

The Colleague to Colleague Approach

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Abstract

As the international cooperation agency of the Netherlands Association of Municipalities (VNG) VNG International implements LOGO South, a capacity development programme in which local governments implement projects in twinnings. Within twinnings the colleague to colleague approach is used as a model for effective capacity development. The approach has been continuously developed. In this contribution we describe the approach we have on capacity development and the view we have on the colleague to colleague approach. We will review literature on using the twinning framework for capacity development and demonstrate the changes which have been made in the programme to enhance effectiveness.

Keywords

Capacity development, twinnings, colleague to colleague approach

Introduction

VNG International¹ works in the field of good water governance through its capacity development programme LOGO South. In this programme Dutch local governments, water boards and water supply companies work together in partnership with their southern counterparts to improve governance issues and improve service delivery.

Capacity development is the main focus of the LOGO South programme. The programme uses Country Programmes and Thematic Programmes as frameworks for twinning projects.

Country programmes provide a framework for the actors active in a certain country to implement a twinning project which contributes to the overall objective of the country programme. The LOGO South Indonesia country programme² has as objective: "To improve water supply service delivery and corporate capacity development of a selected number of water companies (PDAMs) in Indonesia". Five partnerships in Indonesia are currently contributing to this objective through twinning projects.

The other framework are thematic programmes. A thematic programme provides partners the opportunity to learn from each and other partners from other countries on one theme. Themes of thematic programmes are: local water management, local waste management, HIV/Aids and citizens participation.

In this contribution the approach method of capacity development used in the LOGO South programme will be discussed as well as the issues which we have come across while working with this approach. The article draws on the wealth of experience at VNG International with capacity development as well as external reviews and evaluations. The method has been developed to facilitate the capacity development among practioners, therefore the article is routed in the hands on experience with the method.

¹ VNG International is the cooperation agency of the Netherlands Association of Municipalities, more information available at: www.vng-international.nl

² More information on the LOGO South programme as well as full text country programmes and thematic programmes are available on www.vng-international.nl

As the VNG is routed in local government this is the level of attention in this article. Local government is the starting point for project interventions by VNG International. This branches out to other local authorities or local utility companies. This article therefore takes the approach of the VNG transferring knowledge of decentralisation to issues in the water management sector using the IWRM to ensure an integral approach.

View on Capacity Development

One of the main challenges for local governments³ in developing countries is the developing of capacity for organisations to adequately implement their tasks. Before addressing this problem it is useful to touch on the general discussion on capacity development in development cooperation. We agree with the analysis made during the 1980s and 1990s that capacity development was needed as an additional tool to technical solutions to work towards sustainable development. Capacity development, along with financial and material development assistance, is therefore to be seen as an integral component of the development cooperation process and is complementary to other modes of development cooperation.⁴

A basic assumption in our work is that in many cases capacity in developing countries already exists, but that it needs further development. Therefore we use the following definition for capacity development:⁵ “Capacity development refers to the approaches, strategies and methodologies used by developing country, and/or external stakeholders, to improve performance at the individual, organizational, network/sector or broader system level.”

A conceptual framework for capacity development

For further reference capacity development has been conceptualized in a framework. Involvement in capacity development will mean dealing with transformation at various levels. CIDA illustrates this as follows: “It is important to bear in mind that capacity development is fundamentally about change and transformation – individual, organisational, and societal. While it is purposeful in its orientation, it is not likely to be linear, easy or free of conflict. It is also about values – ‘whose capacity’ is to be developed, for what purpose? Finally, capacity development relies, in large measure, on learning and adapting behaviour, which requires openness to the lessons of experience, and the flexibility to modify approaches as required.”⁶

The levels in capacity development which have been identified are: individual, organisational, network/sectoral and the enabling environment. Each of these represents a level of analysis, as well as a possible entry level for a capacity development intervention.

Attention to the individual level is necessary and in many interventions the starting point, but adequate attention is needed for organisational issues, broader processes of empowerment or relevant factors in the ‘enabling’ environment. The importance of this is expressed by the diagonal axis in the conceptual

³ In this article local government includes municipalities, provinces, water boards, water companies and their umbrella organizations, “local government” should therefore also be read as water supply companies, water boards etc.

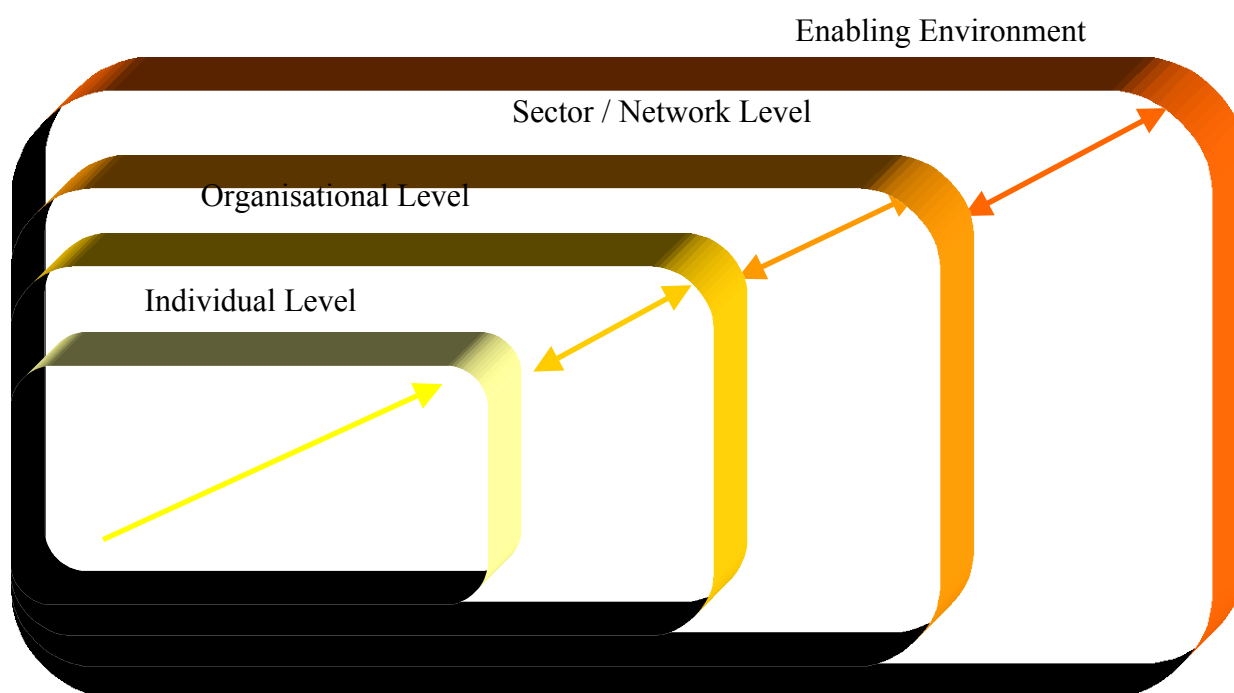
⁴ Report on the UN Inter-Agency Workshop on Capacity Development, Geneva, 20 – 22 November 2002.

⁵ Joe Bolger: Capacity Development: Why, What and How; in Capacity Development. Occasional Series, vol. 1. No. 1, May 2000. CIDA This definition heavily leans on the pioneer work of Peter Morgan. See for instance his definitions in Capacity and Capacity Development – some Strategies: “Capacity development refers to the approaches, strategies and methodologies which are used by national participants and/or outside intervenors to help organisations and/or systems to improve their performance.” Policy Branch CIDA October 1998

⁶ Joe Bolger: Capacity Development: Why, What and How; in Capacity Development. Occasional Series, vol. 1. No. 1, May 2000. CIDA Policy Branch.

framework. It marks the importance of the links among the various capacity dimensions and the importance of thinking in multi-dimensional terms. . Bolger notes: “An important dynamic exists among the organisational, the sectoral and enabling environment levels, with performance of individual organisations being affected by a range of factors in each of those realms. Similarly, organisational performance depends on the availability, effective use and motivations of individuals.”⁷

Figure 1: Capacity Development: Conceptual Framework



Capacity development, local government and decentralisation

The notes on capacity development – definitions, principles, levels of capacity – have to be made applicable for local government and other actors in the water sector. This refers back to their role in development and poverty alleviation and decentralisation as a process to get more transparency and accountability. Capacity needs to be developed to enable local governments, service providers, communities and civil society institutions to function effectively. “All decentralisation efforts will involve structural as well as capacity development challenges”, notes Xavier Furtado. “Structural considerations include a range of issues involving the transfer of power, authority and resources away from the central government to other levels of government or other organisations and the creation of new frameworks of legal accountability. Ensuring that decentralised levels of authority are able to obtain the resources they need may require the creation of new agreements or legislation to govern the transfer necessary resources, skills and technology to local providers. The transfer of authority must be accompanied with a long-term strategy that allows local officials to develop (preferably through experiential learning) the capabilities necessary for decentralisation to succeed.”⁸

⁷ Joe Bolger: Capacity Development: Why, What and How; in Capacity Development. Occasional Series, vol. 1. No. 1, May 2000. CIDA Policy Branch., page 4

⁸ Xavier Furtado: Decentralization and Capacity Development: Understanding the Links and The Implications for Programming. Capacity Development Occasional Paper Series. CIDA Policy Branch No. 4, August 2001.

Decentralised co-operation

Decentralised cooperation – in this case narrowed down to international co-operation between local governments (twinning)– is complementary to other development approaches. The underlying idea is that closer cooperation and exchanges between local governments in the South and the North can lead to creative and effective solutions for local development issues. The ECDPM mentions the relevance from the perspective of the developing countries: “Thanks to decentralisation and the holding of local elections, a variety of organisations, interest groups and professional organisations are now able to participate in the development process and to claim a political role in social and economic development.”⁹

VNG International Experiences with colleague to colleague approach

The main component of the capacity development within the LOGO South programme is the colleague to colleague approach. The main assumption of the colleague to colleague approach is that colleagues working together can efficiently and effectively develop capacity in a practical way.

Long lasting and proven twinning relations are an excellent framework for capacity development. The trust built over years gives an adequate context to develop capacity. These circumstances allow issues to be addressed which without the strong relation would not be addressed in a constructive manner.

In Practice

The twinning between the Amsterdam Water Supply Company and the Beheira Water and Drainage Company (BWADC) in Egypt has shown excellent results. Over a period of 7 years the BWADC has become one of the best performing companies of Egypt. The success of the partnership is now being expanded by extending the cooperation to other water companies in Egypt. During this period results have been achieved such as ISO certification, implementation of GIS system and development of new water treatment methods. Also very important has been the mutual trust which makes it possible to discuss difficult issues in a productive manner.

The method is practice-based, experts working in the same job or in a comparable position exchange views and work together. The problems and analysis can be shared easily and is conducive for building on existing local capacity. Our experience shows that careful consideration should be given to concentrate on practical problem solving rather than pretending to deal with complex enabling environment issues, a clear working context is therefore required.

The capacity development could be hampered by the fact that experts are not familiar with an international developmental context. The switch between different backgrounds, culture, values and attitudes have to be addressed to be effective. Training the experts on advisory skills and attitudes in decentralised cooperation contexts need attention. A good check on the advisory capacity in a cross-cultural context prior to exchange is essential. Even if these aspects do not seem to be a problem, the promotion of a clear understanding of the international developmental context will contribute to an increased effectiveness.

In the LOGO South program a balance is sought between international and local experts. Besides their particular skills and knowledge of the development context, local experts can easily navigate through difficulties and provide solutions when cultural differences are at stake.

⁹ ECDPM; Promoting local governance through Municipal International Cooperation. Capacity.org, Issue 21, April 2004. The importance of decentralised cooperation is also stressed by the Municipal Development Partnership (MDP) programme. Coordinator of the programme in West Africa Elong M’Bassi: “It would be a major step forward if around 20% of all EU financial support could be channelled through municipal international cooperation to the local level”. Page 4.

External Reviews

A review of the colleague to colleague approach by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, a platform and voice of local governments of Commonwealth members. The forum defined five lessons derived from direct experience and external reviews. Projects tend to have a slow lead time; there is a need for long-term sources of finance; partners in the developing countries should buy-in in the process at the highest political level, participants should get training in preparation for working in a developmental context, and reviews and experiences should be much more used.

For the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Merrick Jones was involved in a research project looking into two decades of experience in this field.¹⁰ SIDA was looking for evidence that twinning has the potential to enable the partner organisations to learn from each other. Conclusion of the research was: “It seems clear that twinning offers potential advantages over other possibilities for development cooperation, but that its full potential has not frequently been achieved.” The research studied two current SIDA twinning projects. One of these projects “seemed to have produced benefits beyond the obviously considerable enhancement of professional/technical capacity, and there appeared to be evidence of the development of a putative culture of organisational learning. ... It seemed that, through this combination of organisational factors, a culture had developed in which it was 'alright' to ask questions and where the activities undertaken in the twinning project were seen as opportunities for learning.”¹¹

Not every aspect of the colleague to colleague approach is only positive. The most common criticisms of decentralised co-operation include the supply-driven nature of institutional reform, resistance to change in many Southern institutions, the motives of the linked organisations. It is also judged that there is a tendency to focus more on the prolongation of the relationship and on having opportunities for exposure rather than on clearly defined capacity development. Anyhow, the partner organisations naturally tend to emphasise the delivery of technical/professional expertise rather than sustainable institutional capacity development. A serious threat to long-term institutional sustainability in twinning arrangements is the possibility that individuals who acquire skills in a co-operation project will leave the local government after a period.

Further Development

Based on the decades of experience and research Jones comes up with some suggestions to capitalise more fully the potential of the twinning concept.¹² Twinning projects should have as their ideal and framework the development of an organisational learning culture, to be specified in project objectives and outcomes and evaluated at the level of organisational capacity development. Furthermore, twinning projects must be understood as major organisational change processes. This demands flexibility in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of twinning projects. A forum should be established where all stakeholders can debate the meaning of the project. “This is crucial if abstract western notions such as sustainability, institutional capacity development, and organisational learning are to have any concrete significance in the cooperation; and to ensure the desired degree of the stakeholder understanding of, and commitment to these notions.” It is important that twinning project

¹⁰ Jones, M. L., and P. Blunt. 1999. 'Twinning' as a method of sustainable institutional capacity building

¹¹ Merrick Jones: Twinning as a tool for sustainable organisational capacity building, ECDPM Issue 6 – July 2000. More recently GTZ research on Municipal Development Co-operation came to a comparable conclusion: “Municipal development co-operation through a municipal development partnership that is well anchored, politically and socially, in both municipalities has development-policy potential and comparative advantages compared to other development co-operation approaches in the area of municipal development and also beyond that.” GTZ, Division 42 Governance and Democracy.

¹² Merrick Jones: Twinning as a tool for sustainable organisational capacity building, ECDPM Issue 6 – July 2000.

be viewed by the stakeholders as organisational cooperation, emphasising that the twinned organisations carry equal responsibility, as partners, for all aspects of the cooperation.

Out of the literature¹³ and based on own experiences a number of issues/principles have been identified as important for a successful municipal international co-operation project:

- Partnership represents a sharing of information, resources and decision-making to achieve a jointly established goal.
- Ownership of the relation is an important condition for effective capacity development. Both partners must be really motivated for and willing to invest in the partnership, in terms of time and resources.
- Reciprocity is an important condition for successful links. Benefits should flow in both directions, bringing satisfaction and pride to both partners.
- To effectively implement an international co-operation program, participating local governments must dispose of the necessary managerial and communication skills.

The long experience of VNG International in decentralised co-operation and in guiding and supporting Dutch local governments in that area has led to adaptations in the implementation of the twinning programmes.¹⁴

- Concentration on a number of issues. The program focuses on aspects of local government where practices are close together and partnerships can function optimally.
- Capacity development for Northern Partners. We realise that Dutch local governments are not development institutions as such and that differences in experience, competence and capacity for development work exist between Dutch local governments. In order to ensure that Dutch local governments have the necessary skills trainings for successful international co-operation, training and guidance in intercultural communication, international project management and the local governance context in developing countries have been provided.
- More attention for the formulation of municipal multi-year projects.¹⁵ In order to improve mutual ownership of the projects, an extensive project formulation has been introduced for multi-year projects. The formulation phase consists of a joint problem analysis and defining the expected objectives and results.
- More Southern experts: Within the LOGO South 2004 program it is possible to involve local experts in the projects. These experts can for example provide training, organise workshops or carry out research. It is possible to make use of local experts coming from the same country as well as regional experts.
- More attention to local dissemination. South-south exchange will happen in the following three ways:
 - Product development and spreading of knowledge: activities lead to product development;
 - Spreading and duplicating / repeating experiences from long-range projects in one country or region;
 - Programmatic approach in one country: a country specific program is set up and implemented together with the national government, combinations of districts, involved districts, embassies, non-governmental organisations, and fellow financing organisations.

¹³ UNDP, 'The Challenges of Linking', report of a survey of municipal to municipal co-operation, March 2000
Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 'Municipal Partnerships', general information, 1997

¹⁴ Based on internal VNG International document, Vision on GSO, January 2003. The review took place in an internal workshop of the GSO-team 23 October 2002.

¹⁵ This is one of the findings from the IOB Evaluation. IOB (2004), Over Solidariteit en Professionalisering, Evaluatie van Gemeentelijke Internationale Samenwerking (1997 – 2001). Den Haag, OBT bv.

Conclusion

A tried and tested method of capacity development is the colleague to colleague approach within twinning projects. The method has definite benefits such as: trust, practice based exchange, low cost and dedication. Depending on the intervention various levels within the organisation may be involved thus making an impact on the total organisation. The best results with the colleague to colleague approach are obtained when the exchange between colleagues is combined with local expertise. This removes some of the disadvantages which have been mentioned such as: lack of knowledge of local situation, problems with inter-cultural communication and time between advisory missions.

Experiences with the method have convinced us that the model is useful for the future.