

# CDI's approach in practice: Capacity development

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**WAGENINGEN UR**  
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Capacity development plays an important role in making sustainable progress and development possible. The dynamics and complexity of issues that individuals and organisations face often require continuous updating and improving of individual competences and organisational capacities. Externals can only play a facilitating role in our view.

We understand capacity development as an on-going, institutional change process that should independently occur, even without external actors. The external actor's role is therefore to support or catalyse existing capacity development processes. We like to be engaged in capacity development processes as they unleash the potential of people and their organisations to face the challenges of a changing world.

## Capacity development

Over the past few decades, the idea and practice of capacity development has gained prominence in international discussions on the performance of development cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

Capacity development can be defined in different ways. Although no common agreement exists to define capacity development, the OECD/DAC definitions (2006) are most widely used. While the essential idea about the need for capacity development has not changed that much, the understanding and use of the concept has gone through some transitions. There has been a shift

<sup>1</sup> Main contributions to the importance given to capacity development in international cooperation were *The Paris Declaration* of 2005 and especially the *Accra Agenda for Action* of 2008, in which capacity was addressed as being essential for development (see OECD 2008). Other influential contributions were UNDP's initiative *Reforming Technical Cooperation* (see Fukuda-Parr et al. 2002) and the *ECDPM study on organisational capacities* (see Baser and Morgan, 2008).

The Centre for Development Innovation (CDI) is the knowledge broker of Wageningen University & Research centre (Wageningen UR). We have built an extensive international track record on issues such as food and nutrition security; sustainable markets; adaptive agriculture; ecosystem governance; conflict, disaster and reconstruction; and innovation and change. In our experience, only an integrated approach leads to sustainable change. Our staff have a unique combination of substantive knowledge, an international network and excellent process management qualities. In this issue brief we would like to share how we deal with Capacity Development and illustrate this with a number of examples.

from a focus on capacity building, towards more endogenous, demand-driven support of capacity development, focusing on different levels – the individual and organizational level and also the enabling environment. Yet despite all the attention given to the concept, there are no blueprints for capacity development and capacity development processes are often complex, nuanced and unpredictable.<sup>2</sup>

### Capacity (development) definitions OECD/DAC

**Capacity** is the ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully.

**Capacity development** is the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time.

**Promotion of capacity development** refers to what outside partners – domestic or foreign – can do to support, facilitate or catalyse capacity development and related change processes.

<sup>2</sup> Based on OECD/DAC (2006); Baser and Morgan (2008); Oswald and Clarke (2010); Ubels et al. (2010); Horton (2001, 2003).

## What do we mean by capacity development?

Addressing social, economic and environmental issues calls for greater capabilities everywhere in society: in individual human capital, in communities, in groups, organizations, sectors and institutions. In this regard, CDI recognises that theories and practices of capacity development should operate in a way that responds to the complex development realities that the world is facing.

CDI views capacity development as on-going, institutional change process that occurs irrespective of external actors. CDI can therefore at most **support or activate** capacity development, whereby capacity development is seen as a means, rather than an end goal.

In this regard, CDI defines capacity development as ‘the process by which individuals, organisations and institutions enhance and organise their systems, resources and knowledge. The degree of capacity development is reflected in their abilities, individually and collectively, to perform functions, solve problems and achieve objectives.’

## Capacity development in practice

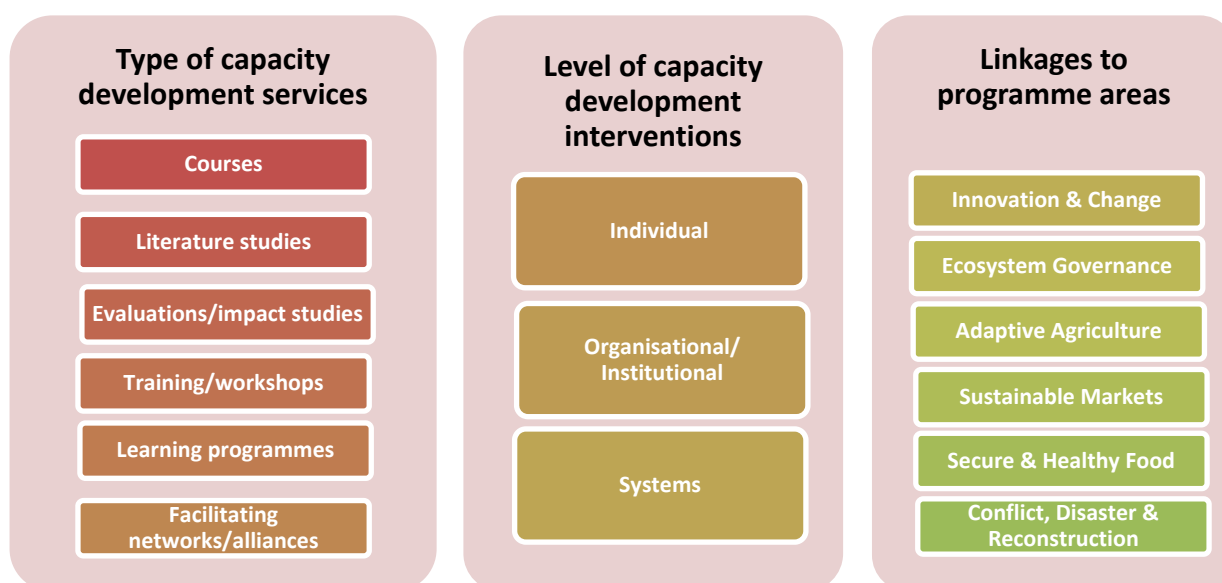
Capacity development is often a point of departure in our services. This is reflected in the rich diversity of capacity development services, from facilitating processes to brokering knowledge, constructing platforms, and providing training. In these services, we combine capacity services with specialist knowledge – as organised around our six programme groups. Our capacity development services are applied on different levels and relate to varying, often interdisciplinary, content areas. The boxes below give examples of the capacity development services that CDI are involved in.

Through our capacity development services, CDI assists stake-holders to develop and implement effective learning and innovation processes. This kind of capacity development goes beyond training and developing skills, knowledge and attitudes. Rather, it involves longer-term processes of engagement and integrated processes of learning and change across individuals, organisations, networks and social institutions.

CDI operates on a needs-oriented and demand-driven basis, while working with flexible and innovative theories and practices of capacity development. Capacity development services thereby function as cross-cutting and are often inextricably linked to approaches of systems thinking, innovations, (complex) change processes and multi-stakeholder approaches.

Important emphasis is dedicated to the context in which capacities are strengthened and any capacity development support process is continuously adapted to that particular context; while striving for a good balance between endogenous and exogenous factors. More specifically, CDI uses a **multi-stakeholder approach** in its capacity development services and treats capacity development support processes from a **systems perspective**, with attention for the individual level, the organisational level and the systems in which these individuals and organisations operate. In this way, our capacity supporting services focus on creating conditions and opportunities for **innovation**, and to bring the right abilities together in order to bring **systemic change** for individuals, organizations, institutions and systems and society.

**Concluding:** We like to be engaged in capacity development processes. They unleash the potential of people and their organisations and are a crucial element to enable them to face a changing world.



## Online resources

[www.ecdpm.org/5cs](http://www.ecdpm.org/5cs)

[www.capacity.org](http://www.capacity.org)

## References

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