

CAPACITY BUILDING AND THE OWNERSHIP DILEMMA

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The question of ‘local ownership’ has become increasingly prominent in international capacity building and security sector reform (SSR) efforts in recent years. Local ownership in this sense refers to the degree of participation in such activities by the various local stakeholders for whose benefit they are meant to be taking place (Donais 2012). Local ownership is commonly agreed to be necessary to the success of the capacity building endeavour, both to ensure that reform takes place in a manner that is relevant and sensitive to local circumstances, and also to maximize the chance it will be sustained and continued once donor activities have come to end (Nathan 2007, 2-4).

Almost all donors recognise the importance of local ownership in capacity building projects, at least rhetorically. Thus, for example, the EU’s strategic framework for supporting security sector reform emphasises ‘the participation of all stakeholders’ and the importance of ‘inclusive consultation processes’ as baseline principles for its SSR initiatives. The same document notes that to be ‘applicable and effective’, programmes should be developed on the basis of national owned processes’, and that ‘[r]eform efforts will be effective and sustainable only if they are rooted in a country’s institutions... owned by national security and justice actors, and considered legitimate by society as a whole’ (European Commission 2016, 5, 7). Similarly, the UK’s Building Stability Overseas Strategy notes the importance of ‘effective local politics and strong mechanisms which weave people into the fabric of decision-making (HM Govt. 2014, 12). The importance of local ownership is also recognized in the maritime sector, with, for example, the US Government’s framework for Maritime Security Sector Reform stressing the importance of local context in developing effective and relevant programmes (US Govt. 2010, 13).

In all cases, the requirement for local ownership is articulated around four justifications. The first of these is *effectiveness*: international capacity building activities need the engagement and commitment of local partners if they are to succeed. The second is *efficiency*: capacity building takes place on the assumption that locals will increasingly take over the responsibility for the administration of programmes, allowing donors to decrease their own commitments and gradually withdraw. The third is *sustainability*: such initiatives need local ownership if they are to continue once specific donor activities come to an end. The fourth and final justification is *legitimacy*. Legitimacy underpins effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. It implies that donor activities should be seen as appropriate and desirable by the actors, organisations and communities at whom they are targeted, generally in the context of democratic principles and politics.

DILEMMAS OF OWNERSHIP IN CAPACITY BUILDING

While the importance of local ownership to the success of capacity building is broadly recognized, including in the maritime sector, translating this recognition into practice is often easier said than done. In particular, there are six key dilemmas of ownership that all such initiatives face. These vary in

seriousness according to circumstance, but are generally present to one degree or another in all international capacity building projects.

1. *Extent*: Perhaps the most basic dilemma of local ownership is the question of its meaning and extent. At its crudest, it can imply persuading, incentivising, or pressurising local stakeholders to come round to the donor's way of thinking and support their programmes on these terms. The degree to which ownership can be considered meaningfully local under such circumstances is questionable. In practice it may lead to superficial, rhetorical or short lived engagement by the locals concerned. More substantive practices of ownership generally require the involvement of local actors in the authorship and evaluation of programmes, with the implication that their role will increase over time as their own capacities develop.

2. *Context*: A second dilemma relates to context. Establishing ownership of a project may be relatively straightforward in a state where institutions are settled, divisions of responsibility and chains of command clear, and where there is broad consensus on the political direction of travel and the role of capacity building within this. However, such activities often take place in more fragmented post-conflict or transitional environments, in which political authority is contested and where institutions are unstable or ill formed. Under these circumstances, establishing local ownership can be considerably more challenging.

3. *Chickens before eggs?* These challenges may be pronounced in contexts where even basic local capacities are absent. This may be due to profound institutional dysfunction or severe local resource constraint, or because the problem space concerned is particularly technical and specialized in nature. In these cases, establishing local ownership of programmes can be more challenging, with donors facing a 'chicken and egg' dilemma: they desire local engagement in capacity building for the reasons discussed above, but capacity building itself is necessary before that engagement can meaningfully occur. Capacity building in these cases will likely require investment in the development of basic skills and human resources, prior to, or in parallel with, other activities.

4. *Who are the locals?* Where political authority is fragmented or contested, identifying whose ownership counts, and whose ownership should count, can be difficult. Donors may face basic questions of where political authority lies for particular policy sectors. They may also risk accusations of bias by appearing to favour one organization or faction over another, or find themselves frozen out when power shifts occur. There is also the question of how far local ownership should reach. Should it incorporate only local elites and formal institutions? Or should it strive to engage a wider set of stakeholders, from across the political community? The answers to such questions will be dependent on the nature of the problem space to be addressed – coastguard training will likely engage a narrower range of stakeholders than judicial reform for example – but have important implications for the wider legitimacy of such activities in practice.

5. *Knowledge, relationships, trust and timescales*: Addressing the issues of local context and ownership above requires knowledge of local circumstances. In most cases, this takes time to acquire, and will involve ongoing processes of relationship and trust-building between donors and local stakeholders. It can also be skewed by a dependence on those gatekeepers and elite groups – often English-language speakers – with whom it is easiest to do business, but who may not be the most significant or representative cadres in any given problem space. Cultivating meaningful local ownership of programmes thus requires sustained engagement on the part of donors rather than one-off interventions, and a sustained effort to understand local stakeholders on their own terms.

6. *Normativity, priority and accountability*: Capacity building is an inherently political activity as much as it is a technical one. It is about how organizations and institutions *should* be structured and how they *should* operate in practice. These political normativities relate to issues of good governance and of organizational effectiveness and efficiency (Edmunds 2014, 6-7). However, these elements of the capacity building project can be in tension with local practices, preferences and priorities in ways that undermine principles of local ownership. They can also create friction for donors themselves, who may be held accountable by their domestic constituencies if such projects end up producing politically undesirable outcomes. Such normativities and tensions need to be recognized if they are to be managed effectively. Donors also need to be flexible in the manner in which they work with local circumstances to achieve their normative goals. Notions of best practice in capacity building can be important, but are best considered in terms of general principles rather than as a formulaic guide to action.

LOCAL OWNERSHIP IN THE SPIP METHODOLOGY

Principles of local ownership are important in the Safe Seas SPIP methodology (Safe Seas 2017, 4-5). The layered nature of the SPIP approach – focusing on Spaces, Problems, Institutions and Projects - allows consideration of ownership dilemmas to be factored in at all levels the capacity building process. In particular, it points to the importance of drawing local stakeholders into the capacity building activities prior to the actual process of project implementation. Specifically:

1) *Spaces*: Layer 1 of the SPIP methodology starts out from an overview of the regulatory and physical spaces in which a state or region requires capacities, and the stakeholders engaged in them. In identifying spaces, particular attention should be paid to mapping the range of local actors responsible for, implicated in, or affected by the problem space concerned. This may include formal actors of the state such as coastguard agencies. However, it might also include other groups too, such as fishing concerns and littoral communities. Mapping spaces in this way allows for a full range of local stakeholders to be considered and, if appropriate, worked into the capacity building process at an early stage.

2) *Problems*: Layer 2 of the SPIP methodology concerns the mapping of the problems or challenges a country or region may face in a particular space. Expert knowledge and assessment on the part of donors will have an important role to play at this point, particularly in environments where local expertise is under-developed. However, efforts should also be made to engage the local stakeholders identified at Layer 1 in the assessment process. What problems do they face? How do they prioritise them? Are there tensions or contradictions between different local stakeholders, or between locals and donors, on what the most important problems are? Engaging local actors at this point can identify tension points and help access local knowledge at the design stage of any capacity building project, as well as illuminating key capacity gaps. It also encourages local ‘buy in’ to the process from the beginning and increases the likelihood it will be seen as legitimate as it develops and matures.

3. *Institutions*: Layer 3 of the SPIP methodology identifies the legal, regulatory and institutional structures through which a particular problem space is governed. Again, engaging local stakeholders at this point is crucial, particularly in complex or fragmented political environments in which lines of authority are unclear, or where the most important practices tend to be informal rather than formal in nature. Local stakeholders will have the clearest view of how things actually operate in practice in their own countries or sectors of responsibility, and have knowledge of both formal and informal practices

of governance. They will also be able to identify blind spots or oversights in external assessments, and provide a sense of the specific opportunities and challenges a particular problem space presents at a local level.

4) *Projects*: Layer 4 of the SPIP methodology involves the development of prospective projects in order to address identified capacity gaps. Naturally, this should take place on the basis of the information gleaned from stages 1-3 of the process, and so incorporate local knowledge, expertise and circumstances. These stages may have identified basic absences of capacity in relation to the ability of local actors to engage with SPIP assessment process, which will in itself help inform the type of projects that may be necessary. Project selection, approval and implementation should then take place in consultation with key local actors and political authorities, again to ensure the maximum chance of buy in an enhance the likelihood of such activities being supported and seen as legitimate. Finally, local stakeholders should be brought into processes of project review and evaluation. Doing so will offer the opportunity to initiate the SPIP cycle again, and help capture the changing needs of the capacity building process as it develops.

CONCLUSION

If capacity building is to succeed, and to endure over the long term in the absence of external support, mentoring and tutelage, then the question of local ownership needs to be taken seriously. Local actors need to be identified and brought into the process early on. It is not enough simply to attempt to engage them at the project implementation stage. We recognize that doing so involves navigating a series of complex difficulties and dilemmas, some of which relate to the challenges presented by specific local environments, and some of which relate to the constraints faced by donors themselves. Even so, it is crucial that such efforts are made if the capacity building agenda is to be taken seriously. The SPIP methodology provides guidance and direction to capacity builders as to the various stages and levels at which local stakeholders should be engaged. It suggests above all that local ownership needs to be factored in at all stages of the capacity building process, from development, to planning, implementation and review. Doing so will increase the chances that such initiatives will become self-sustaining and be seen as legitimate by the very actors they are meant to benefit.

LITERATURE

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