include a series of text boxes to highlight the country-level research that feeds into specific findings. Throughout, we also use bold font to identify SLRC's focus countries, helping readers to distinguish between the Consortium's own findings and those originating from the wider literature.

The **Sierra Leone** programme has most directly examined capacity development, looking at the ways in which this practice has unfolded in the prevention of malnutrition (Denney *et al.*, 2014a; 2014b; 2015a) and teenage pregnancy (Denney *et al.*, 2015b; 2016). The focus has been less targeted in other countries, but the analyses and findings are nonetheless highly relevant, including evidence on:

- community development and public goods provision in **Afghanistan** (Jackson, 2016; Pain, 2016)
- health systems in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** (DRC) (Bwimana, forthcoming)
- local peacebuilding committees (Tandukar *et al.*, 2016), local governance and community development (Acharya *et al.*, 2016), and taxation in **Nepal** (Mallett *et al.*, 2016a)
- post-conflict livelihood reconstruction in **Pakistan** (Shah and Shahbaz, 2015)
- water and sanitation (Lall, 2015), and education in **Sri Lanka** (Lall, 2017)

³ Not all Consortium partners have addressed these issues, concerned as they are with other parts of the SLRC's overarching research agenda. For other synthesis reports, see Nixon and Mallett (2017) on the relationship between service delivery, public perceptions and state legitimacy, Maxwell *et al.* (2017) on livelihoods, conflict and recovery, Mallett and Pain (2017) on markets, conflict and recovery, and Sturge *et al.* (2017) on findings from SLRC's cross-country panel survey.

- municipal economic regulation in northern **Uganda** (Mallett *et al.*, 2016b)
- state-building policy and practice in **South Sudan** (Maxwell and Santschi, 2014; Maxwell *et al.*, 2014; Maxwell *et al.*, 2015; Maxwell *et al.*, 2016).

The findings from this broad body of research were also considered in the context of a review of the wider literature on capacity and capacity development. This

includes both grey literature, often focused on the technical ways of undertaking capacity development, as well as academic literature that seeks to analyse the ‘stuff’ of capacity and critique its mainstream practice. As the SLRC authors have sought to situate their findings within current and evolving debates, the material that we draw upon cuts across how capacity development is practised as well as how it is thought about within the aid community.



Image: Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Secretariat board meeting. Credit: Richard Mallett, edited by James Mauger.

3 The political nature of capacity development: a short history

The concept of capacity development has achieved a staggering consensus in international development, accepted as a central component of programming. This consensus can result in a kind of mythic status that obscures more than it reveals. Yet the particular focus of capacity development has changed over time, depending on the wider political purposes for which it has been deployed (Eade, 1997).

This section briefly traces capacity development's evolution, with a view to uncovering the political dimension that is often obscured by technocratic language. This political dimension matters, because it fundamentally shapes trajectories of capacity development as well as the wider visions of development and change to which it contributes.

3.1 The early origins of aid and capacity development: technical assistance (1940s-50s)

Early ideas of capacity development emerged in the 1930s-40s, with colonial powers undertaking technical assistance as part of a 'civilising mission' to impart modern ideas of public administration to colonies. At this time, 'waves of experts' were sent to change agricultural techniques and reform colonial health and education systems (Cooper, 1997). The model colonial officer was described as 'a technical expert, who knew how to eradicate malaria, organise a school system, teach new cultivation techniques or manage labour disputes' (Cooper, 2002: 88).

In 1949, President Truman's Point IV Programme in the United States (US) set out a plan for providing technical assistance to developing countries, intended to: 'make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realise their aspirations for a better life' (President Truman quoted in Rist, 2006: 71). Experts were sent to countries to transfer skills and knowledge about private-sector development, governance reforms and public-service delivery. While the programme was branded with developmental aims, it also provided a means for combatting communism and preventing 'nationalistic tendencies' in developing countries, thought to undermine the post-World War II order (de Senarclens, 1997). Yet, as Rist (2006: 76) notes, Truman's speech was so effective, in part, because the proposal:

claimed to be beyond the ideological divide between capitalism and communism. The key to prosperity

and happiness was increased production, not endless debate about the organisation of society, ownership of the means of production or the role of the State.

By focusing efforts on improving developing countries' gross national income through technical assistance, the Point IV Programme planted the seed for 'national statistics, with their mathematical aura of objectivity' as the basis for judging progress (ibid.). This focus on the technical elements and measures of capacity continues today, presenting deeply political ideas about progress as value-neutral matters (Kenny and Clarke, 2010).

To coordinate technical assistance, the United Nations (UN) established the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (EPTA) in 1949, which worked alongside the Technical Assistance Board (TAB) and the Technical Assistance Committee (TAC) of the Economic and Social Council (de Senarclens, 1997: 196). These were precursors to some of the international institutions at the forefront of capacity development today – most notably, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (UNESCO, 2016).

From the 1950s, technical assistance was provided throughout the developing world by the US and Soviet Union, as liberation movements spread and the global superpowers vied for ideological supremacy. In addition, because superpower rivalry hamstrung the Security Council, the UN preoccupied itself with activities outside of 'peace and security', including using technical assistance for development (Rist, 2006). Multilateral organisations believed their assistance to be apolitical in contrast to bilateral donors, and would help newly independent countries to improve economic growth (Wilson, 2007). As such, technical assistance largely focused on supporting economic planning and attracting foreign investment (de Senarclens, 1997; Jolly, 2010; Wilson, 2007: 183).

3.2 Beyond the state: from citizen participation to structural adjustment (1960s–80s)

By the late-1960s, there was widespread disappointment at the achievements of the 'development decade' (Jolly, 2010; Wilson, 2007). Such concerns came at the same time as ideas grew – particularly among civil society and grass-roots social-change movements – that people and politics were integral to theories of development. These ideas sat in tension with the top-down statist development planning initiatives that had dominated to date (Kenny and Clarke, 2010). This

emphasis on empowerment and participation continued into the 1970s, as Latin American liberation theories of development spread, which argued for people-led movements instead of dependency on western donors (Cardoso, 1972; Freire, 1970).

At the same time, the concept of technical assistance as an apolitical transfer of skills for improved efficiency became further institutionalised under Robert McNamara's presidency at the World Bank (1968-81). McNamara introduced tools to enable 'the scientific determination of correct investment choices', borrowed from his previous leadership of the US Department of Defense (Hirschman, 1995: 128). An interest in improving aid results led to the introduction of the Planning, Programming and Budgeting System and the logical framework ('logframe'), giving political decisions a 'technocratic aura' (ibid.). These tools constituted early efforts to quantify capacity development activities that continue today (Natsios, 2010).

Until this time, much capacity development had concentrated on supporting states to develop economic plans, deliver services and improve management, which reflected broader ideas about the state's role in developmental processes. This began to shift with the emphasis on participation and people-led development, however, as civil society itself became a target for capacity development. But by 1980, as foreign debt spiralled and conservative governments emerged in the US and United Kingdom (UK), ideas about limiting the state's role gained traction. The idea was embodied by structural adjustment initiatives, which sought to reduce the state's role in the economy and drastically cut social spending. International assistance became increasingly conditional upon macroeconomic policy compliance, with capacity development reoriented towards supporting the kinds of institutional and policy reforms demanded by structural adjustment (Moss, 2007; Trostle *et al.*, 1997).

From its earliest development through to the 1990s, structural adjustment attracted forceful critique (Easterly, 2003), with some arguing that its focus on increasing finances was misplaced, and that 'weak institutional capacity may be a more important obstacle to poverty reduction' (Venner, 2015: 87). Concerns also emerged from within the UN, with the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF and the Economic Commission for Africa criticising the impact of structural adjustment on human development (Jolly, 2010). Yet, it was not until the 1990s, with the rise of the human development agenda, that trends in international assistance shifted (ibid.).

3.3 Bringing the state back in: governance and 'national ownership' (1990s-2000s)

In many ways, debates about the state's role in development have provided the backdrop to shifts in capacity development. As criticism of structural adjustment mounted, popular ideas returned to the role of the state and of institutions and governance (Grindle, 2010). This saw the rise of the 'good governance' agenda in the 1990s, which embraced the role of politics in development (albeit in a highly normative manner) and reflected the belief in liberal democracy as the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1989).

Good governance ideas had implications for capacity development, revealing a whole host of areas where support was needed. As Grindle (2004: 525-6) notes, good governance called for:

improvements that touch virtually all aspects of the public sector – from institutions that set the rules of the game for economic and political interaction, to decision-making structures that determine priorities among public problems and allocate resources to respond to them, to organisations that manage administrative systems and deliver goods and services to citizens, to human resources that staff government bureaucracies, to the interface of officials and citizens in political and bureaucratic arenas.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s the international community was also reflecting on its own ways of working. In 1993 the UNDP released its seminal 'Berg Report' on technical cooperation, which critiqued mainstream approaches to capacity development (Berg, 1993). The report called out development agencies for adhering to their own agendas rather than responding to needs in recipient countries, and criticised some of the main modalities of support, such as placing highly-paid internationals in government roles while national civil servants remained poorly remunerated (Land *et al.*, 2015). The findings contributed to the creation of a Technical Cooperation Network within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) (*ibid.*). Language also began to shift from capacity *building* to capacity *development*: while the former implies an

'externally and top-down defined process' focused on inputs, the latter suggests existing local capacities and endogenous drivers of development (Petersen and Engberg-Pedersen, 2013: 20).

The OECD-DAC has continued to coordinate global efforts to improve aid effectiveness, organising high-level forums that have resulted in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action, and the 2011 Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation.⁴ Underpinning all of these initiatives has been an attempt to reconfigure aid relationships towards local ownership and sustainability.

3.4 Conflict, fragility and the state-building agenda (2000s onwards)

The 2000s also saw capacity development become intertwined with issues of conflict and security. Rising concern about failed or fragile states and ungoverned spaces recast state capacity as an instrument to maintain national and international peace (and prevent spill-over of the effects of conflict to other countries) (van Overbeek *et al.*, 2009). Underdevelopment, conflict and terrorism came to be associated with an absence of state governance (Boege *et al.*, 2009), the logical solution being to create or restore the formal government structures believed capable of delivering development and achieving a monopoly on violence, including through capacity development initiatives.

The move towards state-building as the primary framework for development in fragile states was furthered in 2011, when the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF4) agreed the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States⁵ as part of wider efforts to improve aid practice in fragile settings. Also published that year was the World Bank's (2011) *World Development Report on Conflict, Security and Development*, which similarly recognises capacity development's importance in fragile situations, specifically in security, justice and jobs. From this perspective, capacity development is understood as the key to not only local ownership, but peace, stability, and transforming entire states and societies.

The more recent focus on conflict and fragility as a middle-income-country phenomenon, as opposed to something

⁴ See <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/parisdeclarationandaccraagendaforaction.htm> and www.oecd.org/development/effectiveness/busanpartnership.htm.

⁵ See <http://www.newdeal4peace.org>.

solely affecting the ‘bottom billion’ (Collier, 2007), is now challenging ideas about state-building and capacity development. In conflict-affected middle-income states, capacity is not necessarily in short supply, but rather political incentives are stacked against accountable and responsive governance. There are thus questions about how ideas of capacity development need to be adapted in order to remain relevant to these new conflicts – or, in other words, about how capacity development needs to engage with processes of political change.

This short historical overview captures how politics fundamentally shapes capacity development, from ideas

about its core purpose, to who should (and should not) be its primary focus. Efforts to improve the practice of capacity development at the technical level continue, and have made important strides in recognising existing capacities, the importance of mutual learning, and the primacy of locally-led development. But the technical can also distract from or mask the underlying politics of change (Centano and Ferraro, 2013). We need to be aware of this politics, because it affects what seemingly technical capacity development efforts contribute to – whether that be winning an ideological debate in the Cold War, or contributing to narratives about violent extremism and migration being more effectively dealt with ‘at source’.



Image: interview, Nepal. Credit: Georgina Sturge, edited by James Mauger.

4 Key findings



As a pillar of the contemporary state-building agenda – and of development practice more broadly – what does capacity support to states in fragile and conflict-affected situations look like today?

It is important to recognise the gains that have been made, and not to unfairly denigrate capacity development efforts. That said, there remain various shortcomings, which will be familiar to many readers, in the way that capacity development is often deployed, and that fundamentally undermine efforts to strengthen state capacity to deliver services.

The scope of SLRC's research in this area is limited to service delivery. More specifically, it looks at how international support is being used (or not) to strengthen states' capacity to deliver services (normatively considered a 'core function' of the typical modern state). The research is therefore concerned with a particular type of capacity, and cannot be considered representative of all state-building contexts as it draws on a selection of focus countries and sectors. Thus, while the comparative nature of the programme's research is certainly one of its strengths – and something many other studies lack – any generalisations come with a note of caution. In an effort to address this caveat, we draw on wider literature to connect the SLRC findings with research from other contexts, and identify four cross-cutting findings:

- 1 Training is the default tool of capacity development.
- 2 Power and politics are central to how services are delivered, but capacity development often focuses on technical aspects.
- 3 Capacity development currently focuses on (parts of) the state, largely overlooking 'alternative' capacities and how people use services in practice.
- 4 Getting beyond the 'units' of the system to engage with 'systemic capacity' remains an ongoing challenge.

The remainder of this section looks at each finding in turn, with key messages highlighted at the beginning of each sub-section and illustrative examples from SLRC research pinpointed throughout.

4.1 Training is the default tool of capacity development

Key Messages

- Despite the wide range of possible capacity support activities, programming tends to favour the tangible and quantifiable approaches of training and resource supply.
- The models used often have internal design weaknesses: for example, many trainings are underpinned by flawed learning methodologies and are inappropriate to the context.
- Trainings often assume that knowledge is the 'missing ingredient', and therefore are based on a limited conceptualisation of how change happens.

Despite how broadly capacity development is often defined, it tends to be operationalised in a relatively narrow, homogenised manner through a limited range of interventions. These approaches tend to look much the same from one place to the next, regardless of differences in context that are meant to drive programme design. This is despite the fact that, in relation to service delivery, there are a number of forms that capacity development activities might take (Gillespie, 2001: 24, drawing on Heaver, 2000), including:

- training staff
- supply of equipment or resources
- technical assistance, involving inserting external experts to provide analysis and advice
- mentoring and supportive supervision
- study tours and exchanges
- salary support
- organisational restructuring (hiring practices, payroll, incentive structures, working environment)
- improving coordination mechanisms between relevant stakeholders
- brokering dialogue among relevant stakeholders to improve planning, problem-solving, implementation
- developing and harmonising reporting systems and data flows
- strengthening accountability and improving feedback loops.

SLRC's research suggests that, in practice, there is often a strong reliance on a narrow selection of tools, most notably training and the supply of equipment or resources. These are routinely included in programming

as a way of achieving 'sustainability' beyond the life of the intervention.

The reliance on a limited set of tools is particularly evident in SLRC's work in **Sierra Leone**, where researchers have looked at dominant approaches to capacity development in three areas: 1) the nutrition sector (Denney *et al.*, 2014a; 2014b); 2) health-system strengthening since the end of the civil war (Denney *et al.*, 2015a); and 3) teenage pregnancy following a spike during the Ebola outbreak (Denney *et al.*, 2015b; 2016).

In each of these sectors, the Sierra Leone research maps the kinds of capacity development provided by a range of bilateral and multilateral donors and local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The dominance of training and the provision of equipment/supplies as the primary mode of support is striking. This is not to suggest that there were no alternative forms of capacity development – secondments, salary support and organisational restructuring were also used – but these pale in comparison to the dominant forms of assistance.

SLRC's research in **Nepal** similarly points to a strong focus on training (Acharya *et al.*, 2016), as do findings from **South Sudan**, where the provision of equipment and infrastructure is also common (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016a). Box 1 highlights the uniformity of capacity initiatives found to be used in these three countries.

This reliance on a limited set of capacity development tools is also noted in the wider literature, suggesting a problem that runs beyond the SLRC research sites. Training, alongside the provision of equipment and resources, is often identified as one of the most widespread applications of capacity development across a range of contexts and sectors (Boesen and Therkildsen, 2004; Petersen and Engberg-Pedersen, 2013; UNDP, 2009). One evaluation of Australian aid, for example, finds that capacity development efforts principally focus on training, limiting the effectiveness of building sustained capacity. In Nepal, it highlights that teacher training should have been 'supplemented with other forms of capacity support such as secondments, peer learning and exchange, and on-the-job training in order for teaching skills to improve' (ODE: 2014: 18). In their analysis of capacity development in the context of health systems, Potter and Brough (2004: 336) state that, 'Too often [capacity development] becomes a euphemism referring to little more than training'. The authors go on to highlight examples where capacity development is equated with training and support, arguing that these could be 'multiplied many times' (*ibid.*: 337).

Box 1: SLRC research finds narrowly operationalised capacity development

The nutrition sector in Sierra Leone (Denney et al., 2014a: 12)

In this report, the authors note the following:

What emerges [from the analysis] ... is the frequency with which training appears as a form of capacity support. This suggests not only the dominance of this particular modality among development partners but also the tendency for capacity development to target 'skills and knowledge' almost exclusively through training. The interviews were illustrative: respondents, when asked about the forms of capacity support provided to government, tended to immediately cite training (as opposed to any other kinds of support provided), indicating that this is how capacity development is often framed and understood.

The health system in Sierra Leone (Denney et al., 2015a: vi)

Moving from the nutrition sector to a broader focus on Sierra Leone's health system, researchers similarly found that, 'Capacity building' has been [since the end of the war in 2002] thought about and operationalised in a limited manner. Although there are constraints on the methods and functions of development partners, an overly technocratic, narrow and linear way of thinking about capacity and how it might be developed has resulted in a focus on building technical skills and knowledge at the "individual" and "organisational" levels of the health sector.

Teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone (Denney et al., 2015b: 14, 20)

Strong parallels came out of the later research into teenage pregnancy:

Given the different understandings of the problem of teenage pregnancy ... it is not surprising that we also see different approaches to addressing this problem amongst development partners. That said, there is also a surprising degree of consistency of intervention types adopted from each of these relatively siloed understandings of the problem; a lot of organisations are doing similar things. [...] [Government of Sierra Leone] and NGO activities overwhelmingly focus on the level of individuals – mostly girls – targeting their skills and knowledge and providing them with resources, with the assumption that this will lead to behaviour change resulting in fewer teenage pregnancies.

Peacebuilding in South Sudan (Maxwell et al., 2016a)

Workshops were found to be a particularly common modality of support, ambitiously relied upon to achieve complex social transformations, such as those in relation to local justice or peacebuilding. This was instead of drawing on a wider range of capacity development activities seen to be necessary to achieve such transformations (Leonardi et al., 2010). Moreover, as Maxwell et al. (2016a: 3) note, 'Numerous schools, clinic facilities and boreholes were built ... without a realistic plan for government institutions to assume responsibility for their sustained operation'.

The provision of water services in Nepal (Acharya et al., 2016)

Investments in drinking water channelled through the Local Governance and Community Development Programme (LGCDP) were used to build bigger water reservoirs and to replace pipelines. At the same time, however, evidence suggests that far less was done to support the government's capacity to maintain these services. Where problems arise, it is usually the *de facto* responsibility of local communities to handle repairs.

And finally, a recent synthesis by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on capacity development and security sector reform similarly notes a reliance on a narrow set of strategies characterised by training and technical assistance (Denney and Valters, 2015).

Training is tangible and measurable

Modalities of capacity development such as training and equipment / resource supply have the distinct benefit of being tangible and measurable. From building

schools, clinics and water pumps in **South Sudan**, to running trainings and setting up community groups in **Sierra Leone**, both the inputs and outputs can be easily recorded and reported. Indeed, some argue that the reason that training is used so much as a modality of capacity development is because of its quantifiable nature (Vallejo and Wehn, 2016).

While NGO staff are often keenly aware of the limitations of such support, the use of training (which can be counted, along with participants) and the provision

of equipment and resources (which are quantifiable) continues. Moreover, capacity development in relation to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) can itself reinforce this emphasis on the quantifiable. According to a recent assessment of aid support in DRC, for example, while the focus on building M&E capacity was welcome, this was generally for upward accountability to the donor, as opposed to downward accountability to beneficiaries or to encourage learning or critical reflection (Bulte *et al.*, 2015). This speaks to the ways in which the aid industry's wider political economy shapes the design of capacity development activities, as discussed in section 5.

But there are limitations to the models used

In addition to the overwhelming focus on training, SLRC and wider research suggests there are also limitations to the training itself.

First, models often rely on a 'train-the-trainer' approach. The benefit of this design is that it has the potential to reach a wide target audience in a relatively short time. However, SLRC research in **Sierra Leone** suggests that such training models can act more like a process of 'Chinese whispers' in practice, with the message that is delivered at the beginning being markedly different from that which is received at the end of the chain (Denney *et al.*, 2014a).

Second, trainings can be poorly adapted to local context. In **South Sudan**, chiefs were recurrently invited to workshops or trainings on their role in local governance, justice or peacebuilding. Yet these trainings were usually conducted in English, were based on abstract ideas, and provided little space for exchange and participation of the chiefs themselves (see Leonardi *et al.*, 2010).

Third, training is often short-term. This is partly because those delivering the programme do not want to keep participants from their jobs for long periods. At the same time, however, this has implications for both the depth of learning, and the likelihood that participants retain accurate knowledge. While there is no agreement on ideal length of training, evidence from the wider literature suggests that a series of short-term trainings over time, as opposed to simple one-off trainings, can be more effective at improving and sustaining participants' learning experiences (Chemin, 2009; Mobekk, 2009). Often, capacity building trainings that target adults are 'classroom' based – as illustrated by the SLRC research in **South Sudan** (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016a) and **Sierra Leone** (Denney *et al.*, 2014a) – which overlooks the importance

of practical on-the-job-training, mentoring and follow-up that can facilitate learning and reinforcement (see Murray, 2007).

Finally, and related to the above point, despite the substantial investments made in training, they are rarely underpinned by explicit learning methodologies. Trainings are often operationalised as a relatively straightforward transfer of knowledge from provider to recipients, rarely bringing to bear the wealth of literature on adult-learning techniques, learning methods across cultures, or learning aids for limited literacy.

Taken together, capacity development tends to be thought of as a common-sense activity that gets tacked on to other interventions (Baser, 2014). It is considered to be the mechanism by which an intervention is made sustainable, and not as an intervention in its own right. This filters through to who conducts training. While in some cases this may be experienced trainers, in many others it may be staff with technical but not necessarily teaching/training expertise. This matters because being a good nurse or government official does not mean you necessarily know how to train others. To ensure that training actually develops capacities, we therefore need to reflect on the methodologies that underpin it and engage with the complexity of learning in different contexts.

Training assumes knowledge is the missing ingredient

The tendency to rely on training as the dominant form of capacity development reflects how popular understandings of capacity tend to centre on knowledge as the primary missing ingredient. The logic here is that by providing (often technical) knowledge to recipients, they will be able to deliver or access services better, or hold governments to account. This emphasis is reflected in many monitoring tools, such as beneficiary surveys, which are intended to demonstrate whether a capacity development intervention has resulted in improved knowledge.

Knowledge is of course a vital aspect of capacity: without knowing how to treat malnutrition, health workers are ill-equipped to save lives. Or without knowing that domestic violence is a crime, survivors do not report it. The problem is that knowledge, *in and of itself*, is rarely sufficient to lead to behaviour change.

In reality, the way in which (and extent to which) knowledge translates into practice depends on the nature of an individual's surrounding environment. Are the right



Image: trainee tailor, Afghanistan. Credit: Richard Mallett, edited by James Mauger.

conditions in place to support the behaviour changes that are being sought? This is often referred to as an ‘enabling environment’, where the wider context facilitates the desired behaviour changes. In such a setting, knowledge transfer may enable behaviour change. In many cases, however, what we find are ‘disabling environments’ that work against translating knowledge into practice.

Such environments can emerge where material or ‘hard’ constraints exist. For instance, a health worker can be trained in the latest best practice, but if they do not have a reliable drug supply or electricity or water at the clinic, then providing knowledge alone will not result in better development outcomes. Disabling environments can also emerge when social norms, beliefs and expectations – the ‘softer’ side of constraints, as it were – are stacked against the desired behaviour change. For example, SLRC’s **Sierra Leone** research shows that, even when young mothers know about the importance of exclusive breastfeeding, their ability to translate this into practice is often limited by power relations in the household; this is particularly the case when husbands and mothers-in-law have greater decision-making power over household finances (Mallett and Denney, 2014). In much the same way, while providing teenage girls with knowledge about family planning is an important step, shame, peer pressure and a weak bargaining position vis-à-vis male sexual partners – related in turn to wider gender inequities – can mean that their ability to act on this knowledge is similarly restricted (Denney *et al.*, 2016).

This phenomenon has been noted in other cases, and is in keeping with the recognition that people’s behaviour and decisions are generally influenced by a range of factors, of which knowledge is just one. A particularly telling example comes from the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone, where ‘knowledge, attitude and practice’ studies show that people had reasonable knowledge of both the symptoms associated with Ebola as well as the reporting pathways available. Yet, despite this, many did not report cases, often out of fear, a sense of hopelessness, distrust of authorities, and alternative beliefs about healing (Focus 1000, 2014a; 2014b).

These findings are not terribly surprising. It has long been known in social psychology and behavioural economics that the relationship between attitudes and behaviours is complex and non-linear (Jackson, 2005; Owens and Driffill, 2008). A wide body of literature has developed around this theme in relation to both consumer choice and environmental action, where changes in people’s knowledge and attitudes have not been strongly correlated to people’s behaviour (*ibid.*). This has led to critiques of the ‘information-deficit model’, and specifically its ‘failure to take account of the social, cultural and institutional contexts in which attitudes and behaviours are formed’ (*ibid.*: 4413). In order to be more effective at delivering improved development outcomes, capacity development must therefore take a broader approach – focusing not just on knowledge, but on creating an enabling environment in which that knowledge can be put to use appropriately.

4.2 Power and politics are central to how services are delivered, but capacity development often focuses on technical aspects

Key messages

- Capacity development is often treated as a technical exercise, involving the transfer of ‘best practice’ models guided by a series of predetermined normative outcomes.
- But in practice, state capacity to deliver services is shaped by a series of factors related to power and politics, such as elite behaviour.
- Capacity is also influenced by the distribution of power within society more broadly, including the ‘invisible’ forces of informal institutions and social norms that regulate individual and group behaviour.

Capacity development is often treated as a technical exercise

The SLRC studies suggest that capacity development in fragile and conflict-affected situations tends to focus on the technical dimensions of service delivery, overlooking how power and politics shape or constrain possible action (see Box 2 for examples).

Given the history of capacity development summarised in section 3, this focus on the technical aspects of capacity should perhaps be expected. As Clarke and Oswald (2010: 3) point out, while there are several perspectives on what capacity development is ‘about’, the dominant approach in policy circles is to treat it as a ‘technical solution to a technical problem’. Indeed, it has been argued that ‘standard responses to public sector management deficits in developing countries’ have long continued to focus on ‘a combination of technical efficiency-enhancing reforms based on neoliberal market models and [New Public Management] principles and tools’ (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2015: 222). As such, donor-funded programming, particularly in fragile situations where state structures are often thought of as having collapsed, continues to concentrate on what Petersen and Engberg-Pedersen (2013) call ‘the functional-rational’ aspects of organisations. This refers to procedures, structures and staffing policies that aim to improve internal efficiency and effectiveness, such as by getting the ‘right’ technology in place and making sure staff possess the appropriate competencies (Barma *et al.*, 2014). Certainly, these are

important aspects of organisational capacity: as recent research demonstrates, good technical analysis, advice and assistance often sit at the heart of effective central-state strengthening in fragile situations (*ibid.*).

However, just as ‘missing knowledge’ is only one part of the problem, so too are technical solutions only partial answers. Often, these technical approaches focus on implementing organisational forms that resemble those of developed countries, yet fail to deliver the intended functions – resulting in what is known as ‘isomorphic mimicry’ (Andrews *et al.*, 2015). Building on an established evidence base, SLRC’s research shows that the way in which a state’s capacity to provide services – and, importantly, to deliver and maintain good service-delivery outcomes – is fundamentally shaped by power and politics (see also Foresti *et al.*, 2013; Hickey *et al.*, 2016; McLoughlin and Batley, 2012). This is true across multiple contexts, and sits in distinct contrast to the technical approach favoured by so much capacity support.

This technical focus is exacerbated by the fact that capacity development programmes are usually

Box 2: SLRC research finds capacity development with a primary focus on technical support

Health-related trainings in Sierra Leone (Denney *et al.*, 2014a; 2014b; 2016)

Trainings tend to privilege technical knowledge and know-how, overlooking the ‘softer’ (or relational) aspects of capacity: mothers are trained in the nutritional benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, health staff in diagnosing and treating a range of basic healthcare problems, and teenage girls in family-planning methods.

Government trainings in South Sudan (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016c)

Government officials are trained in the technical aspects of their duties only, overlooking the relationships with the communities that they are employed to serve, and the elites who hold power.

Health sector support in DRC (Bwimana, forthcoming)

While a wide range of external actors is involved in DRC’s health sector, assistance tends to consist of financial and technical support to government. Moreover, the majority of this support has been channelled towards humanitarian, emergency-based interventions, with very little being used for longer-term system strengthening.

designed by international experts who are technical sectoral specialists (e.g. in health, education, security, water and sanitation) with experience in a range of countries (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016a). This is not necessarily problematic if deep contextual knowledge is similarly balanced in designing interventions. But local knowledge tends to be a lens through which technical knowledge is refracted, rather than being a determining force in itself. Technical capacity development then becomes the answer when ‘capacity problems’ are defined in terms of technical resource, skill and knowledge deficits. In other words, defining the problem in such a way logically creates and legitimises a particular kind of response. But in doing so, it writes the less visible factors of power and politics out of the picture, despite the fact that donor and agency staff often already *know* that power and politics are central to how services are delivered and used.

In practice, capacity is shaped by elite behaviour

From the SLRC material we see the ‘disrupting’ effects of power and politics manifest in at least two ways, with the first concerning the behaviours of those who hold political power, in particular pre-existing elites. The evidence speaks most strongly to dynamics unfolding at the sub-national level, as the examples in Box 3 illustrate.

It is not always in people’s interests to tolerate either stronger states or new formal governance structures, especially for those who have benefited from pre-existing arrangements. For many, the status quo – often deemed by outsiders as broken, misaligned, or lacking capacity – works (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). The wider state-building literature suggests this is often particularly the case in situations of fragility, where certain elites might have an

Box 3: SLRC research identifies ‘disrupting’ effects of power and politics at the sub-national level

Community development councils (CDCs) in Afghanistan (Pain, 2016)

The introduction of CDCs under the National Solidarity Program (NSP) was designed to improve the provision of local public goods by bringing village governance into line with principles of democracy, participation and accountability. However, the capacity of the Councils to operate democratically and of community members to participate were constrained by the behaviour of local elites (driven in turn by incentives confronting them). Rather than transform relations and power within villages, the CDCs essentially took on the same characteristics of the existing power structure, with the same figures having power and influence within the Councils.

Governance reforms in Afghanistan (Jackson, 2015; Minoia and Pain, 2016; Minoia *et al.*, 2014)

Research in Kandahar, Afghanistan highlights how sub-national governance reforms ‘focused largely on building technical capacity, [and] have consistently neglected to address the factors and forces that undermine the viability of state institutions’ (Jackson, 2015: 7). For Jackson, the most important of these factors relates to the behaviours of, and incentives faced by, regional power holders, who have the ‘capacity’ to manipulate access to resources. Further research into the workings of rural commodity markets shows how both price and market access are tightly controlled by a narrow group of powerful traders.

Peacebuilding committees (Tandukar *et al.*, 2016) and taxation in Nepal (Mallett *et al.*, 2016a)

In a study of peacebuilding committees in Nepal, these supposedly inclusive and representative bodies are found to be dominated by political parties (Tandukar *et al.*, 2016). So too with the capacity of Nepal’s local government to raise revenue via taxation, as ‘control over planning and resources is dominated by local elites and political parties, rather than the [Village Development Committee] office’ (Mallett *et al.*, 2016a: 10; see also The Asia Foundation, 2012). The implication is that simply expanding the mandate of local government to take on more roles and responsibilities, for example through a decentralisation of decision-making, is unlikely to have much effect unless the underlying power relations of local governance are somehow reordered.

Regeneration of a municipal marketplace in Uganda (Mallett *et al.*, 2016b)

The technical design of a new marketplace in Lira, northern Uganda overlooked power relationships in the community, enabling already (relatively) wealthy vendors to take advantage of prime trading units. Although in its early days, evidence suggests this has contributed to the creation of a rentier class within the new marketplace, placing additional costs on poorer vendors and disincentivising their use of the space. In turn, this has compromised the capacity of the municipality to raise revenues from the redevelopment.

active interest in maintaining disorder and weakness (Menkhaus, 2010). For example, in places where war economies are capable of producing lucrative rents, there may be great incentive for some in curbing the state's capacity to regulate economic activity (and thereby maximising the size of the 'shadow economy') (Goodhand, 2004). In other settings, where regime change is not in the interests of the elites in power, a 'deinstitutionalised' or gutless state might be considered a good thing: there are fewer challenges to power and weaker pressure for accountability (Reno, 2000). In such situations of wilful state fragility, there are no immediately obvious solutions to the problem of capacity, yet the standard state-building templates tend to forget this (Menkhaus, 2010).

Thus, the introduction of new organisations, rules and remits – driven to a large extent by the 'deficit-based' way in which capacity development is often thought about – often does little to reorder power relations, and so leads to limited change. Indeed, capacity development efforts might even find themselves being actively derailed, a consequence that Pain (2016) links to Pritchett's (2015) idea of *in/coherence* in his work on the spatially varied effects of Afghanistan's NSP. As Pain (2016: 13) argues, 'the NSP intervention in its design elements can in some respects and in some contexts ... be incoherent in relation to the incentives and motivations that structure community life'. Where such cases emerge, significant change is unlikely to follow: the logics and norms of the incoming programme are simply too far removed from the realities of

the local context. What is required, therefore, is more fine-grained analysis of political and institutional variation – on a village-by-village basis (ibid.).

Capacity is also shaped by the distribution of power within societies more broadly

The tendency to write power and politics out of the picture – essentially turning capacity development into an engineering problem, where identifiable technical fixes produce known solutions – is noticeable at various levels. As discussed, this might be at the centres of political governance, where unaccountable regimes and members of the political elite resist change. But it is also evident within social relationships more broadly, visible in the everyday nature of personal interactions (should one choose to look there).

As we have already begun to see, much capacity development practice seems to be underpinned by a rational-actor logic that places great emphasis on agency (the framing of knowledge as the pathway to empowerment is a good illustration). But from a more *relational* perspective, we see that an individual's capacity to operate in a certain way depends not only upon their internal competence (defined in various ways), but also upon their surroundings – specifically, their positioning within those surroundings relative to others (see Box 4). As Barma *et al.* (2014: 14-15) note: 'Capacity development from this perspective, has to do with power, conflict and the

Box 4: SLRC research finds a lack of focus on relational aspects of capacity development

Service delivery in South Sudan (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016b)

Capacity development does not sufficiently involve a focus on *relational* aspects that are key to enabling effective service delivery. In particular, the lack of engagement with state-society relations – principally how citizens view, trust and interact with different parts of government across different locations – has been largely neglected, despite playing a strong role in people's perception and experience of services.

Access to education in Sri Lanka (Lall, 2017)

Deep social structures such as caste shape citizens' access to education in Sri Lanka. The way in which 'low' caste identity intersects with a series of socio-economic factors – geographical residence, social status in the present, expected livelihood trajectories in the future – essentially means that ideas about where caste members 'belong' affects both the kinds of schools they are likely to attend, as well as the likelihood of full educational attainment. This is partly related to, and reinforced by, the pejorative attitudes held by some service providers.

Access to healthcare in Sierra Leone (Denney *et al.*, 2014b)

Evidence suggests that negative experiences at the local health clinic, related in part to users' feelings of 'being looked down upon' by staff, can deter future uptake of government-run services. Interestingly, this finding applies not only if an individual has themselves experienced negative service delivery, but also if they have heard stories of others in the community receiving poor service.

mediation of different ... interests. Capacity development is thus part of the political dynamics of a particular situation’.

Consider again the frontline health worker in rural **Sierra Leone** who provides poor care to her patients. Having been through various phases of technical training, she may possess the appropriate biomedical knowledge to diagnose and treat a range of basic health problems (although the use of ‘cascade’ training models may have diluted the accuracy of that knowledge). But when she has been posted to an unfamiliar part of the country, receives little supportive supervision, works in a clinic facing regular drug stock-outs, and has not been paid in three months, she sees little value in treating patients with the care that is required to build trust. As a result, she may resort to selling medicines on the black market to supplement her meagre income, charge informal user fees to patients, or treat them in a disrespectful manner. In turn, these practices can undermine people’s faith in the government’s capacity to provide quality health care (Boozary *et al.*, 2014; Denney *et al.*, 2015a; Tsai *et al.*, 2015), potentially making them less likely to trust public health messaging from official channels, as was experienced during the 2014-2015 Ebola epidemic.

Moving ‘up the chain’ of the health system, as it were, the SLRC evidence shows how informal power relations and identity politics can also constrain effective policy-making. Take the nutritionist of a remote district, responsible for promoting and coordinating all nutrition work in the area. She – and it usually is a she – sits within a District Health Management Team (DHMT). Plans and priorities are negotiated first through the DHMT, and then go through the bureaucratic machinery of the District Council. District nutritionists typically do not have a particularly strong position when it comes to negotiating for what they need within the DHMTs or District Councils, which is not helped by the fact that their roles are fairly recent (2009) additions to the DHMTs, as well as by the wider framing of nutrition as a ‘women’s issue’. As such, the nutritionist’s weak capability to influence, bargain and negotiate then acts as a broader constraint on state capacity to prevent malnutrition, as nutrition gets squeezed out of health plans and budgets (see Denney *et al.*, 2015a).

This is not about the nutritionist’s technical capacity *per se*, but rather her political positioning in relation to others at the district level. Neither is it about the hard aspects of organisational and systemic capacity. As the example shows, many of the structures are already in place: a DHMT, a District Council, planning meetings and processes. It is about the ways in which district nutritionists are subject, just as others are, to the rules of the game (which in this

case are strongly patriarchal). These ‘rules’ are not only enforced in the private spheres of life, but can also run through the very organs of the state.

The dynamics of human interaction occurring at this very granular level might seem distinct from the more ‘conventional’ tasks of capacity development: bureaucratic restructuring, human resourcing, revenue generation. What, for example, does the young mother experiencing poor treatment at the local health clinic or the lower-caste parents seeking quality education for their son have to do with state capacity?

But these are not separate issues. Neither are they straightforward, value-neutral or apolitical. Ultimately, the capacity of any state to deliver services depends on:

- the way it engages with citizens, and the historical forces shaping that interaction. The attitudes and behaviours of frontline workers and local officials may be of particular importance, located as they are at the interface between state and society
- the degree of individual and group compliance with the state
- the extent to which the state is capable of displacing norms that sustain ‘detrimental’ behaviour.

4.3 Capacity development tends to focus on (parts of) the state, overlooking ‘alternative’ capacities and how people use services in practice

Key messages

- Current forms of capacity development are typically government-centric, focusing on the formal, bureaucratic apparatus of the state.
- There is often a tendency to overlook the ‘alternative capacities’ of other authorities and providers, and little consideration of how citizens use services in practice.
- Capacity support primarily targets governments but in uneven ways, with under-investments at the district or provincial level sometimes resulting in a ‘missing middle’.

We have already examined the fact that, in practice, capacity support often gets channelled into a fairly narrow

range of interventions. To an extent, the same can be said of *who* gets targeted, with the SLRC material pointing to a certain selectivity in the way investments are allocated, based in turn on ideas about whose capacity matters most for state-building.

Government-centric capacity development is generally the norm

Contemporary capacity development efforts often focus primarily on the state – or, perhaps more accurately, the government (that is, the formal bureaucratic apparatus of the state) (see Box 5). This is not to say that other actors are never engaged with capacity development efforts. Indeed, in SLRC’s **DRC** research in particular, much of the capacity support analysed in that context was aimed at civil society rather than the government (Bwimana, forthcoming). Moreover, the focus of capacity development appears to shift across humanitarian and development boundaries. Yet despite these variations, much of SLRC’s research in this area saw capacity development being centrally focused on supporting government institutions.

This government-centric focus is in keeping with wider trends in aid practice, in which the international community is focused on strengthening the formal state as a response to situations of perceived fragility or failure.⁶ This is apparent in the manner in which state-building has become the overarching framework for much development practice (OECD, 2008), as well as in international commitments such as the 2011 New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, which defines nationally-owned development as the goal and the government as the central authority to achieving that. In many cases, capacity development and state-building are thus conflated within current aid discourse. As others have noted, this results in a somewhat narrow model of state-building (Fritz and Rocha Menocal, 2007).

A focus on the capacity of government institutions is also apparent within the wider literature (see for instance, Call, 2008; Ghani and Lockhart, 2009; Grindle, 1997; Levy and Kpundeh, 2004), underscoring the particular forms of governance that are currently favoured by the international community for organising societies,

Box 5: SLRC research finds a tendency for government-centric capacity development

Service delivery in South Sudan (Maxwell et al., 2016c)

While the development phase of international support in South Sudan concentrated on building the capacities of core government institutions, when conflict returned and international trust in the government declined, development partners shifted away from capacity support to direct delivery of services themselves, even bypassing non-state actors.

Service delivery through the government in Afghanistan (Jackson, 2016)

In Afghanistan, SLRC research finds that core government ministries received the most international support. This is in keeping with the internationally agreed Afghanistan Compact, which captures the centrality of government-focused support:

The Afghan Government will rapidly expand its capacity to provide basic services to the population throughout the country. It will recruit competent and credible professionals to public service on the basis of merit; establish a more effective, accountable, and transparent administration at all levels of Government; and implement measurable improvements in fighting corruption (ibid., 2).

Marketplace redevelopment in Uganda (Mallett et al., 2016b)

The redevelopment of a marketplace in the north had multiple objectives. Alongside supporting the livelihoods of the town’s traders, this aid-funded initiative was also designed as a way to enhance government capacity to generate local revenue and to use that to finance municipal service delivery.

Health provision in Sierra Leone (Denney et al., 2014a; 2014b)

SLRC research finds a focus on developing the capacities of both the central Ministry of Health and Sanitation, as well as government-run peripheral health units at the community level. Efforts to either harness or develop the capacities of non-government providers, such as traditional healers, were relatively few-and-far between.

⁶ This is arguably now shifting as instability is increasingly affecting middle-income countries that are not plagued by weak capacity but by exclusionary politics. Efforts may be shifting, therefore, to work around the state, rather than on it.

arranging power and delivering services. This tells us something about how power and authority are seen to be legitimately exercised, as well as what the intended role of government ought to look like against that backdrop – i.e. as a benevolent and desirable actor, as a legitimate representative of the population, as centrally responsible for service delivery (along with other core functions).

And there is a tendency to overlook the ‘alternative capacities’ of other authorities and providers

The problem with a narrow view of governance and state-building is that it leaves out the range of other actors and authorities that often form the wider political community, and on which people frequently rely for service provision (Barma *et al.*, 2014). It is now generally accepted that ‘the state’ incorporates multiple layers of authority. Formal government is one of those, but in many places it exists as one part of a broader configuration. The literature on hybrid political orders (Boege *et al.*, 2009), institutional multiplicity (Di John, 2008) and twilight institutions (Lund, 2006) are testament to this.

From SLRC’s research, actors constituting additional parts of these broader configurations of authority and provision include:

- chiefs and traditional healers in **Sierra Leone**
- warlords and elders in **Afghanistan**
- chiefs in **South Sudan**
- the church in **DRC**.

From a state-building perspective, authorities such as these are important for a number of reasons: they are often involved in service delivery, either directly or indirectly; they are sometimes considered more locally legitimate or trusted than formal government; and they are often more physically accessible and affordable for communities, especially those in remote locations.

For example, SLRC’s longitudinal survey data from South Kivu, **DRC** shows that people there hold consistently more positive views of customary governance actors than formal government (Ferf *et al.*, 2016). The Consortium’s wider cross-country survey work additionally suggests that where citizens experience problems with their services, their trust in government in many cases declines, which

may help explain why people often end up turning to alternative providers (Sturge *et al.*, 2017). And so too in **Sierra Leone**, where research finds that taxes imposed by non-government actors are generally seen as being fairer than those imposed by the state (Jibao *et al.*, 2017).⁷

Authorities and providers such as these possess a range of capacities that capacity development programmes tend to overlook, and underline how ideas about what constitutes ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ capacity are contextually specific (Rhodes, 2014). At the same time, this is not to essentialise or romanticise informal authority, as can sometimes be the case (see Centre for the Future State, n.d.). Governments may not always act in the interests of society as a whole, but so too do many ‘traditional’ or ‘customary’ institutions exhibit their own patterns of exclusion and inequality. As SLRC’s research in **Pakistan** shows, this can raise a key dilemma for aid agencies looking to deliver support in hard-to-access communities. On the one hand, agencies operating in conflict-affected parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa felt the need to work through the ‘traditional’ *jirga* system if they were to stand any chance of reaching their intended beneficiaries.⁸ On the other hand, however, this fuelled perceptions within the community that aid had in effect been captured by those authorities and channelled towards favoured households. The question then arises: in areas of weak or contested formal state presence, to what extent does one engage with ‘alternative’ authorities when their norms and values might be considered unjust, discriminatory or in some other way problematic?

Nonetheless, given that service delivery typically depends on a much broader set of governance actors than formal government alone, programming must similarly engage with that wider universe or risk being irrelevant to the ways in which people actually access services. While this is not necessarily straightforward, as the Pakistan research illustrates, ignoring how services are provided in reality makes it harder to solve the problem of delivery. If appropriately engaged, informal institutions can often be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem (Centre for the Future State, 2010; OECD, 2007).

But rather than working with the ‘alternative capacities’ that these actors bring to the table, we often see capacity support being used to set up new organisational

⁷ This research forms part of a collaborative project between SLRC and the International Centre on Tax and Development (ICTD), which looked at the relationships between taxation, livelihoods and governance in Nepal and Sierra Leone.

⁸ *Jirga* is described in the report as one of the major traditional institutions in Pakhtun culture, referring to an assembly of elders (‘white beards’) who take responsibility for settling communal matters and resolving disputes. Although *jirgas* lost de jure authority status in 1992, their power and influence remains visible in a de facto sense.

structures, grafted onto existing institutional landscapes in the hope they might ‘fill in the gaps’. Using examples from SLRC’s research, these can take different forms, including:

- *Material*. In Lira, northern **Uganda**, the regeneration of the town’s central marketplace was framed as key to not only better livelihoods for traders but also stronger state capacity to order and regulate vending activity (Mallett *et al.*, 2016b).
- *Bureaucratic*. Establishing a Nutrition Directorate in Freetown was considered one of the most effective ways to kickstart action against malnutrition in **Sierra Leone** (Denney *et al.*, 2014a; 2014b).
- *Community-based*. The creation of community-development councils in **Afghanistan** (Pain, 2016), of local peacebuilding committees in **Nepal** (Tandukar *et al.*, 2016), and of mother-to-mother support groups to prevent malnutrition in **Sierra Leone** (Denney *et al.*, 2014a; 2014b) are all examples of new local organisations set up through capacity support.

Where ‘non-state’, ‘informal’ or customary actors are supported by the development community, this is often either considered an interim measure on the path to eventual state dominance or done for purely instrumental reasons. In **South Sudan**, for example, the international community has focused heavily on strengthening central government organisations’ administrative capacities, turning only to non-government actors when the return of violence necessitated it (Maxwell *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, traditional healers were eventually engaged in Ebola response efforts in **Sierra Leone** once the importance of their role in the community was recognised (Denney *et al.*, 2015a). Such engagement, however, has not continued.

The neglect of existing capacities and alternative sources of authority and service provision reflects how capacity development, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected situations, is based on judgements about what those contexts lack, rather than what they possess. This approach is deficit-driven, intent on identifying missing organisational and institutional forms rather than searching for what local capacity *does* exist and may be worked with. This type of ‘blank-slate’ thinking, critiqued by Cramer (2006) a decade ago, in many cases continues to inform the post-conflict strategies of external actors, as SLRC research in both **Afghanistan** (Jackson, 2016) and **South Sudan** (Maxwell and Santschi, 2014) highlights. Because capacity development tends to be narrowly

framed as formal state capacity, atypical forms of capacity that may not be immediately recognisable to external actors go undetected and overlooked.

A focus on the state tends to be at national and community levels, resulting in a ‘missing middle’

Just as choices are made about which dimensions of the governance landscape to engage with, so too can there be uneven treatment of different levels of government itself. SLRC research suggests that while we often find a relatively strong focus at both the national and community levels, there is less evidence of significant capacity support in-between – at the district or provincial level (see Box 6).

Box 6: SLRC research finds a ‘missing middle’ phenomenon in support for formal governance

Health provision in *Sierra Leone* (Denney *et al.*, 2014; 2015)

Capacity development in the health sector has tended to target national structures (supporting the Nutrition Directorate, facilitating the development of national policy and strategy, coordinating development partners), as well as local ones (providing peripheral health units and their staff with knowledge and equipment, establishing new community-based organisations with a health remit). Meanwhile, the district level – where implementation within health systems actually happens (see also Bertone and Witter, 2015; Samuels *et al.* 2014) – has been largely overlooked.

Engaging at the provincial level in *Afghanistan* (Jackson, 2015; 2016; Pain, 2016)

Provincial political settlements shape public goods provision at the community level, with the capacity of village-level elites to provide services far more dependent upon their relationships with the provincial centre than on the presence of new community-development councils. But where international actors have engaged at the district level, they have tended to ‘focus on districts in isolation from their broader contexts, neglecting to consider how district issues may fall within the local or regional axes of power’ (Jackson, 2015: 27). This reluctance has been underpinned by the presence of highly personalised tribal networks at the provincial level, which ultimately determine how power is exercised and services delivered. Rather than attempt to manage this dynamic, it has simply been pushed to one side.

Decisions about which levels to engage with are influenced by a range of factors. But as SLRC research in **South Sudan** highlights, they are usually political to some degree, with choices tending to reflect the priorities of local elites who have significant power in deciding where resources should be allocated, rather than where capacity development is most needed (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016a). In South Sudan, this has meant that capacity development has focused on Juba and state capitals, producing sizeable centre-periphery discrepancies (Maxwell *et al.*, 2014; 2016a; 2016c). Cases such as this, as well as **Afghanistan** (see example in Box 6), raise some big questions for state-building (and service delivery) policy, particularly in relation to external actors' ability to navigate, negotiate and manage local power brokers. This, arguably, partly explains why agencies continue to fall back on the narrow range of largely technocratic, apolitical interventions outlined previously.

4.4 Engaging with 'systemic capacity' remains an ongoing challenge

Key messages

- By focusing on individuals and organisations ('the units'), capacity development is typically approached as a modular exercise, assuming micro-capacities naturally aggregate up to build better systems. This results in systems themselves receiving far less attention.
- Addressing this requires acknowledging and engaging the two main types of systemic capacity: 'hardware' (formal regulations, mechanisms, procedures) and 'software' (power relations, informal institutions, social interactions).

We have seen how capacity support tends to be narrowly focused, with investments often targeting the familiar terrain of training and resource provision. This is usually to the detriment of factors like power and politics which, while somewhat more difficult to engage with, in many cases constitute the core of the problem.

Underlying this practice is a tendency to concentrate conceptually on discrete 'units' of wider systems. What do we mean by this? Some of the most widely used frameworks for understanding capacity development break down the 'targets' of intervention by scale, of which there are typically three (Baser and Morgan, 2008; Pritchett *et al.*, 2012):

- *Individual*. This might refer to a health worker, a bureaucrat in central government, or even a citizen whose actions one might wish to steer.
- *Organisation*. Such as a health clinic, government department, or a newly introduced council or committee at the local level.
- *System*. Understood as i) the collection of all previously mentioned individuals and organisations, as well as ii) the various channels and interactions that connect them – both 'hard' (such as procurement systems) and 'soft' (such as relationships governed by power dynamics and social norms).

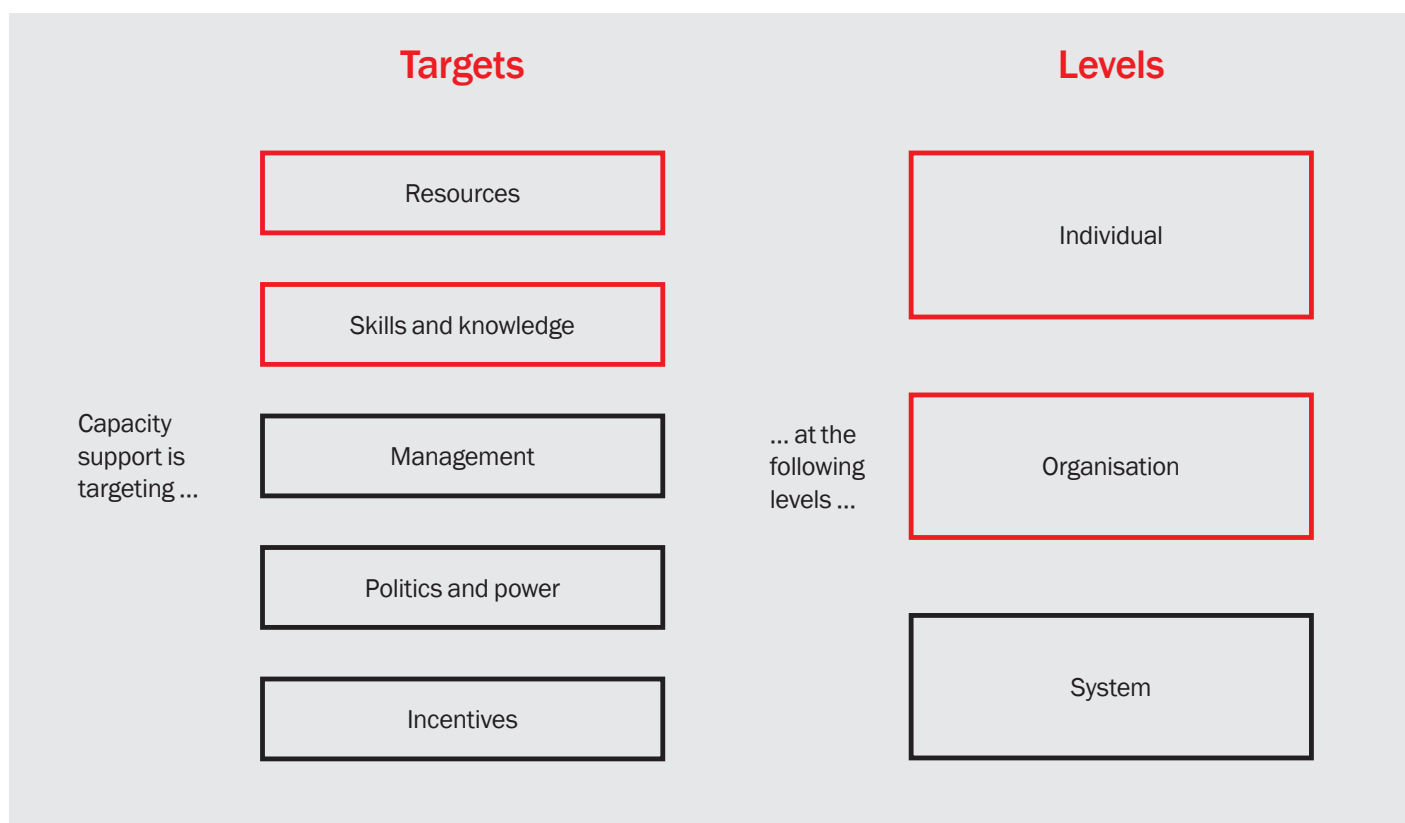
With its focus on individuals and organisations, capacity development is approached as a modular exercise

The above disaggregation is useful given the slippery nature of the concept of capacity, helping to try and visualise the different levels at which it is located. But while lessons contained within the literature suggest that all three levels need to be targeted in order to achieve sustainable change, SLRC's evidence suggests that capacity development typically operates at the first two levels. Figure 1 depicts these dominant 'focal points' of capacity development.

This *modus operandi* is driven by: i) the fact that 'units' offer tangible and relatively accessible entry points into the enterprise of capacity development (and indeed state-building more generally); ii) the quantifiable nature of interventions at these levels; and iii) the uncertainty of what it means to actually work systemically. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the humanitarian mindset of much programming acts as an additional driver, preventing a focus on longer-term 'whole-systems' strengthening. As found in SLRC's **DRC** research, for example, of the 150 or so international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) engaged in health-sector support in South Kivu in 2014, just four could be described as trying to build sector-wide capacity (Bwimana, forthcoming).

Underpinning this 'modular' approach is what we might think of as the assumption of automatic aggregation. This asserts that if one is able to develop capacity at the individual and organisational levels – by hiring more people, investing in better training, building more offices, better equipping them, and so on – then it is possible to develop a better capacitated system from below. At the other end of the spectrum there is

Figure 1: Focal points of capacity development



some belief in trickle-down effects; that strengthening capacities at the central-state level will cascade down to better service delivery at the local level. This thinking is rarely explicit but underlies much capacity development practice.

The problem is, there is very little evidence to suggest that this modular approach to capacity development holds true. As de Savigny and Adam (2009: 31) put it, just because you are focusing and working on the 'units', does not necessarily mean you are building a system:

The building blocks alone do not constitute a system, any more than a pile of bricks constitutes a functioning building. It is the multiple relationships and interactions among the blocks – how one affects and influences the others, and is in turn affected by them – that convert these blocks into a system.

Ultimately, while the modular approach is a useful disaggregation device for thinking about the levels at which capacities might exist, it is less effective at addressing the links and connections between units, which we know play a key role in how services get delivered.

Systemic capacity is made up of both 'hard' and 'soft' dimensions

We can think of the connections between the units of the system as the glue that holds things together, and can classify them in two ways: systemic hardware and systemic software.

Systemic hardware refers to a range of formal interventions – policies, reforms, procedures, mechanisms, regulations – that are designed to order and coordinate the activities of individuals and organisations. These 'sub-systems' constitute what some call the functional-rational dimension of systemic capacity (Petersen and Engberg-Pedersen, 2013).

So, for example, in the context of a health system, things like procurement mechanisms and supply chains are put in place to ensure the availability of medicine stocks in facilities across the country. There might also be attendance-monitoring systems and payroll reforms to make sure staff are both legitimate employees, are turning up and are getting paid. We would typically think of an absence of such mechanisms as a symptom of poor systemic capacity (to deliver services).

Where systemic capacity development does occur, it tends to take place at this hardware level. This is certainly evident in the experience of post-war health-system strengthening in **Sierra Leone**, with capacity support at the systems level focusing on these technical sub-systems. As Denney *et al.* (2015a: 12) note:

Development partners have focused on building up certain ‘sub-systems’ (or ‘building blocks’), particularly those of a technical nature closely linked to the [Free Health Care Initiative] ... This approach is consistent with conventional modes of thinking about capacity building in the context of health systems strengthening in low-income countries, where the focus is typically on ‘human resources for health’ and ‘human resource management’, developing ‘hard’ management expertise, and generally making health staff work more effectively and efficiently.

Systemic software is about the less visible aspects of systemic capacity. It refers to a series of factors bound up within social and political relations: social norms, shared beliefs and expectations, the politics of distribution, *de facto* authority. These are arguably some of the most pivotal determinants of capacity, partly because they underlie all else, embedded as they are in the historical context of particular places.

Although difficult to make out initially, these factors invisibly govern individual and group behaviour. They can both constrain and enable what people do, depending on their identity and relative power. To illustrate this, we return to the example of the district nutritionist in **Sierra Leone**, who feels unable to secure resources for programming or push malnutrition up the District Health Management Team’s agenda. The main reason for this is her lack of bargaining power relative to others, a problem reinforced by her gender. Thus, while many of the ‘right’ hard, formal structures are in place – a Health Management Team, a clear organisational framework

within that, regular planning and coordination meetings – she nonetheless finds her capacity to deliver nutrition programming constrained by the fact that she is a woman trying to negotiate a deeply gendered issue in a space dominated by men.

Because of the durability of norms and institutions such as these, the introduction of new forms of hard systemic capacity often does very little to displace or alter their dynamics. This accounts for why so much capacity development falls short of its so-called ‘emancipatory promise’ (Clarke and Oswald, 2010), and takes us back to the discussion about power and politics, where new organisational forms ultimately operate in line with pre-existing rules of the game.

Thus, capacity is not helpfully thought of as an objective quality that is either possessed or not, but is rather better understood as a *relational* concept. It is both the formal interconnections between different parts of the system (such as procurement processes) as well as its less tangible dimensions (related to position, relative power and socio-cultural dynamics) which really matter – it is their combination which ultimately determines both individual and organisational action.

The point for capacity development efforts is that there are parameters to current practice, and, beyond these, further aspects of capacity that should not be ignored. At the very least, it should be acknowledged that capacity development at the individual and organisational levels is shaped (and often constrained) by system-level dynamics. In other words, the system is not simply the ‘sum of all things’, but an arrangement of governing forces itself. Acknowledging this could help to make interventions more realistic. It would also help us take seriously the idea that improving service delivery outcomes is not just about technically focused trainings and awareness-raising; it should also involve finding ways to shift the ‘rules of the game’ that set the overarching framework for how services are delivered and used.

5 The political economy of aid drives flawed capacity development

Many of the findings presented in section 4 have been documented by a range of previous evaluations and reports (for a selection see Berg, 1993; Denney and Valters, 2015; Fukuda-Parr and Malik, 2002; Kuhl, 2009; Land *et al.*, 2015). Yet, as SLRC's research findings illustrate, these critiques have largely failed to percolate into actual practices of capacity development. This raises the question of why these limitations persist when they are already known.

In this section, we show that the ways in which we continue to think about and practice capacity development are shaped by the wider political economy of aid. They are not the result of unthinking people within aid organisations: the reams of literature from aid organisations that discuss the challenges and failures of capacity development attest to this. And yet somehow capacity development – and its various problematic characteristics set out in this paper – remains remarkably resilient. Why? We argue this is due to a number of features of the aid environment that are stacked against change.

5.1 Good ideas often do not filter into practice

A number of important advances in the thinking behind capacity support exist and yet do not appear to filter into practice. A good example is the five-year study by the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) on *Capacity, Change and Performance* (Baser and Morgan, 2008) which concluded with an empirically informed and practically useful framework for engaging in capacity development. This framework breaks down the broad concept of capacity into a series of five much more specific 'capabilities', each of which has been identified as a critical factor for performance (see Morgan, 2006). The '5Cs' model, as they refer to it, includes capabilities to:

- self-organise and act (operate as a cohesive whole in accordance with a specified plan or vision)
- generate development results (perform against and fulfil expected core functions)
- establish supportive relationships (create meaningful and useful links with other stakeholders, including non-government actors and society more generally)
- adapt and self-renew (deal with stress, shocks and crises as they develop)
- achieve coherence (develop shared plans and coordinate action in multi-actor settings).

Yet, this kind of thinking was rarely apparent in the capacity development practice studied by SLRC. The problem thus seems less with the quality of ideas that exist – there are useful tools and ideas such as the 5Cs model out there – but more with the disconnect between these ideas and practice. There are few incentives in place within the aid industry for practitioners to connect with the latest research, with time and access constituting two particular challenges. Equally, researchers in many cases do little to make their findings easily accessible to practitioners beyond donor capitals. Ultimately, improving the practice of capacity development will require the aid industry to facilitate an open channel of communication between these two communities.

5.2 Staff are hired for technical skills rather than contextual or conceptual knowledge

Aid agencies, like all bureaucracies, struggle to develop and retain the kind of granular knowledge that is necessary to effectively support capacity in specific times and contexts. They are often expected to combine sound technical knowledge with nuanced contextual understanding, as well as remain up to date on the latest conceptual thinking. While all of these forms of knowledge need not reside in every member of staff, this is still a big ask.

What is more, a number of features of the political economy of aid limit aid agencies' ability to cultivate and retain all these forms of knowledge, as well as to ensure that ideas translate into practice. Generally speaking, aid staff are hired for their technical skills, rather than their contextual knowledge. Overwhelmingly, jobs are advertised for health, education or water and sanitation advisors; not for country specialists or more conceptual thinkers. These technical staff are tasked with carrying out capacity development as one of multiple project components. Most often, their terms of reference specify tasks and goals with tangible outputs, which means that soft skills and in-depth country knowledge are not the primary focus of their role. Neither is their ability to train others, or to understand latest learning methodologies.

As a result, many staff who are required to 'develop capacity' or conduct trainings are not particularly well-equipped to do so. They lack the tools to teach these skills to others, especially across cultural, educational and language barriers. And because of a lack of familiarity with the context in which they are working, they may also struggle to make sense of the cultural

dynamics that are central to understanding existing capacities and 'what counts' as capacity in different contexts (Rhodes, 2014). Of course, some staff can and do develop these skills. But generally speaking, recruitment in the aid industry is not formulated to prioritise them.

Further to this, because capacity development is often one component of wider programming, it can easily slip down the list of priorities when other output-oriented tasks are pressing (Baser, n.d.). This is not because those working in development do not believe that capacity development is important. Rather, its time-consuming nature, combined with the fact that development practitioners are rarely trained in how to meaningfully develop capacities, means it is a daunting task that can easily become deprioritised.

5.3 Short timeframes to support long-term change processes

In many cases, capacity development programmes attempt to achieve what we know are long-term processes of change within short timeframes. Changing behaviour requires ongoing reinforcement of messages and new practices through a range of strategies; one need only think of the long-term and ongoing efforts to reduce smoking in many developed countries, for instance.

Similarly, we know that training adults in new information and skills takes time and repetition, with ongoing supervision and on-the-job mentoring required. Yet the funding modalities used in the aid industry rarely allow for this. These short timeframes are connected to donor countries' political cycles, making it difficult to secure the long-term financial commitments necessary to genuinely support change in levels of capacity.

5.4 A focus on the tangible and quantifiable

From its earliest articulation in President Truman's Point IV plan, aid outcomes have been biased towards what is measurable – from growth in gross domestic product to quantifiable results-based indicators. The belief in the infallibility of numbers continues to run deep in development, even though the shortcomings of such an approach to results are widely known (Jerven, 2013; Natsios, 2010).

Since the World Bank introduced the use of logframes under McNamara's presidency, these quantifiable

indicators have been used to measure highly linear processes of inputs, outputs and outcomes. Logframes are often dismissed as just a programming tool that can be used in better or worse ways, which – although undoubtedly true – overlooks the ways that logframes and their categories can shape the way that we think about and practise capacity development. In this sense, logframes shift from being a model for thinking about programmes to fundamentally shaping what programmes look like. Indeed, aid agency staff often recognise that the things they measure in their logframes are not transformational, but rather meet bureaucratic requirements. Staff are thus incentivised to count workshops, participants trained or supplies provided.

One could argue that these are merely the things one has to do to tick the boxes and create space for more innovative ways of working. But the point is that the aid industry incentivises a continued reliance on approaches that we know are not particularly transformational. It is a problem that tools so fundamental to programming are an obstacle to, rather than an enabler of, transformational practice.

Efforts have been made to overcome the constraints of these management tools – for instance, focussing on theories of change and, more recently, flexible and adaptive programming approaches that try to move away from the rigidity of pre-planned projects (Wild *et al.*, 2015). But theories of change are often treated as an add-on to logframes, and are themselves often difficult to change. Moreover, adaptive development, while a welcome shift in approaches to programming, remains an outlier, with the bulk of aid programming remaining conventional.

5.5 The push for results and a diminishing appetite for risk

The aid industry has come under increased pressure to deliver quantifiable outcomes with the emergence of the ‘results agenda’. As the political climate has, in many parts of the world, become increasingly antagonistic towards aid spending – in part due to economic downturns in donor countries – demands for delivering impact have grown. This has led, for instance, to calls for performance-based financing and payment by results, so that donors can hold implementers to account.

In some cases, such as in Australia, these dynamics have led to significant reductions in the aid budget. In

others, such as the UK, they have led to a reduction in the administrative costs that support aid delivery and a greater reliance on outsourced programmes through increasingly high-value contracts. Such an environment further encourages the use of simple results metrics that respond to donor demands and political pressures, rather than to what might be most transformative in particular partner countries.

Given the greater scrutiny of aid spending that is occurring in donor countries, donors’ tolerance for risk has also declined. This can be seen, for example, in the move away from budget support in many countries, where donors direct funding through the budget of partner countries to strengthen their financial systems. A lower appetite for risk also means relying on more conventional programming approaches, which do little to push forward changes in ways of working.

5.6 Accountability for aid is to donor publics, not beneficiaries

All of these features raise a further concern about aid’s supply-driven nature, as lines of accountability typically flow more directly to donor-country tax payers than to aid beneficiaries. This can lead to training programmes being based on donor-led assessments of ‘gaps’ and consideration of what donors have available to fill them, leading to trainings that focus on donor, not partner country, priorities. As Land *et al.* (2015: 5) note:

Priorities determined at the national level were often ignored or overruled by decisions taken in various donor capitals, each promoting their own projects with their own accounting and reporting requirements. As a result, ownership and development efforts were fragmented, undermining the development of strong local institutions.

The supply-driven nature of capacity development can also be more subtle or unintentional. We often think of our own delivery mechanisms and ways of doing things as neutral and natural. It makes sense to export such models to places where we see things not working as well. But in doing so, we fail to recognise how our own approaches are embedded in particular histories and contexts. This is most apparent in fragile and conflict-affected contexts where multiple donors work in the same sectors with the same overarching goals, yet are often weakly coordinated and adopt surprisingly different ways of doing things.

For instance, in Timor-Leste, a range of donors have been involved in supporting community policing programmes, but these have all differed depending on how such programming is undertaken in the respective donor countries. As a result, the variety of approaches brought in by the Portuguese, Brazilian, Australian and New Zealand agencies have varied, and have resulted in a confusing range of practices and pressures for the Timor-Leste police (Wassel, 2014). This highlights how, whilst ways of doing things in donor countries might seem neutral, value-free and applicable elsewhere, this is often not the case. In practice, there is rarely a single approach that works at all times and in all places.

This supply-driven approach can end up promoting a very normative vision of what states or service delivery arrangements ought to look like – a vision developed primarily by external actors. Furthermore, there is a real danger that this is only likely to intensify over time, with increasing pressure in many donor countries to draw more extensively on ‘cross-government’ personnel as part of a ‘whole-of-government’ approach, whereby people are deployed not just from aid agencies but justice, home office, defence and other departments. Such an approach reinforces the idea that all will be well if only recipient countries are able to benefit from the expertise of donor country x.

A legitimate question that arises, therefore, is: what about local ownership? This is intended to ensure that the beneficiaries of aid are themselves in charge of the developmental processes unfolding in their countries, and to ensure that interventions meet their needs. Since the Paris Declaration, aid spending is, at least in theory, meant to have become more locally owned and led. Yet aid effectiveness principles, like local ownership, have been criticised for being ‘tick-box’ in nature (Wild *et al.*, 2015). Rather than constituting a genuine conversation about locally understood needs and priorities, ownership is reduced to partner governments signing up to development plans in which they have been consulted to varying degrees. This partly stems from donor concerns about risk, and a sense that partner governments are not able or willing to act in the interests of their populations. But it also stems from the supply-driven nature of much aid, as well as a prioritisation of donor accountability to political leaders and publics at home, rather than accountability to those whom aid is intended to support.

5.7 Projectising social change

All of these features of the political economy of aid speak to a much bigger point: the ways in which the development industry – through capacity development – has ‘projectised’ what are essentially processes of social change. Capacity development nobly aims to end the need for aid by strengthening local skills, knowledge and capabilities to achieve a wide range of governance and service delivery functions without external assistance. And yet, the political economy of the aid industry has turned this endeavour into an elaborate social engineering process. Through this, the political nature of social change is stripped out and replaced with technocratic efforts to design, input, monitor, measure and deliver. With the best of intentions, this flies in the face of what we know about how social and political change happens.

Moreover, by making social change a technocratic endeavour, it is made to appear value-neutral and apolitical. As Kenny and Clarke (2010: 7) note, tasks are performed as technical inputs of a wider programme:

[C]apacity building programmes are based on a lineal logic directed at predetermined objectives and goals. Capacity building is also technocratic in so far as its activities become technical tasks or procedures and political decisions are dressed up as technical decisions.

As we have tried to capture throughout this paper (and particularly in this section), the political economy of aid shapes the way that capacity development is conceived of and practised. This means that, as a concept and a practice, capacity development is informed by particular ideas and choices about: what counts as capacity; how this can sensibly be measured; what functions capacity should enable people, organisations or systems to perform; the role of government alongside (and in relation to) other actors; and, perhaps most fundamentally, how change happens. The political nature of these ideas and choices is then obscured by the fact they get built into projects and subsequently broken down into technocratic components. Without confronting the elements of the aid industry’s political economy that sustain poor capacity development, it is difficult to see how social and political change can be better supported.

6 Conclusion: from building capacity to supporting social and political change



By now, the future of capacity development might seem rather bleak. The analysis presented in this report highlights some fundamental flaws in the dominant models of capacity development, which have not only been known for some time, but are actively sustained by the political economy of the aid industry. This concluding section sets out recommendations for how we might overcome the impasse and move capacity development on to focus much more centrally on how best to support what are ultimately processes of social and political change.

State capacity – or more specifically, the question of how to support its development in ways that are contextually relevant and effective – remains one of the most pressing issues facing the aid community. It is also safe to assume that capacity development will likely continue to receive a sizeable share of aid budgets in the future, not just in places affected by fragility and conflict, but further afield too. Familiarity is a hard thing to shake off. So, if we accept that capacity development will maintain its centrality in mainstream development and state-building policy in the coming years, the question then becomes: in what way should it evolve, and what can be done to support this process?

Here, we take our cue from the ‘thinking and working politically’ (TWP) and related agendas⁹, which attempt to integrate an understanding of politics into development practice, building on rich scholarship that demonstrates how development practice itself is always political (Booth and Cammack, 2013; Carothers and de Gramont, 2013; Ferguson, 1990; Leftwich, 2000; Mosse, 2004; Unsworth 2010). Such approaches can be usefully brought to bear on capacity development efforts, making them more attuned to their fundamentally political nature, more aware of and relevant to context, and thus more effective at delivering for people.

For too long capacity development has been cloaked in value-neutrality, hiding the fact that both its focus on the formal state, as well as the way in which it has

⁹ The TWP agenda is one element of a wider shift towards practical engagement with the politics of development (see <https://twpcommunity.org>). Related concepts and movements include: ‘doing development differently’ (DDD), which calls for improving the impact of development programmes by focusing on locally defined problems, working with local actors and embedding learning and iteration in programming (see DDD Manifesto at www.doingdevelopmentdifferently.com); problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA), similarly focused on locally identified problems and using iteration and adaptation to experiment to find solutions to development problems (Andrews, 2013). Others also use the phrase ‘adaptive development’, emphasising the learning component (Wild *et al.*, 2015).

sought to strengthen it, are themselves deeply political prerogatives. First, the state's pre-eminence and its role as a benevolent, universal good is far from uncontested, particularly in contexts where hybrid authority structures vie for power (whether this be warlords in Afghanistan, elites in South Sudan, or customary leaders in Sierra Leone). The extent to which the formal state is or should be the primary authority or service provider remains an open question in many contexts, despite the aid community's tendency to embrace it as the natural order of things. This is likely to become an increasingly pertinent question as the focus of aid shifts to middle-income countries. In those cases where authoritarian governments are present, capacity development tools concerned with building state capacity in a traditional sense may be less relevant.

Second, even if the centrality of the state is accepted, the ways in which it is engaged remain similarly political – albeit in often unacknowledged ways. To date, the dominant focus of aid organisations has been on improving bureaucratic competence, on which weak or strong state capacity is seen to hinge (vom Hau, 2012). This treats state capacity as a profoundly apolitical outcome, delinking processes of state-building from the concrete contexts in which they are actually occurring. It also understands an effective state as one that has legal-rational bureaucratic procedures in place, rather than one forged out of its relationship with its citizens.

Thus, we argue that capacity development needs to be re-politicised in order for quality services to be delivered to citizens, acknowledging and reflecting on the political implications of its goals. We say 're'-politicised, because it has of course always been fundamentally political, even if this has not been explicit. By recognising that what have frequently been diagnosed as capacity deficits are in fact the result of particular constellations of power and incentives, it is clear that what we are really interested in is social and institutional change. The ways in which we currently think about and practise capacity development, then, seem partial, outdated and patronising, and 're-politicisation' probably requires doing away with some of the existing capacity development terminology.

We conclude by setting out five recommendations for what a re-politicisation of capacity development might look like. Rooted in the lessons and constraints documented in previous pages, our aim is to suggest how the concept – and practice – of capacity development might be made more operationally 'fit for purpose'.

1 Be prepared to change ways of thinking and working in order to 'do' capacity development better

It is important to keep sight of the need to change ways of thinking and working in the aid industry over the long term. This can seem an overwhelming task for single organisations or individuals, but something that senior managers and political masters in aid organisations should take seriously in order for capacity development, and aid more broadly, to improve.

Donors must avoid incentivising implementers to default to tangible, technical forms of assistance that, while at times important, tend to be overused. Donor agencies need to be able to make the case better to their political leaders as to why less quantifiable results from aid are still important. While some donor staff claim to have already indicated space for this, more needs to be done to signal to implementers that they will not be penalised for having less easily enumerable results. By the same token, implementers must invest time in understanding the problems that lie behind capacity gaps, so that programmes can be developed that address the real blockages, and not the symptoms.

Implementers must be incentivised to include intangible and soft skills. Donors and NGOs must value strong local knowledge, not merely as an add-on to technical knowledge. This means more local staff. It means not rotating staff so quickly that knowledge evaporates as soon as it is learnt. And it means viewing time invested in building relationships and deepening political knowledge as worthwhile, even though there may be no immediate output. Timeframes for supporting social and institutional change processes need to be longer, with political commitments to multiple phases of programming. Accountability needs to shift to beneficiaries, rather than to domestic tax payers alone, in order for aid to serve the interests of those it is meant to help.

While these are big industry-wide changes, there are also ways that staff can begin to make important changes at the individual level. In particular, there is a **need to reflect much more critically on the dominant thinking that filters throughout aid practice.** From defaulting to an assumption that knowledge is the missing ingredient and jumping to trainings or technical assistance to provide it; to treating improvements in public financial management systems as an apolitical endeavour that simply makes a bureaucracy function more efficiently; to an implicit belief that (either) more or less state is naturally better for all times and places. Particularly in fragile and conflict-

affected contexts, the international community should be supporting local populations to figure out what power structures can best serve them for a range of public goods and services. There is no natural answer to such pressing questions, and the sooner the aid community can displace its sense of bringing simple solutions and invest in learning alongside local partners, the sooner we might achieve more effective development outcomes.

2 Accept that capacity development is about politics, and think and work politically to negotiate this

As this report has argued, what are usually treated as capacity gaps or deficits are often the result of constellations of political interests and incentives that get in the way of improved service delivery. Whether it be that women trained in infant and young-child feeding practices are unable to translate their knowledge into practice because of limited power in their household, or that Village Development Councils in Afghanistan are captured by pre-existing power dynamics, capacity development is ultimately about politics.

There is some concern that if we accept poor service delivery as a problem of politics rather than capacity, then donors will see little role for themselves in solving these problems, potentially leading to aid cuts or withdrawal. While this represents a genuine concern that must be confronted, **continuing to mask the real, 'wicked' problem of politics with a simpler one of capacity is ultimately unhelpful.** Recognising the fundamental role of politics in impeding or enabling service delivery should open up a wider range of tools and levers that aid organisations and their partners can draw on to affect change. This goes beyond training programmes, technical assistance or provision of resources, and has best been described as needing to 'think and work politically'.

While it can be difficult to see how political change is possible in the face of countervailing interests and incentives, it is important to remember that change happens all the time. Women and ethnic minorities get the vote, gay marriage becomes legal, slavery ends – and so on. The point is, **development interventions need to get better at being part of these processes of political change,** rather than treating 'more capacity' as the straightforward answer.

In practice, this means **investing in understanding the political constraints surrounding a problem,** not merely by undertaking **macro-level political economy analysis** at the national level – as is so often the case – but

by building a **nuanced understanding of the micro-level politics.** This might be at the level of a particular bureaucracy (say, an education ministry), a problem (for instance, high levels of teenage pregnancy), or a community facing particular service delivery challenges. This will be an ongoing process throughout the lifespan of programming. This knowledge must then also filter through so that programmes *act or work* politically. That might entail supporting coalitions for change, brokering relationships between key actors, finding alignments in interests between key influencers and the improvements sought, etc. – and will involve behind-the-scenes work that donors will not always be able to take credit for publicly (Booth, 2013).

3 Start from an understanding of how people use services in practice, and recognise existing capacities

The transplanted of new structures and organisations onto existing institutional landscapes is rooted in particular normative ideas about how governance and service delivery ought to function. There is often an assumption that, where certain kinds of formal structures are missing, capacity is non-existent and that what needs to follow is a 'gap-filling' exercise. The problem with this approach is that it tends to overlook alternative capacities, as well as the way in which citizens access services on a day-to-day basis. Existing social and political orders are often remarkably resilient, and cannot simply be overturned by new ideas or programmes. The aid community still has some way to go in acknowledging and learning from existing capacities, recognising that there is never 'nothing there'. **There are always systems and practices that 'work' – and understanding their logic, who they benefit, and who they exclude, is critical.** By doing so, we can begin to move beyond the one-way direction of travel implicit in much capacity development, towards a recognition of mutual learning and exchange. This is key to making capacity development more relevant to people's experiences.

Knowing what capacity exists – including beyond what is offered by the formal state – requires a solid understanding of local systems. This involves **spending time mapping out who the key actors are, what the relationships between them look like, and how the incentives and interests facing them result in particular behaviour.** This might involve asking, for example: who are the providers? How do they work together (or not)? Which ones do citizens actually use? And what accounts for their preferences? Such questions will likely reveal a trove of information about customary behaviour, social pressures

and expectations, relationships with authorities (of various kinds), material poverty, and so on.

In line with the latest research on statehood that sees public authority as comprising much more than formal state structures, analysis must remain open to the **potential relevance of alternative actors, which often form part of the state in their own right**. Governance arrangements do not always work in the ways that we might ideally envision, but still work nonetheless (albeit often in the interests of some more than others). Failing to recognise these ‘actually existing’ dynamics both within and beyond the formal state shuts down possibilities for change, and makes capacity development efforts less relevant to people’s lives.

Systems and their governance evolve over time. Such mapping exercises should therefore be done on an iterative basis. Keeping on top of this by **investing in better local knowledge and expertise – and, importantly, ensuring that this gets taken up by programme staff on the ground – will result in more contextually relevant capacity development**. Mapping exercises also require sufficient focus at the granular level to account for the ways in which governance and service delivery arrangements can vary even within single provinces and districts. This means the common approach of implementing standardised interventions within a country is problematic. Subnational variation tends to not get picked up by macro-level or even sectoral-level analyses; thus, **tailoring needs to take place on a much more localised basis**.

4 Think about capacity not just as tangible building blocks, but as the glue that holds them together

Capacity development tends to focus on the individual and organisational levels, overlooking what is known as the systemic level. This includes the connections between the ‘units’ of the system, as well as the wider politics, power and incentives that shape a service delivery system. This tendency implicitly assumes that systemic capacity can be built from below – that capacity in the lower levels automatically aggregates up. Yet, in practice, this assumption does not often hold. As a first step, there needs to be a ‘de-unitisation’ of the way we treat capacity. To build capacity at the systemic level, **policy-makers and programmers need to look more at the channels, regulations and interactions that connect the various units within a system** (which can be defined in either a very local or very macro sense). In other words, to work systemically we must think less in terms of the building

blocks *per se*, and more in terms of the glue that holds them all together.

As this paper shows, systemic capacity comprises both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ dimensions. The former refers to formal policies and procedures that regulate and structure action within the system (procurement mechanisms, data-reporting systems, laws governing minimum standards of delivery, human-resourcing policies), while the latter refers to the way in which action is governed by a series of informal forces, including politics, power dynamics and social norms. It is harder to alter the latter of these, but given their determining influence on service delivery, **it is essential that capacity development programmes think through how such systemic ‘software’ might shape (or derail) potential reforms**.

Of course, there is no easy answer as to how one works on these soft systemic capacities, which perhaps goes some way to explain why this is often not done in practice. What can be helpful is to move away from the strictures of capacity development thinking, focusing not on what a given programme can do, but on what would need to change for services to be more effectively delivered. **Once an understanding of the influence of politics, power and social norms is built, programmes can turn to the question of what levers might exist for change**. This may include some ‘quick wins’, centred on finding alignments in interests between powerful influencers (maybe a government minister, or a local community leader) and improved services. But it is also likely to include longer-term change processes to shift social norms, be this gendered inequalities, patronage or cultural beliefs. These can be difficult for aid programmes to support because they are unlikely to deliver transformational results in the lifetime of one project. But they are essential in achieving improved service delivery, and thus must be balanced against more short-term wins. While no one project is likely to be able to claim complete success, if these soft dimensions are never worked on then they will continue to prevent transformational change.

5 Build the capacity of the aid industry to develop capacity

Finally, where capacity development activities are found to be useful – either in helping to overcome poor service delivery or to build space for other kinds of interventions – it is crucial (and relatively straightforward) to ensure that those providing capacity development know how to do it. Many in the aid industry are guilty of running

trainings, providing technical assistance, mentoring and so on, without knowing how to impart learning (aside from what they have learnt on the job). If organisations are in the business of capacity development, then they must ensure that the individuals they deploy to ‘develop capacity’ understand appropriate teaching methodologies suited to those they are supporting. This includes considerations of literacy, culture and language, teaching tools, the learning environment, reinforcement of messages, and recourse to follow-up support. While this might not address the wider problem of diagnosing whether capacity is in fact the binding constraint, it would nonetheless go some way towards improving the quality of capacity development that gets provided.

This report sees a role for capacity development in future. But it is a role that is much more honest and explicit about its fundamentally political nature. Such a repositioning would enable it to more effectively grapple with the local political dynamics that so frequently prevent capacity development from achieving its intended goals, rather than brushing them under the

carpet. SLRC research finds that capacity development efforts need to:

- avoid simplistic, short-term and easily quantifiable forms of assistance,
- recognise the centrality of politics,
- start with an understanding of how people actually access services, and
- be more systems-focused.

Attempts to achieve this will inevitably rub up against features of the political economy of the aid industry. But this political economy is of our own making. While it can seem monolithic, it can be changed – but only when the industry consciously decides to make this happen. Given capacity development’s centrality to aid endeavours and the importance of investments that deliver change, we cannot afford to continue bemoaning these constraints without doing something to change them.

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