

building news

Welcome to Capacity Building News No. 9. In this issue, Indrani Sigamany reflects on the nature of North-South NGO partnerships for advocacy, drawing on a recent INTRAC workshop. INTRAC's Director of Training and Capacity Building, Brenda Lipson, reports on the recent Conference of the International Forum for Capacity Building.

Supporting Southern Advocacy

In April of this year, INTRAC ran a workshop in London on 'Supporting Southern Advocacy' for staff from a number of European NGOs. The workshop focused on the promotion of successful advocacy in partnerships between Northern and Southern NGOs. The participatory methodology of the workshop generated considerable discussion, and this article highlights some of the key questions that were raised.

What Drives Advocacy in Northern NGOs?

The questions of why NGOs are involved in advocacy and what factors drive it within organisations are critical. Advocacy is perceived by Northern NGOs as a means of tackling the root causes of inequality. Furthermore, a general growth in political awareness and a move towards adopting a rights-based approach or an empowerment approach are seen to be forces driving advocacy within Northern NGOs. The recent focus on the role of Civil Society, particularly in the context of transition, has also pointed organisations in the direction of advocacy. A more cynical view would suggest that advocacy is also driven by donor self-perpetuation and fashion.

The Capacities Needed within Northern NGOs to Support Southern Advocacy

In order to strengthen advocacy capacities within Northern NGOs, a clear understanding and commitment to the particular organisation's vision, mission and advocacy strategy is vital. Furthermore, the organisation's central advocacy strategy should be integrated into country and regional or thematic programmes. At the same time, it is important for advocacy strategies to be partner-led and to develop mechanisms for learning from the South. This illustrates the critical balance that Northern NGOs need to maintain in integrating partner-led priorities from the South into centrally-defined advocacy strategies.

It is important for an organisation to identify both strengths and gaps in its own capacity at both head office and field levels. Research and access to specialist skills and knowledge are important to an organisation's capacity for advocacy, as are communication and facilitation skills. Some NGOs favour having one person to 'drive' each advocacy issue and retain coherence, whilst others believe that advocacy should be anchored with programme officers.

Ideal versus Actual Relationships between Northern and Southern NGOs

Ideal relationships would be characterised by **equality**, with both partners feeling powerful, and with an element of **trust** in decision-making. Partners would identify what they wanted, and strategies would be culturally sensitive. Northern NGOs would listen to and take on board what Southern partners had to say, without claiming to speak for them. **Collective learning** would take place, and there would be mutual accountability and agenda setting. There would be control of and access to resources on both sides. Partners would move away from discrete, project-based interventions to **longer-term strategies**, with a commitment to relationships and capacity building within which funding would be secure and mistakes would not be fatal to relationships.

Of course this ideal differs from the reality. In fact the North often imposes its latest understanding of development and processes on the South, in ways that may not be culturally appropriate or indeed right. Furthermore, relationships are vulnerable to changes in Northern NGO ideology and strategy, with gaps in understanding of issues and methodology on both sides.

Funding from the North brings power and influence, and can therefore create pressure and reinforce dependence. This is exacerbated by a one-sided requirement for accountability from the Southern NGO, to some extent reinforcing colonial relationships for some partners. Relationships are focussed on results, and can be inflexible in areas

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such as finance. Northern NGOs can be too demanding in aspects such as the need for information, and Southern partners may feel used. Moreover, the agenda of Northern partners is not always transparent, and can be non-consultative. However, some positive developments are shared such as the North encouraging democratic and **non-hierarchical** structures in Southern NGOs.

The workshop on 'Supporting Southern Advocacy' was facilitated by Indrani Sigamany of INTRAC and consultant Ian Chandler. By the end of the workshop, the participants had spontaneously established an advocacy 'network'. They decided to share new advocacy developments and experiences, using this network as a platform for learning from each other. Meanwhile INTRAC will continue to explore the issues raised through its ongoing research into North-South partnerships.

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Further information about INTRAC's research 'Promoting Effective North-South NGO Partnerships' can be viewed on our website: <http://www.intrac.org/r-ngo.htm>

Conference Report: International Forum on Capacity Building

In May of this year people from a multitude of diverse organisations gathered together in Washington D.C. to review the experiences of the first three years of the International Forum on Capacity Building (IFCB). This ambitious multi-stakeholder initiative was established in order to facilitate debate and innovation on conceptual approaches, policies and practice for capacity building interventions. The Conference aimed to share lessons learnt, examine the implications of donor policies and plan for the future, all with a strong emphasis on South-South collaboration.

Interesting case studies were presented in relation to the multi-stakeholder dialogues taking place in some countries as well as the experiences of working in alliances and networks. There was also rich debate in the small group sessions amongst organisations with quite different viewpoints on themes such as local self-governance, policy research and advocacy, organisational sustainability and leadership development. Most striking was the resonance across the continents of the question 'capacity-building for what?' The response of most of those present was to emphasise capacity building for a stronger 'voice' over and above more donor-oriented responses.

The Forum faces a number of challenges ahead:

- It is evident that the initiative is making good progress at individual country level, but it is unclear what the specific role of work at the regional and global levels should be. A possible way forward may be through learning and dissemination on the identified key themes, supported by the regional focal points.
- The initiative needs to deepen the 'technical' debate on capacity building. Whilst the 'catch-all' terminology used initially allows many participants to join in the

dialogue, it also risks losing any real meaning and consequently leading to disillusionment with the very concept of capacity building.

- There were two regional groupings noticeable by their under-representation at the Conference, raising the question of how to engage them in the debate. The first group consists of organisations from (re)emerging Civil Society working in contexts of socio-political and economic transition. The second, perhaps more difficult, grouping was that of the European NGOs. Their very poor attendance at the event possibly reflects a loss of momentum in pan-European reflection and debate on these issues. INTRAC is currently in dialogue with other NGOs present at the Conference on how best to address this.

INTRAC would like to congratulate the organisers of the event and to confirm our commitment to the initiative. We express our best wishes to the regional fora and focal points, and to the new Global Secretariat (hosted by ALOP, Asociación Latinoamericana de Organizaciones Populares) and remain open to supporting the IFCB in the most appropriate ways.

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