Lessons learnt on capacity development for environmental assessment

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The NCEA is known to many as an independent quality evaluator of EIAs and SEAs. Not so well known is that regularly the NCEA itself is independently evaluated. In 2011, the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs published the findings of an evaluation of the capacity development efforts in developing countries of the NCEA and six other Dutch NGOs. By doing so, the IOB hoped to identify factors that determine effectiveness. This article summarizes some of these factors, focusing on the lessons learnt on capacity development of EIA and SEA systems.

IOB's evaluation on the capacity development efforts of seven Dutch organisations was intended to deal with a significant gap in knowledge that the IOB had observed, namely the absence of international consensus on what constitutes effective capacity development. Capacity development is becoming increasingly important in Dutch development cooperation. Thus, it is becoming increasingly important to evaluate the effectiveness of this work. However, the IOB could not find a broadly accepted theoretical framework against which the results of Dutch capacity development effort could be analysed. By evaluating practice experience, the IOB hoped to identify the factors that determine effectiveness.

Methodology of the evaluation

The evaluation of the seven (large and small) Dutch organizations began in 2008 and was completed three years later. Two or three programmes of each organization were selected for an in-depth evaluation of their outputs and outcomes. For the NCEA, these were programmes in Georgia, Mozambique and Guatemala that we had run between roughly 2000 and 2008. Two shorter desk studies were also conducted on our programmes in Burundi (2005–2010) and Ghana (1998–2008). Most programmes comprised a mix of training, awareness raising, guidance material and advice on concrete EIAs and SEAs (see figure 1 for more details of our result chain).

The IOB selected the 'five capabilities model' (hereafter the '5C' model; see figure 2) as the methodological framework for the evaluation. This framework was developed by the European Center for Development Policy Management and was regarded by the IOB as a possible candidate for an overall theoretical framework for capacity development. Interestingly, this meant that the 5C-model was used as both the start and the end point of the evaluation. At the start, the five capabilities were translated into indicators against which the results of programmes would be evaluated, while at the end the lessons learnt in the evaluation were used to establish whether the model is actually a good framework.

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What has been learned?

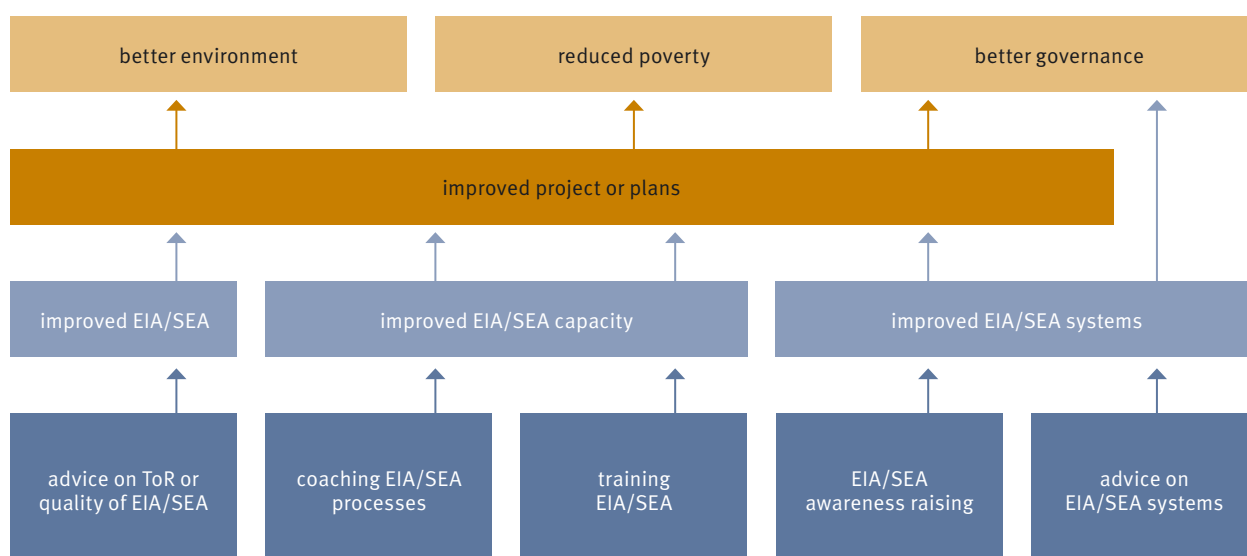After three years of hard work and fierce discussions, we now have:

- A more explicit intervention theory and strategy to design its work.
- A better framework (the 5C model) for monitoring, evaluating and learning from its capacity development efforts.
- A better understanding of what has and what has not been effective in its work.
- New priorities for its future work, in particular the enabling conditions for learning in the countries it works with.

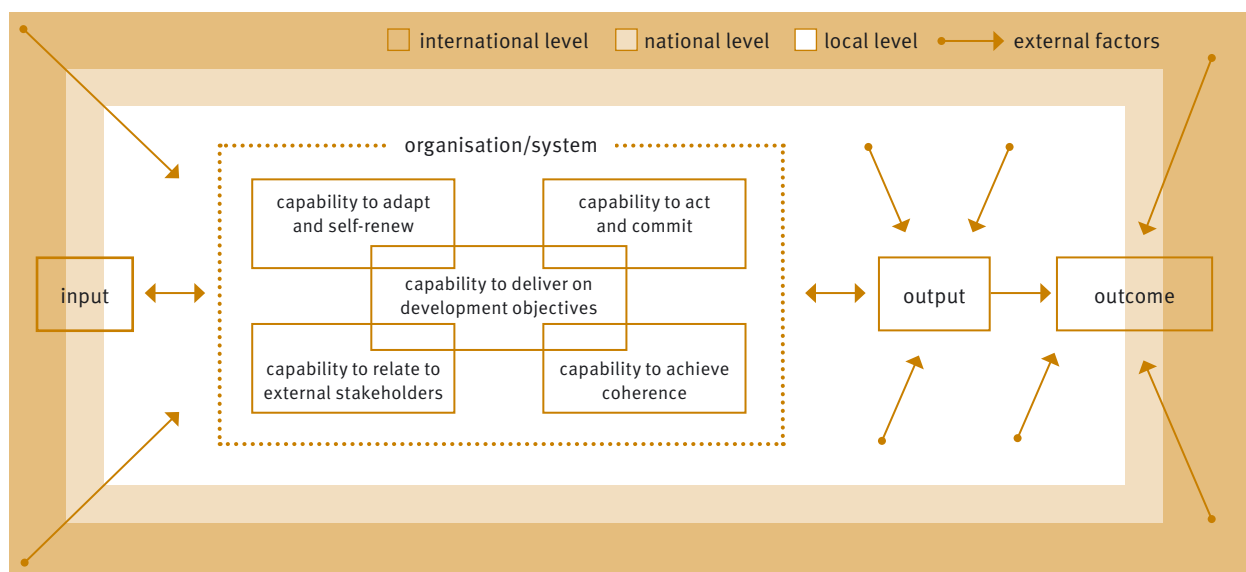These learning points are further detailed below.

A more explicit intervention strategy

The IOB's evaluation compelled us to make its intervention strategy explicit: why do we do what we do, and why do we think that it is effective? The key to NCEA's intervention strategy is to focus on strengthening EIA and SEA systems rather than singularly focussing on one individual organization. This systems approach is judged by the IOB as important for effective capacity development. Or, in the words of the IOB, it is '*a promising approach to capacity development at the institutional level*'. One of the key arguments for this is that an EIA or SEA is not carried out by individual organizations in isolation. Environmental assessments are multi-stakeholder processes, in which each stakeholder tries to influence both the assessment and the other stakeholders.

Figure 1: The NCEA result chain – from input to impact

Figure 2: The 5C model

Legend: ☐ international level ☐ national level ☐ local level •→ external factors

Diagram elements: input, organisation/system containing "capability to adapt and self-renew", "capability to act and commit", "capability to deliver on development objectives", "capability to relate to external stakeholders", "capability to achieve coherence", output, outcome

A diagram of this would look somewhat like figure 3. In order for an EIA or SEA to be effective, each of these stakeholders – and particularly those that strive for the sustainable development of their country or sector – should have the capacity to play their respective roles in the process. When deciding on the focus of capacity development efforts, it is important to base this on a system analysis. Where are the most important flaws? Which stakeholders are most important from a systems perspective? But also: an important part of capacity development should always be to make stakeholders aware of their role in the EIA system and how to function within it.

NCEA programmes typically aim to strengthen the capacity of environmental assessment systems, rather than of individuals or individual organizations. To achieve this, a range of services are offered within a programme. Figure 1 presents an overview that links the services with intended output, outcome and impact. The most common activities are displayed at the bottom. The middle rows show the outputs and outcomes, while the top row shows the final impact to which the activities should contribute. As our efforts are tailor-made, the activities in a country programme depend on the specific demand of partners, on the context of the countries involved and on the key flaws in the systems.

A framework for learning and monitoring

One of the objectives of the evaluation was to establish whether the 5C model would be an appropriate framework for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of capacity development. Based on the evaluations of all seven organizations, the IOB has concluded that it is. This has led the Dutch government to make the application of this model mandatory in reporting the results of the capacity development efforts that it subsidizes. The 5C model is also included in the new contract we have with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for support to Embassies, governments and NGOs in the period 2012–2016. Although it is clear that the model offers advantages over our existing monitoring framework, it is also clear that the model has been developed towards organizational capacity development rather than system capacity development. It needs translation in order to be effective in NCEA's work.

The effectiveness of NCEA's work

The IOB's evaluation concluded that NCEA programmes have enhanced the capabilities of the partner countries' environmental systems. Our train-the-trainers approach, and the country experts' appreciation and use of the technical guidance provided, were specifically mentioned. Overall, NCEA's programmes were judged as being well aligned with the countries' own policies and flexible enough to be adjusted in the case of sudden government policy changes. However, some aspects of our work were also criticized. An important criticism is that in some cases, the high turnover of trained staff (caused by, for example, a lack of career opportunities or decent salaries) threatens the sustainability of the enhanced capacity. The NCEA recognizes that this is an important issue and therefore intends to start paying more attention to financial mechanisms within EIA and SEA systems (see following paragraph).

Figure 3: Example of the circle of involved players in the Indonesian program for Pollution control, Evaluation and Rating (PROPER II)
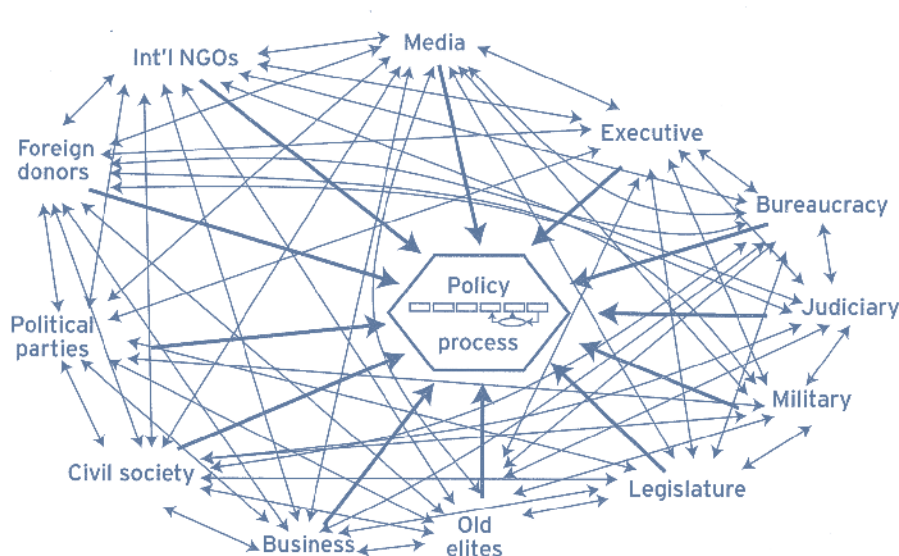

Figure 3 is an example of key actors and their relations in the case of the Indonesian Program forPollution control, Evaluation and Rating (PROPER II).

Source: Blair, H. 2008. Building and Reinforcing Social Accountability for Improved Environmental Governance. In: Strategic Environmental Assessment for Policies. An Instrument for Good Governance. Eds. Ahmed, K. and Sánchez-Triana, E. 2008. The World Bank. Washintong, DC.

Generic conclusions on effective capacity development

- **Apply 'systems thinking' in capacity development**, rather than focus on individual stakeholders. Focusing on the capacity strengthening of 'associations of stakeholders' collaborating in, for example, value chains or EIA systems increases effectiveness.
- **First formulate the desired outcome, then plan input accordingly.** The evaluation led the IOB to conclude that this is often not the case in current practice. This may lead to ineffectiveness.
- **Help Southern organizations to become learning organizations**. The IOB has concluded that capacity development is always an 'endogenous' process, happening from within. The best an 'outside' partner can do is to help partners to learn.
- **Gather systematic data on output and outcome**. The evaluation revealed that these data are very hard to find, or do not exist because data are often not systematically gathered in the countries.
- **Southern organizations have ownership.** Increasing pressure on donors to justify in their home countries the importance of what they are doing, should not lead to a situation in which the donor's objectives become more important than those of the countries in which they work.

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> "Effective capacity development should help partners to become learning organizations."

Another criticism is that the NCEA focuses on stakeholders at the national level, and does not pay enough attention to capacity at the local level or to the capacities of small-scale investors. This issue is more difficult to address. Although we agree in principle with the criticism, the sheer number of enterprises and stakeholders at the local level requires capacity development programmes of a size that is beyond our capacity.

Enabling conditions for learning

A key finding of the IOB evaluation is that effective capacity development should help partners to become learning organizations. There are a number of enabling conditions for this learning, of which two stand out: sufficient institutional memory, and continuity in trained and skilled staff. We have therefore made these two objectives priorities in our future work. This includes support in building databases and libraries, access to these in the form of websites, and the earlier mentioned integration of financial mechanisms (e.g. legal dues) into the EIA and SEA regulation.

Finally: generic conclusions on capacity development

The final conclusions of the IOB do not focus on specific organizations, because the aim was to draw generic conclusions that apply to all capacity development. The generic conclusions are summarized in the box above – although the summary does some injustice to the many worthwhile lessons and conclusions drawn in the evaluation. These conclusions were the starting points for the design of the NCEA's recently awarded 5-year programme 2012–16.

The full reports of IOB's evaluation on the capacity development efforts of seven Dutch organizations can be found at: http://www.minbuza.nl/ producten-endiensten/ evaluatie/ afgerondeonderzoeken/ 2011/iob-evaluation-of-thedutch- support-to-capacity-developmentfacilitating-resourcefulness.html

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