



Critical Capacity Development: An Action Research Approach in Coastal Brazil

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Summary. — Capacity development is a development approach and a methodology with origins in colonization that has yet to be decolonized. The underlying assumption for the most part is that there are deficiencies in the abilities of the group in question, and does not question the possibility that the system or structure may be dysfunctional. The ongoing design and implementation of international protected area management systems in general, and the one described in this paper, continue to be based on a foundational assumption of a lack of community capacity for governance of the resources on which they depend, the “deficit” model. Emerging from the context of a community in Trindade, Brazil, the goal of the present project was to support members of a community-based organization in capacity development endeavors for needs they identified. Although the implementation of a series of courses is not a novel approach to capacity development, the commitment to critical pedagogy, the clarity of capacity development of what and for whom that was based on an assumption of capacity, defining the capacities needed and the purpose, and being guided by theory, were perhaps the more novel approaches used in this action research project. The goal of capacity development as attempted in the present research project was not to develop skills so that people may fit into an unjust structure or for ease of social control, but to support the enhancement of skills and knowledge to challenge the existing state of affairs. Instead of the insistence on Indigenous Peoples becoming willing partners in flawed governance systems, much work is needed to continue to address these significant flaws and failings, and to critically challenge the status quo.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Capacity development is an approach and a methodology that originated in colonization and has yet to be decolonized. It is often premised on the belief that a problem exists, usually in a marginalized group, including Indigenous Peoples, and that a response can be designed to address this problem (Tedmans, 2012). There can be many serious issues with the philosophy or reasoning behind a capacity-building approach. The underlying assumption for the most part is that there are deficiencies in the abilities of the group in question, and does not question the possibility that the system or structure may be dysfunctional.

Capacity development has a long history in practice, but less so in academic theory and scholarship. Now considered a field in itself, capacity development originates in the realm of practice, and did not originate in any particular academic discipline (Horton, Alexaki, Bennett-Lartey, *et al.*, 2003). Correspondingly, “much of the analysis and writing on this subject has been done by individuals associated with development assistance or technical cooperation agencies” (Horton *et al.*, 2003, p. 34). About 25% of international donor assistance is spent on capacity development initiatives, yet there continues to be limited evaluations on their effectiveness (Lange, 2013). As a result, capacity is a vast concept to engage with and a challenging area for theory development. More importantly, there continues to be little critical analysis of the assumptions behind capacity development, and a disconnect between the development literature and the need to decolonize the methodology and practice of Indigenous development (Smith, 2012).

What is the basis of capacity development? Smillie (2001) states that capacity development has been used synonymously with institution building, institutional development, and orga-

nizational development. The community development movement of the 1950s and 1960s was “focused on building the self-help capacities within rural communities” (Smillie, 2001, p. 8). As Baser and Morgan (2008) observed, capacity issues effect almost every aspect of development, and capacity development has been an important feature of international development since the late 1980s, “but for most of the 1990s, both capacity as an outcome and capacity development as a process... attracted little in the way of serious research... this pattern began to change in 2001 with a major UNDP initiative [that criticized] the weak contribution of technical assistance to capacity development” (Baser & Morgan, 2008, p. 7). In the major study that these authors carried out, they were surprised to find a common pattern demonstrating that practitioners had virtually no interest in abstract concepts or in theories. In the study, Baser and Morgan (2008, p. 9) endeavored to focus on both theory and practice, but found this to be difficult for three reasons;

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(1) The current approach to capacity building is largely focused on the macro and the aggregated levels such as state building, improved governance and democratization. This perspective can provide strategic guidance but little operational direction.

(2) Historically, most capacity analysis has been based on operational experience in project management, therefore much of this analysis is instrumental and concerned with prediction, targeting, control, results, and accountability.

(3) Practitioners are being required to do more with less and have little time and interest to devote to abstract concepts and theorizing.

Baser and Morgan (2008, p. 13) were unable to find “a set of universal principles that govern all capacity situations and that can be easily stated”. The lack of a clear definition of capacity development or of an agreed upon approach is well-documented (Black, 2003), as is the lack of widespread success. In the field of international development there is disillusionment by many about the realities of capacity building on the ground (Mequanent & Taylor, 2007). For example, Ubels, Acquaye-Baddoo, and Fowler (2010) estimate that hundreds of thousands of people “do” capacity development, but there is little ability to evaluate if it is being done effectively (Ubels *et al.*, 2010, pp. 1–2).

Perhaps more importantly than the recognition of the lack of sound theory, are the criticisms raised by authors such as Black (2003), Craig (2007, 2010), and Tedmanson (2012). Tedmanson raises important points about the use of capacity building with Indigenous Peoples in Australia. Noting the false sense of security of development practitioners and government agents in the superiority of their worldview, Tedmanson describes uncritical use of capacity building as “epistemological racism”, and provides examples grounded in Australian experiences.

Recognizing these challenges, how can capacity development be approached in a research project? This paper will describe a community-based capacity development process in Trindade, Paraty, Brazil, that emerged through a negotiation between a community-based organization and the administrative branch of the Ministry of the Environment regarding protected area boundaries and regulations.

The capacity development process described in this paper was designed after a critical analysis of capacity development initiatives as described in development literature, and after spending significant time in the community in question, and building on the work of Bahia, Seixas, Araujo, Farinaci, and Chamy (2013) and Araujo (2014). “Critical” is used in the sense of critical theory, a body of theory concerned with emancipation that challenge social structures and the social order, and raise questions of social justice (Keucheyan, 2010) (see for example Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Taylor, 1994). Even with a critical approach, the capacity development process described in this paper only went as far as to support development of skills and relationships to better struggle for rights within a structure, and was not designed as a challenge to the structure itself. The structure requires compliance to an externally developed management system that creates disadvantage at the community level. The system in place was developed by the Brazilian government, but assumptions behind it reflect colonial thinking that excludes and discredits Indigenous local populations.

The next section of this paper will provide a description of the evolution of community development and the emergence of capacity building as a part of development terminology and approach. The subsequent section outlines the main bod-

ies of theory that have influenced approaches to capacity development, followed by an overview of the range of ways in which capacity development is conceptualized and addressed in the natural resources and environmental management literature. Following this, the focus will be on the research project in Trindade, and the paper concludes with a critical reflection on how capacity development was approached in this context.

2. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TO CAPACITY BUILDING

Ramisch (2009) positions community development as emerging from the practice of rural development in the 1950s. A great deal of capacity development has of course been concentrated in urban settings, largely through the public sector or through technical assistance (more currently called technical cooperation) (Fukuda-Parr, Lopes, & Malik, 2002). The focus for this paper is more rural, community-level development and capacity building. Holdcroft (1978) states that in the developing world, the community development approaches “had its early roots in (a) experiments by the British Colonial Service, primarily in Asia, (b) United States and European voluntary agency activities abroad, and (c) United States and British domestic program in adult education, community development services, and social welfare” (Holdcroft, 1978, p. 5).

“...community development programs were not intended to, nor did they, affect the basic structural barriers to equity and growth in rural communities. Rather, they accepted the existing local power structure as a given...thus strengthening the economic and social position of the elites. There was little attention given to assuring that benefits from community development programs accrued to the rural poor. Realizing this, the poor majority of the villagers did not respond to the community development approach”.

[Holdcroft (1978, p. 19)]

There were no widely agreed upon definitions of community development throughout this time period. Community development was seen as a complex, dynamic, context-specific approach addressing entire communities, and, as such, a specific definition was deemed to be impossible and undesirable (Holdcroft, 1978). There are very few published materials that document the community development approach of this time period, and a lack of theory or of a “coherent body of knowledge”, which is in part due to the “diverse nature” of community development (Holdcroft, 1978, p. 3).

After the “demise” of the community development approach, as put by Ramisch (2009, p. 344), there were two competing approaches—an emphasis on small-farm growth and agricultural, and integrated rural development’ (IRD), which emphasized a ‘balanced’ approach through large-scale projects. To take us to the current time frame, the decades from 1950 to 2000 can be summarized, recognizing that this is oversimplified and that there are not such linear beginning and end dates to the different phases (Craig, 2007; Ellis & Biggs, 2001, p. 444; Ramisch, 2009, p. 344):

- From community development (1950s) to the (1960s) emphasis on small-farm growth, integrated rural development and green revolution.
- Continuing small-farm growth within integrated rural development (1970s).
- From state-led rural development (1970s) to market liberalization (1980s).

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