

Partner capacity strengthening

A toolkit for small NGOs



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Catherine has 35 years' experience of working with international development agencies. Since starting her freelance work in 2000, she has focussed on capacity building practice for small and medium sized organisations – including developing strategy, building skills, governance, leadership and organisational values.

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This toolkit is part of a series of five for small charities released as part of the INTRAC programme "Strengthening Small Organisations with Big Ambitions".

Here you can access all of the toolkits including more accessible mobile-friendly versions.



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Author's acknowledgements

Almost all the ideas, tools and framing in this guide have been drawn from or inspired by others.

INTRAC's staff and consultants who bring so much practical experience and a values-led approach, and in particular Bruce Britton, Rick James, and Brenda Lipson. Their writings and guidance are the foundation of this toolkit.

The inspirational work of CDRA and the Barefoot Guide Collective in South Africa: their engaging and freely available guides provide an empowering vision for what community development should be all about.

Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge who brings wisdom and personal accountability to the profession of Organization Development.

Fellow members of the Framework collective who have generously shared their experience and resources to shape the thinking in this toolkit.

Thank you.

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Section 01. Introduction

What is this toolkit about?

This toolkit is not just a kit of tools! Tools are included of course, but we hope to encourage you to take a step back and take a fresh look at the way you support capacity strengthening with your partners.

We believe that starting with some principles to help guide you will provide a firm foundation for your own decision-making.

Then the toolkit goes into more practical areas:

- Do you feel that partners are sometimes reluctant participants in strengthening their own capacity or just 'going through the motions'?
- Are you sometimes at a loss about what the real problem is?
- Are you frustrated when training courses seem to make little difference?

This toolkit will give you some practical ideas about what you could do differently.

Contents

- What is the toolkit about?
- Why strengthen civil society organisations (CBOs and NGOs)?
- What is a 'strong' organization?
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Why strengthen civil society organisations (CBOs and NGOs)?

Civil society organisations (including sports clubs, trades unions, and culture groups as well as NGOs and CBOs) play a central role in improving the lives of citizens in ways that businesses and government don't.

They provide fun, social connections, and opportunities for people to change their own lives and get involved for the wellbeing of their communities.

NGOs and CBOs can innovate, can organise people and can give a voice to those who may be left out. They are vital to reducing conflict and inequalities in society. They often hold powerful people to account, and promote political accountability beyond party politics.

Strengthening civil society organisations is an end in itself – not just a means to enable partners to deliver projects and services more effectively.



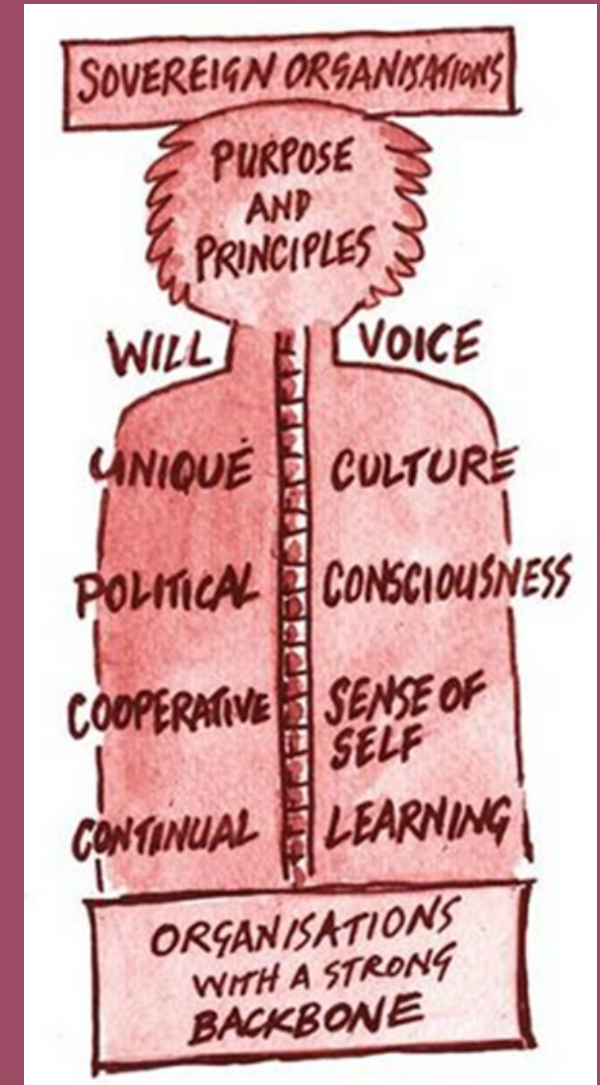
What is a 'strong' organization?

Our vision of a strong organization is what The Barefoot Collective in South Africa describes as a 'sovereign organization'. An organization which draws its purpose and effectiveness from their experience within a community, is accountable to them, and successfully achieves its purpose. More on this in Section 4.



Sovereignty is a particularly powerful concept when applied to an organisation, suggesting the same authentic qualities, describing a home-grown resilience, an inside-out identity, the idea of an organization being the expression of the free will of its own constituents. It should be clear that rights like food sovereignty can only exist if they are embedded in strong, sovereign organisation.

Source: [Barefoot Guide to Organisations and Social Change](#)



Who is this toolkit intended for?

This toolkit is written for people working or volunteering with smaller organisations. It is for those who don't have big budgets for international travel, who don't have specialist staff who are there to write proposals, set up M&E systems or collect data for reports – but do all this themselves, with a few colleagues and volunteer trustees.

If you are based in the global north: you will probably be thinking of how you can use this guide for strengthening the capacity of partners in the global south. That is one key purpose. But you can also use it to approach strengthening your own capacity. You will learn a lot from doing it 'to yourself' and it will also show integrity and credibility if you can tell your partners you have used the approaches in your own organization. Even more, if you involve your partners in your assessments and self-reflection.

If you are based in the global south: you are maybe using this with a partner in the global north or with others in your region. We hope this tool can help to create a common language and approach with them. But beyond that, we hope you will feel it useful for you to lead your own development, challenge poor practice of some northern partners, and find your own version of a Sovereign Organization.



How and what for should it be used?

We hope this guide will give you:

- Ideas for new ways of doing things
- A framework for thinking about what is a 'good' or 'strong' organisation
- A common language and set of models to use with your partners
- Some lessons (learned the hard way) of approaches that work
- Challenges to think about your own attitudes and the skills you need to be effective

We recommend a read through the toolkit, especially the first few chapters, before starting to use the tools.

Then pick it up, drop it again, take ideas, or read whole chapters. Use it to answer burning questions or to help you develop your thinking and strategy. You know best how it can be useful.

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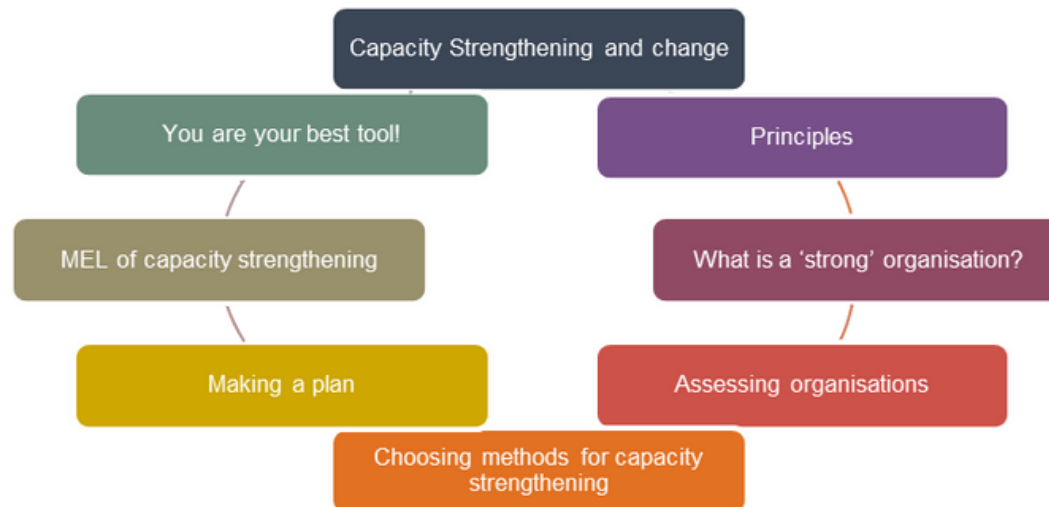
Overview of contents

Sections 2-4: The basic frame for capacity strengthening: definitions, how organisations change and principles which shape good practice. Thinking more deeply about what we mean by a ‘strong’ organisation.

Sections 5-7: Teasing out the mains stages in capacity strengthening: assessment, choosing ways of building capacity then putting together a plan. Top tips for the journey.

Section 8: Some practical ways of tracking the changes in capacity and assessing what difference it made. Learning from your experience.

Section 9: Exploring what makes you effective in your role – change starts with ourselves.



Section 02. Capacity Strengthening and Change

Capacity strengthening with partners is about two things:

- Appreciating the strengths, contributions and uniqueness of their organisation
- Supporting change which helps them to become more effective versions of themselves

Getting involved with partners in this way is delicate: they have done the work to start, nurture and develop their organisation, and then we come along with goodwill and suggestions (not always with sensitivity), and often too, our own agendas which may not always match their own needs.

2.1 What is Capacity Strengthening?

Capacity strengthening is a planned process of change to enable an organisation to better carry out activities, fulfil its mission and grow and develop itself sustainably.

Capacity strengthening involves reflection, leadership, inspiration, adaptation and search for a better fit between the organisation's mission and its systems, structures and activities. In the end it comes down to people wanting to change what they do and how they do things. Change is personal.

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- 2.1 What is capacity strengthening?
- 2.2 What do we bring?
- 2.3 What kind of change are we trying to support?
- 2.4 How does change happen?
- 2.5 What capacity strengthening is not!
- 2.6 Reflection

2.2 What do we bring?

We need to be very clear about what we (and our organisations) bring to the process.

- Are we mainly acting as funders, bringing resources for training, equipment and setting up improved systems?
- Do we have specialist skills to help with technical aspects of running an community group (such as fundraising)?
- Do we see ourselves as facilitators, coaches, supporters?

Are you doing a mixture of these things?

What are your strengths? What do you need to get better at doing?

2.3 What kind of change are we trying to support?

We need to be very clear about why we are building partner capacity. Are we:

- Helping partners to implement projects we are funding?
- Supporting the long-term sustainability of their organisation?
- Hoping to contribute to a strong and influential civil society sector
- Contributing to deep changes in rebalancing power relations between the global north and south?

Or something else? Why you are involved has implications for how you will relate to your partners and how you go about helping them to develop.



Use this space to answer
the questions

2.4 How does change happen?

Change is a human process. For an organisation to change the people in it have to do things differently. Nothing is just 'technical'. A new computer system relies on people to learn how to use it, to maintain it and to fix it!

So change is also about power, emotions, and relationships. It's complex and has unpredictable outcomes.

If your aim is to support partners to become more autonomous and effective then start by asking yourself what you can do to ensure they are making the decisions, building the relationships and finding the resources they need to move forward.

They are building their own capacity – we are there to help and support and to learn and change our own practices alongside them.

2.5 What capacity strengthening is not!

There are many poor examples of thinking that smaller organisations always need our help with capacity strengthening and that capacity strengthening is basically training, and it's as simple as sending people on a course.

The reality is that small organisations have often been set up despite many difficulties, by a small group of people with few resources, who have successfully improved the lives of people in their community. They did it without our help. That speaks for itself! Appreciating their achievements is a good starting point for capacity strengthening.

2.6 Reflection

Before you go on , take time to write down what you think the answers are to some of the questions above and how they apply to you in your current role in your organisation.

Not all the questions will be relevant for you, or you may work with many different partners in different ways.

When you've read more of this toolkit, come back to this section to see if your thinking has changed in any way.



Use this space for your reflections

Section 03. Guiding principles

Capacity strengthening with partners involves using our power, knowledge and experience to influence change in partner organisations. We are accountable to them to use this power wisely and tread carefully over the delicate structures they are building.

Having some clear guiding principles helps to:

- Shape your decision making (ask “how does this fit with our principles?”)
- Re-balance the power relationship with your partners
- Remind us of the approaches which we know from experience work well

Example:

In Burkina Faso, an International NGO found that involving the young board members of a youth organisation in their self-assessment process (not just the staff) massively increased their engagement and support of the process of change.

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3.1 Ownership and leadership

3.2 Getting to the heart

3.3 Change takes time

3.4 Learning is by doing – not by training!

3.5 Capacity Strengthening myths

3.1 Ownership and leadership

Ownership is the single most important ingredient in ensuring change. Lasting change comes from within an organisation, even if it's triggered by external events such as a donor pulling out or a pandemic.

Every time you make a decision **for** your partner, you are eating away at their ownership of the process. Here are some examples of being helpful but risking taking away that power of finding their own way:

- Giving them an assessment tool to use without discussing the pros and cons
- Choosing consultants for them
- Facilitating an assessment process for them
- 'Helpfully' writing a plan for them

Each of these examples **could** be a helpful intervention. But in each case, there may be ways to keep the partner involved in the decision-making: e.g. by showing different tools, giving them a budget to hire a consultant themselves, supporting one or two staff to lead the facilitation... etc.

Leaders (staff and board) are there to lead the process. Often they are the ones who have to change first, and often the most useful thing you can do is listen, support them, give feedback and provide information if they ask. Encourage collaboration and involvement at all levels of the organisation.



Support partners through decision-making, instead of acting on their behalf. Ownership is a key factor in ensuring lasting change.

3.2 Getting to the heart

Get past the symptoms and the standard assessment form and get to the heart of the matter. Look below the surface: observe and talk to people. Are there power struggles holding back progress? Are there attitudes which block communication? When you are in a meeting with a partner what are the dynamics between the people in the conversation? What can you do to hold up a mirror to your partner so they can see themselves in a different way? Engage positive emotions: hope and excitement for the future. Avoid fault-finding which makes people defensive and feeling judged.

Example of fault-finding question: *Why did you do that?*
Better questions: *What happened?* , *What changed?*

3.3 Change takes time

We are often driven by donor deadlines for reporting results, or our own deadlines to get a project 'done'. Real change takes years:

- small organisations have to squeeze capacity strengthening in as well as their doing their work in communities
- Volunteers don't have as much time to spend on meetings
- It takes time for people to get used to doing things differently
- Emergencies or crises can throw timetables out of the window

Example: model the behaviour

UK based staff of an NGO wondered why their country staff behaved in a very bureaucratic way with partners: giving feedback in long annotated documents for example, rather than sitting down together to talk through the learning from a project report.

They realised that they were setting the example by doing exactly the same thing with country offices!

3.4 Learning is by doing, not by training!

Training is often seen as the same thing as capacity strengthening. It really is not!

Would you have confidence in a doctor who has passed all her exams, but never actually seen a patient?!

Training is one tool among many to enable people to learn and change. It shouldn't even be the first one we think of. We'll say more in section 6.4 about when it could be useful and how to make training more effective.

Other ways to learn include:

- learning from others (how many of you have sat next to someone on a computer while they showed you how to do something?)
- Having a go at something new and reflecting on what went well and what you'd do differently
- Having someone coach you, asking questions to get you to think of solutions for yourself – after all you know your situation better than anyone.

More about this in Section 6.

Quote from NGO staff

"I've been on lots of training on gender – so I don't understand why I'm getting feedback that my colleagues don't see me putting it into practice. I know all about this equality stuff!"

3.5 Capacity Strengthening Myths

Myth No 1: We can control and predict another's change

The aid system assumes that we can manage others' development. Aid agencies set up more and more procedures to manage change and be accountable to donors. In the process they often strangle innovation and community-led development.

Luckily as smaller organisations you may be able to avoid this trap! You cannot control another organisation, only do your best to support helpful change.

Myth No 2: Organisations operate like logical machines

We can't assume that if we do 'x' then add a bit of 'y' the result will definitely be 'z'. Example: if we send 20 people on gender training, and put in some equality in recruitment guidelines, then the organisation will be a model of equal opportunities.

We know the reality is more complex but we often behave as though we can ignore the reality, and the result will be 'good enough'.

A story

A northern-based INGO was struggling to adapt their reporting format to make it more appropriate for the youth-led organisations they wanted to work with.

One of their finance staff pointed out that the youth groups they worked with in West Africa often had their own formats they were used to working with and which actually worked well.

The finance person suggested the head office could just adopt the format the youth groups were already using. This idea was laughed at by her colleagues. What?! Use their format?! It's not the way things are done.

Section 04. What is a strong organisation?

The models described in this section help us to reflect on different aspects of what makes a 'good' organisation. Many tools are based on these models.

They are useful because they:

- Move the focus from project work to a 'whole-organisation' view of capacity
- Provide a way to help us see what we are aiming for when we say we are building capacity.
- Use pictures that people understand easily and remember
- Make explicit some of the assumptions underlying assessment tools
- Help with diagnosis and with deciding on priorities for where to build capacity.



Share the models and discuss with partners to build a common understanding of how they see their organisation changing and becoming over time.

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- 4.1 Sovereign organisations
- 4.2 Organisations as living systems
- 4.3 The Life Cycle of an organisation
- 4.4 The Onion model
- 4.5 The Three Circles model



"Supporting the development of sovereign organisations requires deep respect for what is local and indigenous and a subtlety of practice to give thoughtful and careful support where it is needed."

Barefoot Guide 1, p.15

4.1 Sovereign Organisations

The Barefoot Collective, working in South Africa, identified the aspects of community-based groups which work authentically with the communities they identify with. They call them ‘sovereign organisations’: they have home –grown resilience and see self-reliance as a right. Central to their identity is local ownership and decision-making.

Encouraging and supporting these qualities is a real challenge for partner NGOs and donors. Sovereign organisations are unlikely to meet the criteria of most donors. But it is through these kinds of organisations that the rights of communities, can really be expressed and advanced.

The danger of developing NGO clones of so-called international best practice is that CBOs and local NGOs lose the character that makes them effective advocates for their communities and instead become dependent on powerful outside interests.

Source: adapted from Barefoot Guide to Working with Organisations and Social Change p13-15



"If development is about shifting or transforming power there has to be a clear concept of where power can rightfully and sustainably be held – sovereign local organisations and social movements are an obvious location."

Barefoot Guide to Working with Organisations and Social Change p. 13

Defining a sovereign organisation:

Works with its own purpose and principles

Mobilises and expresses the will and voice of its own constituents

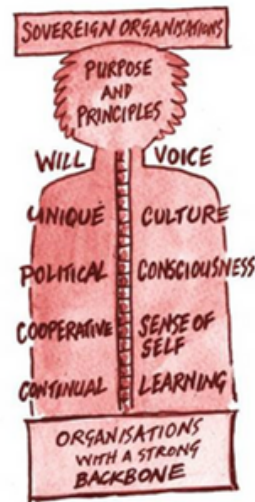
Not an outsourced service provider

Culturally and structurally unique
(not a “Best Practice” clone)

Politically conscious, asks its own questions

Able to cooperate and collaborate

Able to continually learn and adapt, from its own experience



You can use this space
to answer the questions

Source: Slide in the presentation on ‘Sovereign Local Organisations’, [available here](#)

Discuss with your partners:

- 1.What aspects of a ‘sovereign organisation’ are important to you?
- 2.How do you see yourself in this model?
- 3.What would you like to develop?
- 4.How could we support you to do this?

[illegible]

4.2 Organisations as living systems

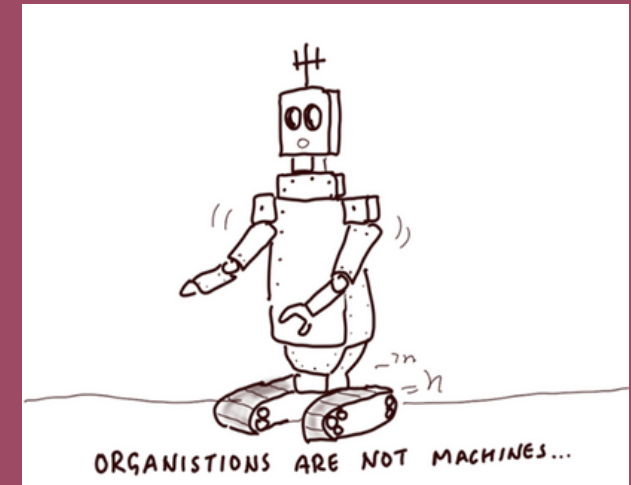
As we've already seen, organisations are made up of individuals: they are living systems of people in active relationships with each other. They are not machines.

When we try to manage people so they behave in predictable ways on their way to known, planned destinations, then we treat them like machine parts. We look only at systems, structures, policies and the logical frameworks driving the project work. We squeeze out creativity, energising warmth and human spirit.

On the other hand, when we try to understand an organisation as a living system, we would explore:

- The values and principles that guide people's behaviour
- The actual practice – not just what the plan says
- The quality of human relationships between people and with the world
- The culture and habits, and unwritten day to day behaviours
- The organisation's development – how it learns, grows and changes over time.

Source: adapted from [Barefoot Guide to Working with Organisations and Social Change p16-17](#)





"Organisation is a process not a structure."

Margaret Wheatley, quoted in the Barefoot guide 1, p.16

"When we see organisation as something other than its people, as other than human, we reinforce all that lies at the bottom of what is wrong in the world."

Barefoot Guide 1, p.17



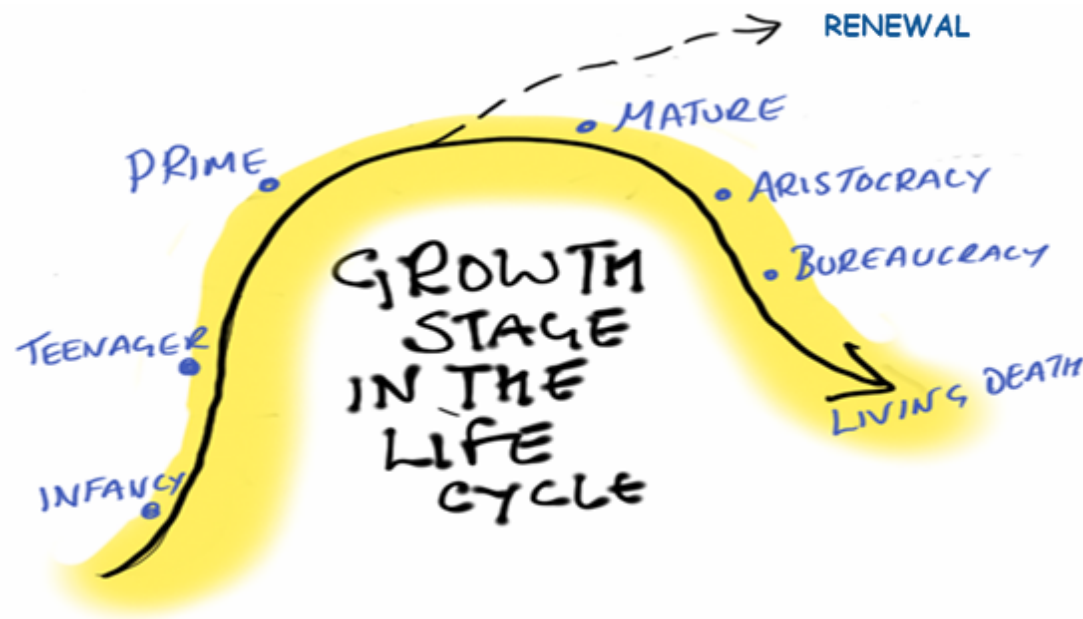
You can use this space to answer the questions

Questions to discuss with partners

1. What do you think is unique about your organisation?
2. What are the values that are behind all that you do?
3. When do you refer back to your values?
4. What is the real work of this organisation?
5. What were key turning points in your organisation's development? (maybe ones that people still refer to)

4.3 The life cycle of an organisation

Organisations grow and develop – and die. There is nothing inevitable about going downhill though, and the dotted line represents the renewal that a process of self-reflection and capacity strengthening can bring.



- **Infancy:** a good idea, just needs a bit of help
- **Teenager:** dynamic and experimental, unstructured, founder-led and takes lots of risks
- **Prime:** transitioned to a more distributed leadership, with systems set up, innovating and effective
- **Mature:** still very effective, starting to be less innovative
- **Aristocracy:** belief in self is stronger than desire to change and evolve with new challenges
- **Bureaucracy:** forgetting what the organisation is there to do, focus on procedure rather than results
- **Living death:** the organisation has become irrelevant and continues only because no-one can be bothered to close it down!

Life cycle activity with a partner

Purpose: A discussion of ‘where are we on the cycle?’ among staff, board members and stakeholders is a good starting point for identifying what kinds of steps are needed for the organisation to become more effective. This builds consensus and awareness, as well as enabling different views to emerge.

Set up: If possible, draw a large version of the life cycle with chalk (or string or ribbon) on the floor. Write the labels on large cards and put them onto the curve. On the back of each label write a description of the stage and the challenges associated with it (see the activity guide for further details).

Steps:

1. Invite participants to think of an **organisation they know (not their own)** and move to the place on the curve that they associate with that organisation.
2. Share in their groups what organisation they chose and why. Look at the back of the card and discuss what they think the organisations need to do.
3. Now invite them to **think of their own organisation**, and move to the place on the curve they think represents their organisation. Not everyone needs to be on the same place!
4. Encourage people to share why they chose a particular stage. Encourage debate between different ideas – there is no ‘right’ answer.
5. Discuss what the implications might be for the organisation’s development.

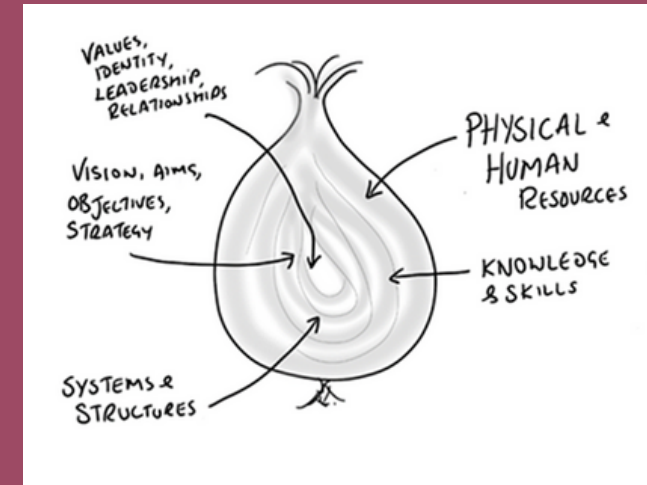


Download the [life cycle activity guide here](#) for advice and templates to facilitate this activity face-to-face and online

4.4 The onion model

This model illustrates:

- All elements of an organisation are interrelated – weakness in one area will affect others, especially in the centre of the onion where the ‘rot’ can spread.
- There is a hierarchy of capacities – deal first with issues nearest the centre as they affect all other layers.
- There needs to be a good fit between different levels e.g. an organisation campaigning on the environment needs staff who are knowledgeable in this area.
- As you get nearer to the centre, complexity increases and capacity issues are harder to diagnose.
- It is hard to fix deeper issues by just increasing funding or staff (external layers) – though that is often what we try to do.
- Healthy growth of an organisation depends on how well it is rooted in the soil of its community.



*“When you cut an onion, it makes you cry...
working on capacity issues at the heart of an
organisation can sometimes be a sensitive and
painful process”
Brenda Lipson*

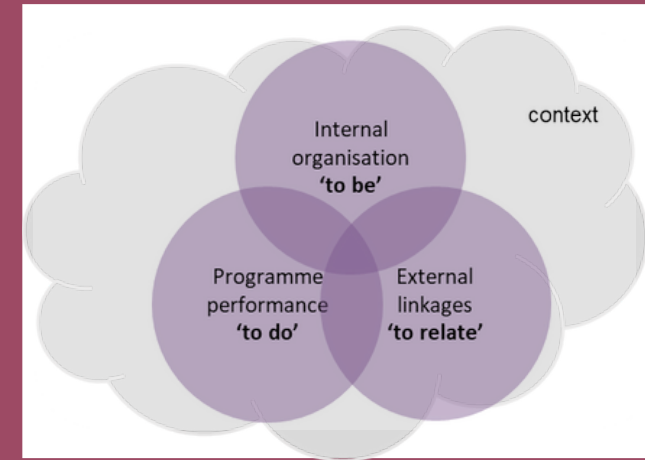
4.5 The three circles model

Many assessment tools are based on this model.

Organisations need strengths in all these of these areas to be effective – just **focusing on one circle will not be enough**. For example for a youth programme, you need to train staff to work with young people **and** to have links with youth organisations, local media and other relevant partners, **and** have a board that includes young people.

Poor external relationships ('To relate') could be due to a failure of leadership ('To be') and not because of poor media strategy, for example. When diagnosing weaknesses you need to **look beyond the obvious**, because circles overlap and affect each other.

And everything is **shaped by the context**. For example, an organisation working in a context where the government is very hostile to CSOs will need different capacities to another working in a context with clearly set out and relatively supportive regulations. So there are no blueprints that apply everywhere.



Section 05. Assessing organisations' capacity

There are literally hundreds of Organisation Assessment (OA) tools available. Organisations also spend hours developing new 'standard' tools to diagnose areas of strengths and weaknesses in an organisation often through a scoring process, sometimes by assessing against descriptive 'levels'. This diagnosis serves as both a baseline for tracking progress and a starting point for making a capacity strengthening plan.

The purpose of this section is to give some suggestions for how you can make this assessment process more meaningful and use it as an opportunity for empowerment and reflection with your partners, rather than just a mechanical and superficial exercise for some purpose dictated by a distant head office.



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- 5.1 Getting started - how to bring up capacity strengthening?
- 5.2 Involving partners in the process
- 5.3 Tailoring the process
- 5.4 Components of OA Tools
- 5.5 Adapting an OA Tool
- 5.6 Broader and deeper assessment

5.1 Getting started: how to bring up capacity strengthening?

Partners are often all too aware of the areas they need to improve in their project management and M&E. But it is not often that they have time and space to think about the wider organisational capacities which need to be developed: the functioning of their board, the development of future leaders, the systems and structures needed for 'back room' operations, and the mechanisms for community involvement for example.

Here are some opportunities for discussions about broader organisational capacity:

- Problems with a project which are not to do with how the project is being run, but are caused by organisational issues such as poor planning or unclear aims or unsustainable funding models
- A strategic planning exercise when broader issues such as reviewing the mission, and the effectiveness of the organization become important
- A major external event (such as Covid or new technology) triggers a review of the organization's work in the new context
- A sense of stagnation where staff are feeling the need for more flexibility in the organization so they can innovate
- A desire by the organization to be less dependent on international donors (or a donor pulling out of a partnership).

You may feel it is not your role to bring up issues such as governance. You need a strong relationship of trust and respect to be able to have these discussions. See Section 9 for more about the skills and qualities you can bring.

A helpful role you can play:

Talk through with partners some of the models in Section 4, so they can see the need to look at the wider context for OA and capacity strengthening beyond just their capacity to deliver projects.

5.2 Involving partners in the process

Ideally, partners will take the lead for the capacity assessment. In many cases though, they may look to you to support them. Some key questions to discuss with your partner before you start:

1. Why are they doing an OA now? Where does it fit in with other plans for change in the organisation?
2. Have they done an OA recently with another donor or partner? If so could you build on this rather than doing it again?
3. In what way do they want you to be involved? How can you help facilitate without taking over the process?
4. Who else could support them (local independent facilitators, for example)?
5. What decisions and choices will they be in charge of? (choosing/adapting the OA tool, finding a consultant, deciding who to involve in the assessment, drawing up an action plan, deciding on capacity strengthening activities, controlling the budget etc.)

As we discussed in Section 3.1, ownership of the process by the partner is the single most important factor in successful and authentic capacity strengthening.

5.3 Tailoring the process

More important than the tool is HOW YOU USE IT. There are many different ways to go about an organisational assessment.

INGO Experience of trying out a new OA process with a local partner:

Our normal organisational assessment process is called a 'self-assessment' but actually involves our staff facilitating our tool with the partner's staff. We lead each question, we ask follow-up questions, the Director speaks a lot and maybe one or two other staff. Sometimes we are not there, and one person from the partner organisation fills it in on their own and sends it back to us.

This time we decided to try to make the process much more participatory. They chose a tool they were familiar with, invited most of the staff to attend, and we sat at the back of the room and hardly spoke.

During the day, we just listened and saw how engaged all the staff were as discussions erupted spontaneously, and the Director held back to let staff have their say before she added her views. They were in charge of their own process and that came out in the quality of the discussion. Although they didn't finish by the end of the day, we didn't rush them along. They took the time they needed. We learnt that we can do things differently! It's not about us, but about the partners! Our procedures are not as rigid as we thought. These are deep waters we are swimming into, but we will learn as we go along.

(Former INTRAC course participant, Feb 2022)



Here you can find a [sample organisational assessment process](#) to use with your partners

5.4 Components of assessment tools

As with any tool, it is much more effective if those involved in the assessment process can combine different approaches and sources of information rather than just rely on one OA tool (see Section 5.5).

5.4.1. Scoring vs descriptive levels:

A description is much clearer than just 'level 1-5'. It helps people to think more clearly about what each level involves and also gives a clear idea for what to develop if they are on level 1 and want to get to level 3, for example.



HIV/AIDS alliance assessment tool for Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) (see picture below from page 20) is an example of tool with descriptions of each level.

| How do you understand and initiate networking? How does your group do advocacy work? | | | | | |
|--|------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| | Question | Capacity score | | | |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 1. Networking | Are you a part of a network? | Organisation is not involved in any network | Organisation is involved in a network in its area/ province | Organisation is involved in a network with other provinces, and participates in decision making | Organisation is involved in a national network as an active partner |

5.4.2. Built-in process for using the tool

Some OA tools include the description or suggestions for a process for how to use the tool, who to involve, how to facilitate the scoring etc. This can be in separate scoring tool and process description, or built into the OA tool itself. Process descriptions range from very detailed (e.g. the tools developed by WWF for HIV/AIDS alliance) to quite simple (e.g. ActionAid Myanmar).

5.4.3. Built-in planning for capacity strengthening

Always follow an OA by coming up with a plan for capacity strengthening. Having a planning process built into the tool can make this easier for organisations who don't have support to carry out the OA.

5.4.4. Reflecting values and approaches in the tool

Make sure the tool reflects capacities you think are important to the values you want to put into practice, or relevant to the kind of organisation. E.g. a community based organisation would want to include questions on community participation in project decision-making and design.



[Guide to the WWF
Organizational Assessment
Tool](#)



[HIV/AIDS Alliance CBO
CAPACITY ANALYSIS
toolkit](#)



[Action Aid Myanmar
Organisational Capacity
Assessment tool](#)

5.5 Adapting assessment tools

When using organisational assessment tools, beware of the risks of using these tools mechanically, for instance not triangulating with other sources, not linking elements to each other, remaining blind to the specific context, etc. Also, remember that the organisational assessment should not be a one-off activity, but rather the beginning of a change process.

Some of these issues can be alleviated by working with a small group of people from your partner to adapt a generic tool to their needs. This has two advantages:

- The partner gets to really understand and engage with the tool before starting to do any scoring.
- The tool will include capacities which are relevant to them, and they can also get rid of capacities that are not relevant.

However, adapting an existing tool also has some disadvantages, in particular:

- It will take more time
- It means you can't use it to compare between organisations (e.g. if you have a group of youth organisations all having capacity strengthening support from your organisation).



Remember not to use assessment tools mechanically. Adapting the tool(s) may be a good idea.

5.6 Broader and deeper assessment

As with any tool, it is much more effective if you can combine different approaches and sources of information rather than just rely on one organisational assessment tool. Don't be satisfied with just what's visible on the surface: culture, leadership style and taboos can't be explored with a tool.

Some approaches to do this include the following:

- Semi-structured interviews with individuals in different positions in the organisation to get different viewpoints (board member, volunteer, staff, manager etc)
- Observation of dynamics in meetings (who speaks, who remains silent, how are decisions taken)
- Observation of office set up (do people eat together, are the notice boards updated, any differences between managers' offices and everyone else's)
- Observation of interactions with beneficiaries / community
- Look at documents such as plans, reports, the website.

See also Section 4.2.



INTRAC's M&E Universe has guidance on different [data collection methods](#), including [interviews](#) and [observation](#)



Section 06. Choosing methods for PCS

What's the best method of capacity strengthening?

The main message of this section is: putting things into practice, using a mix of methods and encouraging partners to do things themselves are the best ways. Training on its own rarely results in change.



Section contents

- 6.1 Menu of capacity strengthening (starting with DIY)
- 6.2 Making training more effective
- 6.3 Follow up support (change takes time!)

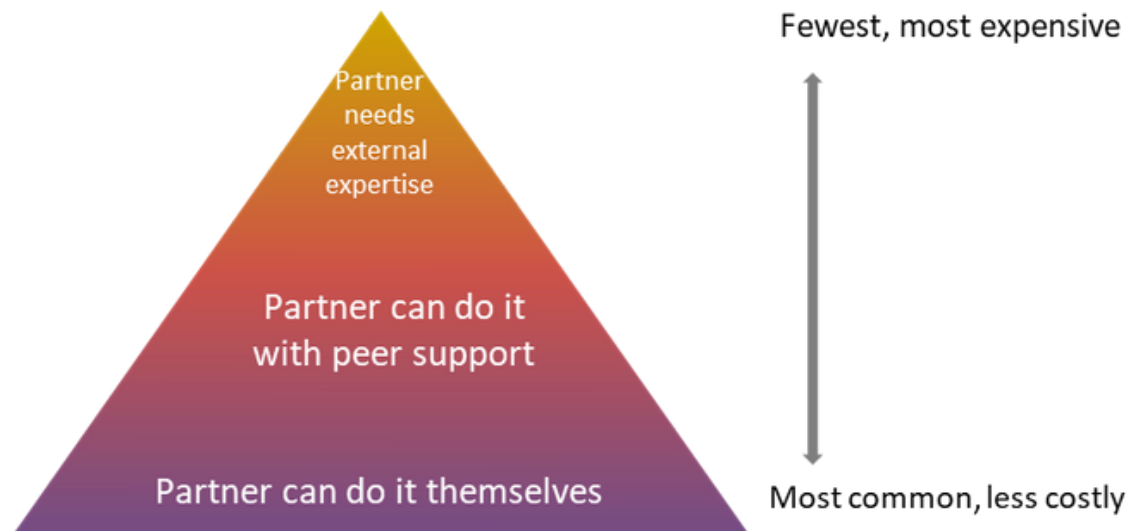


There is no ONE best method! Each has pros and cons. A combination of methods often works well.

6.1 Menu of capacity strengthening (starting with DIY)

How do you learn? Adults often learn best when we need to do something – we observe someone doing it well, or look it up, watch a video on YouTube, ask a mentor, or just have a go and get better at it as we learn from what works and what goes wrong. We rarely sit in a formal class. Capacity strengthening is just the same.

Capacity strengthening starts with what the partner can do themselves, or with peer support. Only a very small part of capacity strengthening needs to come from outside. The realisation that partners can do so much for themselves, is in itself part of capacity strengthening: developing confidence, recognising the power that they have to shape their own change, making their own decisions.



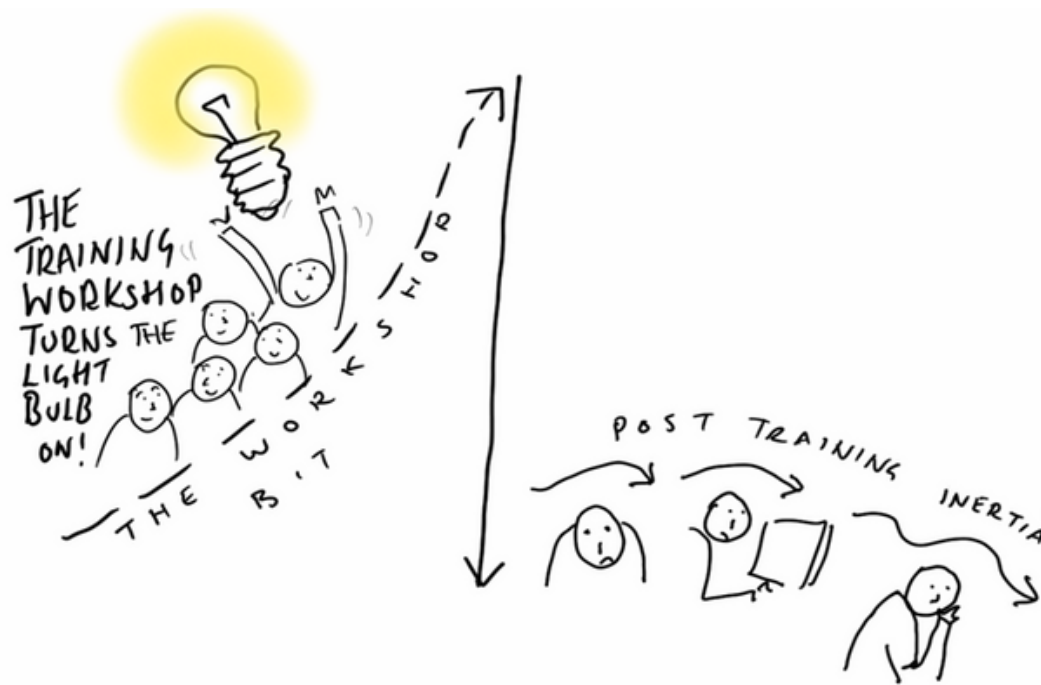
Here's a list of capacity strengthening activities, many of which a partner can do for themselves or with the help of peer organisations.

An NGO realised that they didn't even include initiatives which they were doing themselves in their CS plan. If it wasn't funded by a donor they didn't have it in their plan, and didn't monitor or review it! So all the work that they did to develop job descriptions, put safeguarding policies in place and improve their accounting was never recognised.

6.2 Making training more effective

If part of your capacity strengthening includes a training course, then think about how you can make the training as effective as possible. It's not just a question of what the participant learns. Ultimately, the aim is for something to change! So what can you do ensure that?

It is helpful to reflect on who are the people involved in the training? What does each one need to do before, during, and after the training to make sure the learning gets put into practice?



Participant on a training:

"I was so excited to be going to Nairobi for the course with people from different countries. The topic was exactly what I was working on. The trainer got us involved and the discussions were so relevant to me."

But when I checked my emails in the lunch break, my manager had sent me a report to revise, so I had to skip lunch and couldn't sit with other participants. I was very frustrated as they had invested a lot in sending me, and I couldn't really concentrate."



If you are having meetings, trainings or workshops online, get inspiration for better engagement in the 'Radically Remote' toolkit. It's packed with ideas for participation and well-thought through activities to get the most out of online meetings.

6.3 Follow-up support (change takes time!)

For any kind of change to really become part of practice, follow on support is essential. Here's a few ideas:

- Have several people go on a course, so they can work together and support each other to put into practice what they learnt.
- Make sure that at the end of a training, there is time for action planning.
- Involve managers in follow up conversations so they support the changes being made
- Organise peer learning sessions between participants on a regular basis for people to share how they are putting things into practice and what challenges/successes they've had.
- Encourage informal ways of sharing and supporting each other through WhatsApp groups or other social networks.
- Provide plenty of affirming feedback for any changes or initiatives that participants put into practice.

Change can be scary. An INGO staff based in East Africa reflects on putting learning from a course into practice:

*“These are deep waters we are swimming into. But we are beginning to relax... our fears and anxieties are less. We've discovered we **can** do things differently.”*

Section 07. Making a plan

You've now explored the capacities of the organisation and have mapped the strengths and areas which your partner might want to develop their capacity (see Sections 4 and 5).

You've also thought about which kinds of capacity strengthening methods would work well (Section 6), starting with what the organisation could do themselves.

So now it's time to put a plan together. Why make a capacity strengthening plan?

- The staff and volunteers have now been enthused by the process so far and have started to see the possibilities of change – those expectations need to be followed through.
- A plan allows you to be realistic about what's possible, where a 'to do' list can easily be over-ambitious
- A plan sets out clearly what resources (people, time, money) will be needed
- A plan can be reviewed regularly to see progress and can be changed in line with changing context or opportunities
- A plan brings together different areas of change: individual, systems, ways of working and materials which will all contribute to building capacity.

Section contents

7.1 Prioritising

7.2 Elements of a plan + sample plan

7.1 Prioritising

Prioritising is essential to ensure that the capacity strengthening plan does not become an overwhelming burden. You can't do everything at once. Some changes will have a greater impact than others. Cost may also be a factor. Staff and volunteer time will definitely be limited.

The first priorities should be:

- Capacities critical to the success of the organisation's aims
- Addressing relevant serious capacity deficits
- Then you can also look at other areas, such as improvements that can have a knock-on effect, or are easy to achieve and can boost confidence (easy wins).

Simple participatory prioritisation exercise

Give each participant a number of peanuts (or beans/soda lids/stones) to vote on which areas they feel are most important to focus on.

The process of discussion in prioritizing different capacities for strengthening is as important as the scores themselves.

Especially if there are big differences in the way people score – this is an opportunity to hear different point of view. It's an important part of building consensus and commitment to the plan.



Another example of prioritisation exercise is offered as [part of the Strategic Planning toolkit](#). If used for a CS plan, you would need to list all the CS activities you are considering, rather than all of your organisations' activities.

7.2 Elements of a plan

There's no blueprint for a capacity strengthening plan. It should take the form that best suits the organisation's purpose – it can be a stand-alone document, or form part of an overall organisational strategy or business plan. It can also be fed into work plans. However, whichever format is chosen, it will be helpful if it contains the following elements:

- For each capacity area to be addressed in the plan, a reference to current level and a description of the 'goal' level that is to be achieved within the timeframe of the plan.
- An indication of how the capacity strengthening intervention will be implemented – by the organisation itself, with others /peers or with external help
- A brief description of the proposed capacity building intervention or activity
- Who is responsible for each activity
- Timescales
- Resource requirements (time, finances, tools, specialists)
- How progress will be monitored, when, and by whom (see section 8).

Once the plan is done, it is still a living document. It needs to be reviewed periodically, and updated according to what happens. Opportunities may come along, or unplanned changes (good or bad) may happen. The plan can be updated whenever it needs to be.



Here's a [CS plan template](#) that you can adapt or take inspiration from

Section 08. MEL of capacity strengthening

Monitoring capacity strengthening can be daunting, as it is not as tangible as other areas of work. The starting point is to have a capacity strengthening strategy and objectives which your Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) can focus on.

Capacity strengthening intends to trigger change in the partner and ultimately for the wider beneficiaries, but this is harder to control and measure, and extremely unlikely to happen in the short term anyway.

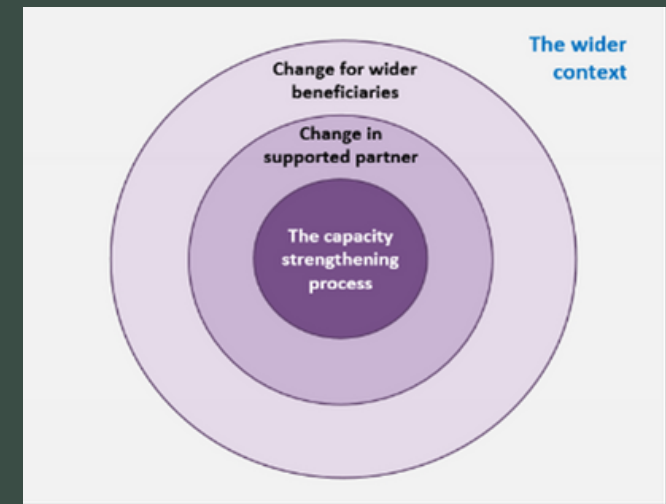
In practice, you should be monitoring the process of capacity strengthening and its outcomes (changes) in the supported partner. In some cases you may want to provide evidence of impact beyond this.

Section contents

- 8.1 A framework for MEL of Capacity Strengthening
- 8.2 Using the CS plan for MEL



INTRAC's M&E Universe - a free online repository of short papers on various aspects of monitoring and evaluation - has resources on M&E of capacity strengthening: [you can start with this paper.](#)



8.1 A framework for MEL of Capacity Strengthening

| What is being monitored or evaluated | Example | Example of questions to ask | Suggested methods |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Impact | Changes in the community due to the better performance of the organisation | What has changed in the community? What can be attributed to the work of the organization? Is this linked to the capacity strengthening work? | <u>Most significant change</u> method |
| Longer term outcomes | More diverse & effective governance; greater involvement of members; new funders | Can the organisation carry out its work more effectively? What unintended consequences were there? What were the most significant changes? | Mixture of reports, <u>surveys</u> , interviews and discussion. <u>Outcome harvesting</u> . Most significant change method. |
| Short term outcomes | Changes in skills, knowledge, attitudes, relationships etc. New policies and procedures | What are you doing differently? How has your thinking changed? What has changed in your team or organisation? | Mostly use qualitative methods: <u>interviews</u> , observations. Can use a before/after knowledge test. |
| Outputs | Numbers of participants, breakdown by gender/team etc +/- Reactions to the activity | How many people participated? What was their feedback? Did any unplanned things happen? | Review records and reports at the time, interview or surveys of participants |
| CS activity | Training, coaching, peer exchanges... | How well was it done? Was it the right thing to do? | Review records and reports at the time, observe the activity |

8.2 Using the CS plan for MEL

Regular reviews of the capacity strengthening plan (see section 7 above) will help you monitor capacity strengthening with these questions:

1. Did we do what we said we would do?
2. How well did we do it?
3. Was the result what we hoped for?
4. Did anything unexpected change?
5. What do we need to do now and what needs to change in the plan?
6. What have we learnt?

Use the CS plan to review these questions every 3 months or so.

Be clear about **what you need to do** and **what your partner needs to do** and what you've each learned about supporting capacity strengthening.

If you have done an **organisational assessment** (see section 5), then it can be used as a **baseline** to measure progress by repeating the assessment in one or two years.



See also the INTRAC's M&E Universe papers on [M&E of capacity strengthening](#).

Section 09. Conclusion: you are your best tool!

In your role supporting partners, you are your own best tool in your toolkit: your effectiveness depends on your skills as a listener, coach, advisor and all the other competencies you deploy.

How effective you will be in catalysing positive change in partners will depend first and foremost on how much they trust you.

According to Rick James, trust comes from four things:

1. **Competence** – we trust people who know their stuff and are good at what they do. The activities on the next few pages are designed to help you identify and develop your competencies.
2. **On my side** – partners need to feel you are ‘on their side’ and have their best interests at heart (and those of the people they serve). Some call this benevolence.
3. **Integrity** – to be trusted our actions have to live up to our words. It is all about character. As leadership author, Walter Wright says ‘It all starts with character – who we are – because who we are, shapes everything we do and everyone we touch’. This means being honest and admitting mistakes.
4. **Reliability or predictability** – we trust people who are predictable and not different each time we meet them, depending on how they happen to feel that day.

Section contents

- 9.1 Sample list of competencies and skills for effectively supporting CS
- 9.2 Some resources for developing practical skills

“If we aspire to both the labels and the roles of helper, counsellor, adviser and supporter, using ourselves as key instruments, we must undertake a process of life-long discovery and of owning and refining our instrumentality”
Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge

9.1 Sample list of competencies and skills for effectively supporting CS



Use this list as a starting point for reflecting on what you need to develop in your own practice supporting capacity strengthening with partners.

Consider:

- What are the core competencies you need in your job?
- What is important in the context you work in?
- What future direction do you see your career taking you? What will you need to develop for what you hope will be your next role or job?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Who could give you feedback to help you see your capacities more clearly?

Then...

Give yourself credit for your strengths and make a plan to address areas you want to develop.

9.2 Some resources for developing practical skills

Here are some videos and guides which demonstrate and explain some of the skills that you might want to develop to be an effective partner for capacity development:



[Active Listening](#) (up to 1:40 mins)



[Coaching](#)



[Avoiding giving advice](#)



[ORID Process facilitation](#) (to give direction and focus to a meeting)



[Giving feedback](#)



[Facilitating online meetings and training](#)



[Developing and managing a partnership](#)



[Managing conflict](#)



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