

Samuhik सामूहिक पहल Pahal

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Rethinking Capacity Building

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What's in a Name?

From Training to Transformational Development

Nisha Nair

Children from underserved communities encounter numerous challenges that often adversely impact their learning and development. The school experiences for many—characterized by a heavy reliance on textbooks, memorization of content, and narrow assessments in the form of tests—compromise the development of skills and attitudes necessary for children to flourish. This, in turn, limits children's access to future opportunities.

Disrupting problematic beliefs requires a recognition that these beliefs exist in the first place. And, it involves identifying the root cause of their existence.

There is growing recognition, however, that “with uncertainty about the kind of skills the jobs of the future will require, schools and teachers must prepare students with more than basic reading and writing skills. Students need to be able to interpret information, form opinions, be creative, communicate well, collaborate, and be resilient.” In short, “be equipped with the skills they need to thrive in an increasingly demanding and uncertain world” (World Bank, 2019).

It is against this backdrop that ArtSparks Foundation was established in 2015. ArtSparks is an educational nonprofit organization that uses visual art and design to support the development of 21st century

learning and life skills in children, particularly those from marginalized communities. Through our Creative Learning Lab program, we strive to usher in an alternate vision for education—one that embraces broader conceptions of ability; nurtures varied human potential; inspires diverse ways of thinking; and invests, with equal vigor, in children's creative, cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Enabling Local Participation - Mobilizing Women

In order to administer our Creative Learning Lab program ArtSparks has turned to women from within the local communities where our work is situated. These women, often disempowered by their socio-cultural realities, are not required to possess prior teaching and/or art facilitation experiences. This is primarily because the absence of such experiences does not preclude potential. Neither does the presence of such experiences exclude problematic classroom practices, often acquired within a rigid system of education.

Instead, for this program women are recruited on the basis of need and enthusiasm, as evidenced during the recruitment process. Yet, as we embark on working with them, we are mindful that many of the women's understanding of teaching and learning, and even art, may have been compromised by their prior experiences as learners themselves. And, that they may carry beliefs regarding ability, intelligence, success, knowledge, and more, that are incongruent to the goals of ArtSparks' programming for children.



A Workshop in Progress

Mobilizing women from local communities has undoubtedly offered us a viable solution that addresses our need for facilitators. However, recognizing the complexity of experiences that our women enter the organization with propels us further to invest in their development in more deep and meaningful ways. When enlisted and empowered, these women display a vested interest in serving the needs of the communities they come from. And they go on to frequently build strong bonds with the families and community members they come in contact with. This in turn enables them to more convincingly advocate on behalf of the children they serve, and their learning and development. This also helps them cultivate their untapped potential to lead change in their communities.

Beliefs and Their Constraints on Teaching Practice

Successful implementation of an educational program that seeks to facilitate a paradigm shift in education hinges on the quality and effectiveness of its teacher development efforts. Transformative educational programming for children calls for more inspired approaches to teaching. Research, however, reveals that teachers' knowledge and skills are often shaped by beliefs that reflect their sociocultural contexts and experiences. And that these beliefs can exert significant influence on teachers' actions.

For example, a belief that accepts the existence of hierarchies in society can creep into the classroom, perpetuating teaching practices that maintain hierarchical relationships between teachers and their students. This in turn can inhibit the adoption of child-centered practices that require teachers to break hierarchies and work collaboratively with their students, staying curious, asking questions, and discovering things together as co-learners.

While professional development efforts should engage with these entering beliefs, they often do not. On the contrary, teacher training practices can perpetuate and reinforce these enduring beliefs. For example, the belief that knowledge is fixed can be reinforced through imparting fixed content through trainings. Unexamined, these beliefs can color teachers perceptions, inhibiting their understanding of reform agendas that in turn impact implementation.

For example, teachers' continued perceptions of themselves as transmitters of knowledge and children as receivers, can result in their integrating child-centered methods into their traditional rote methods of teaching. Outward manifestations of this may include, teachers using props and an engaging tone while still didactically narrating a rhyme, line by line, to their students, who in turn repeat each line back word-for-word. Or, in art, teachers showing their students, step-by-step, how to make a replica of a famous artist's painting, with students in turn merely recreating the same.

The above illuminates for us the extent to which developing our women facilitators is a complex process that necessitates going beyond the mere provision of content training that delivers neatly packaged program solutions to be adopted. And, compels us to reflect on how failing to acknowledge and engage our facilitators in examining their beliefs can result in them rejecting new knowledge or continue to operate in earlier

modes due to its inadequate internalization. Grappling with these issues and more inform our ongoing efforts to develop our facilitators.

Efforts Towards Transformational Development

Disrupting problematic beliefs requires a recognition that these beliefs exist in the first place. And, it involves identifying the root cause of their existence. At ArtSparks, learning circles offer our facilitators a safe space to congregate and engage in discussions and analysis around a range of topics, such as, the nature of learning, notions of intelligence, definitions of success, and more. These discussions, always connected to personal experience, serve as a way for our women to surface and challenge the legitimacy of previously unexamined beliefs and assumptions.



ArtSparks Foundation

An Exhibition in a Workshop

Combined with immersive embodied experiences, these discussions serve as a pathway to perspective transformation.

Additionally, as an organization that upholds the arts, we have also been relying on the visual arts, introducing it as an expressive, emotive tool to propel dialogue, while recognizing the powerful influence that emotions and feelings play in the transformational process. Furthermore, we have found that the creation of art can help transcend the limitations of traditional forms of communication, and allow for an alternate means to surface beliefs that are present deep within the subconscious.

The imaginal quality of art also lends itself for our women to imagine alternate states of being. Moreover, we're finding, anecdotally, that participation in creative endeavors that enable our women to start seeing themselves in a new light, as creative individuals, has some implications for the way they contribute to the creative re-envisioning of education.

As we continue to engage in this process with our women facilitators, learning from it, and excited by the possibilities it holds, we however understand that addressing beliefs as part of their development is not a singular event. Instead we understand that it is an ongoing effort. Particularly, as entrenched beliefs have the possibility of resurfacing. Especially when considering the complexity of the external environment and the myriad influences it exerts on our women.

A Glimpse at a Facilitator's Journey

Reflecting back on her school experiences, Roopali (name changed) describes herself as having been an unexceptional, average student. And it is these qualities that she believes caused her teachers to pay no heed to her. Instead, she recalls, her teachers elevating the handful of students that they deemed 'intelligent,' worthy of their attention. Being rendered invisible as a child, when she secretly craved the attention of her teachers, was a source of immense sadness. But her behavior turned to defiance when a teacher reprimanded her for the actions of one of the so-called intelligent students. In time, feelings of worthlessness set in, along with a sense of shame, and a strong belief that

she would never be successful, all of which contributed to her regular absence from school, and her eventually leaving school. Growing up within an unsupportive family environment, she did not have an outlet to talk about her experiences, and make sense of them. Instead, she internalized her experiences, and over time, believed herself to be the problem.

The effects of these early experiences seemed to have carried over to her adult life. By her own admission, when Roopali attended the recruitment drive organized by ArtSparks, comparing herself to the other candidates present, she did not consider herself worthy of the position. And, therefore, even though she cleared the first round, and was invited back to a second, she did not attend for fear that she would appear foolish and incapable. It took convincing on the organization's part for her to finally relent.

Once hired, she attended ArtSparks' trainings. But, despite being introduced to concepts around child development, 21st century learning and life skills development, child-centered teaching practices, and more, having no reference of these from her own personal experiences, she had a difficult time reconciling these ideas. And, as such, she grasped these concepts at a superficial level. Which meant that, during the early phase of her entering the Creative Learning Lab, she abandoned her new learnings and rather unconsciously mimicked her teachers' behaviors. Behaviors that included, but, were not limited to, teaching in a didactic manner; categorizing children as slow and fast learners; putting the onus of learning on children rather than on herself. It was only when the organization changed its strategy of developing facilitators like her that she found herself gradually embodying the values of the organization and imbibing its methodologies at a deeper level.

Roopali's metamorphosis is now evident to anyone who meets her. But, maybe, not as apparent as it is to her, as only she knows how far she has come through her journey at ArtSparks. And only she has truly experienced how these shifts have occurred within her in deeply meaningful, yet, sometimes conflicting ways. Reconnecting to, deconstructing, and challenging her prior experiences has allowed her to get to the root of problematic beliefs that have previously stood in her way.

Engaging in acts of self-reflection, and wrestling with the feelings and emotions that emerge as a result, has her empathizing with children and all that they experience. Experiencing growth through confronting rather than avoiding impediments, as someone who was previously thought of as incapable of growth, has her reassessing notions of growth and capability. All of this and more have profound implications for her facilitation practice as she exemplifies the fact that what she does is no longer just work, but a calling.

Nisha Nair has been involved in the education sector for over 15 years in varied settings in the US and India. As an art educator, she is deeply interested in how meaningful art experiences can propel individual and social transformation, and in how teachers can promote such experiences for diverse

learners. This dual interest is what led her to start ArtSparks Foundation.

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Unpacking and Making Sense of ‘Capacity Building’

Anish Kumar

In 2009, while visiting a remote village in Shahpur, Betul (in the state of Madhya Pradesh) an interesting visual came up right next to the road. It was the new सरकारी (government) building painted in bold saying ‘क्षमता भवन’. Our enquiries revealed this was ‘Capacity Building’ under the Food for Work Program and would be used for storing Minor Forest Produce! In the days before Google Translate, many development workers have seen and heard such creative interpretations of ‘Capacity Building’!

So what is Capacity Building? What is Capacity? How did this become standard intervention in development projects? Can anyone in real sense build someone else’s capacity? If yes, then how? How to know if ‘capacity’ is being built ‘up’ ‘down’?

Building the capacity of communities to manage a comprehensive set of public services and creating thriving, resilient economies is now a major developmental goal.

I have grappled with such questions all my life in as a development professional. Here, I will attempt to place the conceptual underpinnings to the subject and my reflections on it, and the effort will be to invite readers to immerse, reflect and declutter for themselves this important area of action in the social sector.

Defining Capacity and Capacity Building

On the one hand the word capacity can be used for things like Potential and Ability; whereas on the other hand it is also a synonym of Capability and Performance. I highlight these two different sets of meanings of the word ‘capacity’.

The concept of ‘capacity building’ is one of the most abstract ones that development agencies deal with. This term derives from, and depends on, the variously interpreted, multi-faceted conception of ‘development’, that is largely understood intuitively but seldom unpacked into concrete, uniformly agreed upon aspects.

We need to ground the idea of ‘capacity building’ in real-world engagements of development agencies, constraints and aspirations. The Hindi words कबिलीयत and कुव्वत – together beautifully capture the essence of capacity in context of development practice. Central to these words is a sense of control/power that one has to leverage available opportunities in achieving a set of purposes set by oneself.

By ‘ability’ we usually refer to what ‘you can do’ in present as compared to ‘potential’ which is what ‘you can do’ in future. Capacity is potential available in the present, what you can do now, it is the ability to carry stated objectives.

‘Capability’ is what a person can do, ‘Performance’ is what you actually deliver on your stated purpose(s). Capacity refers to those capabilities in a specific task

environment or directed towards attainment of defined purpose.

In broad terms, capacity building refers to processes or activities that improves the ability to carry out stated objectives. It is used in the context of an individual, organization, or system.

It is an internal process of improvement in functions and abilities, especially in terms of specific skills which may be stimulated or enhanced with external assistance.

Capacity building is now well understood as an internal process driven by those whose capacities are to be developed. External assistance is better understood in terms of its components, strategies, dimensions, and intervention.

In recent times, 'capacity development' is often preferred to the term 'capacity building'. Underlying this is the premise that capacity exists and can only be stimulated or strengthened from outside. The concern here is that, by presuming to build capacity, we may be implicitly referring to an assumption that no capacity exists to begin with.

In this article we will use capacity building interchangeably with capacity development, underlining the belief that capacity exists in individuals, communities, institutions. External capacity building efforts can only stimulate or strengthen intrinsic existing capacities. This assumption and understanding underscores a fundamental fact that people are not the problem, they are the solution.

Conceptual Underpinnings

Capacity building needs to impact multiple dimensions of a disadvantaged person's life. Material resources alone cannot bring the desired change. Communities themselves must be willing to take charge of the change process with the belief that

human beings have the potential to change one's own lives and that of others, and that it is possible to facilitate the realization of this potential through alteration in one's self-view.

Capacity building/development thus is a deeply human-centered process anchored on self and interaction of the self with its environment. The process of change is understood to have two distinct parts; a personal dimension and the environmental dimension. Capacity development takes place when personal dimensions such as aspirations, self-belief and sense of agency are triggered and each person is provided with an ecosystem that supports fulfilment of these aspirations.

Processes to trigger 'capacity building change' at community level is best supported with peer support groups.

Practice over the years has shown that the most critical process for capacity building which is internal to an individual or a group is the action-reflection process. Triggering processes for action-reflection within safe-spaces provided by support groups of disadvantaged communities is a key process which links the intervention with psycho-social change.

Repeated cycles of concrete experiences followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, leading to experimentation of new behaviour and practices facilitate the process of questioning age-old held beliefs about one's self and the society.

Examples of such negative self-beliefs are: "I am a tribal and tribal person can never be a progressive-prosperous farmer;" "We as women are subordinate to men;" etc.

Another inspiration to the way we understand capacity has been the capability approach articulated by Amartya Sen. This has two important components: (a) freedom to achieve well-being; (b) and, well-being understood in terms of people's capabilities and functionings.

Capabilities are the doings and beings, such as being well-nourished, being educated; and functionings are capabilities that have been realized. The key capacity question is how someone can convert a set of means - resources and public goods - into a functioning.

Capabilities have also been referred to as real freedoms as they denote the freedoms that have been cleared of any potential obstacles, in contrast to mere formal rights.

Capacity Building as an Integrated System

As discussed earlier, capacity development is a contextual process. It is rooted in specific development objectives. Design of effective capacity development program has to be tailored to specific priorities and issues.

Therefore, it is helpful to think about capacity development clearly by asking the following set of questions:

- Who: Whose capacities are planned to be developed? Which communities'?
- What: What is the purpose? To what end do we need to develop capacity?
- When: What milestones indicates when 'capacity' is deemed to have been 'developed'?

Capacity development is a perpetually evolving process of growth and change. The three points of action/intervention are: system, in organizations and within defined communities or individuals.

These three are inter-related and linked. 'System' refers to the broad social system within which people and organizations

function e.g. the rules, laws, policies, power relations and social norms that govern civic engagement. 'Organization' refers to the internal structure, policies and procedures that determine an organization's efficacy and effectiveness.

These include inputs, processes and resources. 'Communities/groups/individuals' are the agency, skills, experience and knowledge that allow each one to deliver or perform.

'Being' and 'doing,' functioning, self-view, self-efficacy, agency, and instrumentality of initiative and action are some of the internal aspects that are central to this.

Capacity Building: Evolution of a Core Strategy in Development

Capacity building or capacity development, is a fairly recent concept in the social sector. It started gaining lot of traction in 1990s, principally as a better way of 'doing' development. Capacity development is often used together with training, technical assistance, or policy advice. Capacity development now has emerged as a core function of the United Nations Development System. The Sustainable Development Goal Target 17.9 is the dedicated target for capacity- building.

The Hindi words **काबिलीयत** and **कुव्वत** – together beautifully capture the essence of capacity in context of development practice.

The dominant thinking in development engagement today can be summarized as capacity development, thus integrally linked to 'human development.' It is about change that empower individuals, communities, agencies and societies.

A good test us for engagements that constitute capacity building is whether it

leads to change that is generated, guided and sustained by those whom it is meant to benefit. The shift has been towards agency, freedom, efficacy, capabilities and away from relief, training, technical assistance and program support approaches of the past.

Increasingly capacity building strategies are being advocated and implemented at the community level as well as at the individual level. Building the capacity of communities to manage a comprehensive set of public services and creating thriving, resilient economies is now a major developmental goal.

This has become known as Community led Development (CLD). It is the process of collaboratively striving together towards visions and objectives of systemic transformation that are owned by local communities. CLD tries to go beyond projects and tries to put people in control of their own process of development. It focuses on building up the entire system of public services and their governance.

Capacity building needs to impact multiple dimensions of a disadvantaged person's life. Material resources alone cannot bring the desired change.

Processes to trigger 'capacity building change' at community level is best supported with peer support groups, which create the necessary conditions for exploration and understanding the skewed power dynamics around caste, class and gender, for joint identification of cross-cutting issues, and to start collective action.

Capacity Building: Some Indian Examples

One good example of this process is the women's Self Help Group (SHG) movement in India. Modelled on the Alcoholic Anonymous,

these are groups of 10-20 women drawn by affinity who come together.

Their similar socio-economic context provides a setting of examining existential realities of poverty. They explore ways in which each member could draw on support from each other to set an aspirational goal for herself and contribute collectively.

Women's SHGs have over 70 million members across rural India now. This is the largest such peer-based organization of women collectives in the world. Women members of Self Help Groups often discuss cross-cutting concerns such as treatment of widows, issues surrounding the payment of wages under MGNREGS etc. They then attempt to start collective action leveraging the network of hundreds of primary SHGs in a compact geography.

This collective action could be around adoption of new normative behaviour. Examples of these include deciding to call widows by their names and thus reinforcing an independent identity; accessing public goods, services, and entitlements, e.g. full MGNREGS wages; engaging jointly with markets – e.g. setting up producer aggregations; and, dealing with social discriminations around gender or caste.

One powerful example of such collective action is the anti-arrack movement led by women collectives organized as part of the literacy movement. This process finally led to ban of arrack sales in Andhra Pradesh in 1995.

Similar groundswell by women SHGs forced similar legislative action in Bihar relatively recently. These were grassroots movements with no identifiable leaders. The raising of political and social consciousness led to the realization that collective action can help them control their own destiny.

Farmer Field Schools (FFS) are another good example of capacity development in the

Indian context. FFS as a mode of collective action emerged as a farm technology extension approach including agro-ecological practices.

It is essentially a group-based learning process that is set in a field context and provides farmers opportunities of practical field exercises and learning by doing.

The FFS approach today reaches over two million farmers. In a village context local knowledge interacts with scientific insights, and these are tested, validated and integrated in farmers' fields.

FFS facilitators start with community-based problem analyses and opportunities to develop a location specific curriculum. A growing range of technical topics are being addressed through FFS. These include soil management, crop and water management, varietal testing, and pest management.

In Conclusion

In the context of India, issues central to people's lives such as patriarchy, caste, ethnicity, feudal agrarian and rural economy and disenfranchisement are anchored in power relationships and normative social practices.

Additionally, issues of poor governance, absence of basic public support systems and infrastructure, and lack of functional markets impinge on the context of capacity building engagements and their design process. In such an environment, capacity building processes over the years have started assuming important roles in transformative social action.

This is true of education as a sector as well. Increasingly one can mark a shift from 'training' to identifying capacity gaps and figuring out ways of addressing these. This

shift is more marked in the case of non-profits than in governmental organizations.

Building the capacity of communities to manage a comprehensive set of public services and creating thriving, resilient economies is now a major developmental goal.

At TRIF (Transforming Rural India Foundation) we have taken an approach of building peer networks in order to enable Teachers to share their experiences and also seek academic support from each other.

This has been through larger community enablement. Tools of such enabling processes include newsletters, reading materials, resource centres, learning camps for children (where teachers also participate), and Bal Melas where teachers and parents work together with children.

Teacher peer groups and localized resource centres have become important source of academic and motivational support. It is high time that the public policy discourse around education puts the capacity building of teachers as a learning community and that of schools as social organizations at the centre for a transformative vision for the sector in India. etc.

Anish Kumar is Co-lead at Transform Rural India (TRI) and chairs the National Smallholder Poultry Development Trust. His areas of expertise include creating business organisations run by poor communities and facilitating participation of smallholder farmers in modern value chains.

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Capacity Building

Challenges and Opportunities for a Rural Non-Profit Organization

Arjun Trivedi

Historical Roots of Disempowerment in Assam's Tea Plantations

Karunar Kheti Trust is a rural non-profit organization founded in 2019 and is based in one of the tea-plantations of Assam. Our organization has given agency to its people to build and run a model school. In addition, we are also exploring and developing people-led and ground-up driven initiatives in livelihood development and health. This article lays out our particular context and approach to capacity building, and the challenges and opportunities therein.

The tea-industry of Assam is the 3rd largest employer of people in India and is currently facing an unprecedented socio-economic and environmental crisis that leads many to think

that this industry may not survive another 15-20 years if drastic course corrections are not taken. Deeply entangled in this crisis is the extreme disempowerment of its 1.2 million workers. This disempowerment has historical roots, and was seeded more than 150 years ago by top-down systems of an exploitative indentured/contract labour system created by the colonialists.

This process led to a cycle of inter-generational workforce bound to live on isolated tea plantations with little to no opportunities for development of even the most basic human agency. After independence, any attempts at reform were, at best, also top-down in nature, for example by way of the Plantations Labour Act 1951. The extreme disconnection of proposed

Engaging Parents



solutions to the deep-rooted crisis of the human condition of a vast people has only led to a deepening of the crisis and the conflicts.

From Self to Community: Education as a Pathway for Empowerment

Growing up in the tea-plantations of Assam, this increasing gap between top-level systems, the disempowerment of the people on the ground, and increasing levels of related crisis and conflicts felt clear for me to see. However, as an adult, as I began to note why it was so profoundly difficult to address such gaps, I began to feel the presence of a humbling responsibility to at least try.

Our approach has been to trust our local knowledge and skills to build a foundation for empowerment

I immersed myself in an exploration with the people to find the first steps towards building a collective agency for empowerment. I began noting, ever more deeply on the basis of experience, the depth of the human crisis whose reflection in numbers and statistics has become routine for the tea-plantations of Assam. For example, Assam tops the school dropout and maternal mortality rate in the country, both of which are alarmingly higher in the tea-plantation communities. Our own research in the tea-plantation where we are based revealed that only 5%, 2%, and 1% passed class X, XII, and college, respectively.

The decision to build a school was given birth in such a churn, which included time that I spent time with children as a volunteer tutor and mentor. A group of women tea-pluckers, with whom I spent as much time as with their children, began building confidence and trust in me. One day they opened up to me for their need of a good school, for which if I took the initiative, they would support me. This gesture of support affected me deeply because it was the spark for a spirit

of collective empowerment that I was looking for to lead us. Karunar Kheti Trust, with a vision to give agency to the people to build a school, was thus born.

The overarching challenge that immediately awaited us for building the capacity of such an organization can be briefly noted as those related to bridging this same gap that affects the crisis of the region -- between external/top-down and local/ground-up systems, which are also strongly correlated with modern and traditional systems, respectively. Our approach has been to trust our local knowledge and skills to build a foundation for empowerment on the basis of which this disempowering gap can be collapsed into an empowering and unifying resource pool of knowledge and skills that is fundamentally accessible by all human beings.

Learning Capacity Building: Many Strands that Make the Rope

For example, consider the building of the education expertise of our school. Our community of students, teachers, and parents need safe incubation for an immersive interaction with each other to rediscover the values of empathetic connections, mutual trust and processes of collaboration to build the foundation of our processes of education. This includes, for example, not using textbooks of any kind, but developing the ability to listen to and trust our children, and be guided by the general principle of holistic education that is anything but an exclusive idea.

Recognising systemic disempowerment over generations, we have focussed on adult literacy programs for the parents and are in the process of establishing a School Management Committee (SMC) to deepen the foundations of community participatory processes. On such a basis, we engage with the wider ecosystem of education, from various boards and textbooks, to teacher training courses with SIES Institute of Comprehensive Education, Mumbai and Azim Premji University's School of Education.



Karunar Kheti Trust

Wholesome Engagement

For our larger goal of organization development, we are working on a program developed by Dhvani Foundation to systematically develop, initiate, and document respective processes and policies of compliance, governance, finance and accounting, HR etc. After having established such a core foundation, we have begun to look towards significantly more challenging aspects of organizational growth based on an even greater synergy between the top-down systems and ground realities of the tea-plantations. For example, we are working on extending our Board of Trustees to include in it members from the labour community as well as the top level ownership, management, and administration of tea-plantations.

To create the capacity of such a diverse, historically disparate and even distrustful body of people to work together will be one of our greatest challenges, but within it is also the key to one of our greatest opportunities – that of creating a wholesome body of leadership to guide our organization to enable a people and industry to move beyond the entrenched landscape of conflict and crisis into peace and prosperity.

Arjun Trivedi has a PhD in Physics and for 15 years he worked in some of the world's leading scientific and engineering institutions. He grew up in the tea plantations of Assam and recently returned to respond to the socio-economic, political and environmental challenges being faced by its people and the tea industry of Assam as a whole. He co-founded Karunar Kheti Trust (with Mineswar Dutta) to works towards empowering the tea plantation communities of Assam as a vital pillar of a wholesome solution for creating peace and prosperity for the tea industry and its people. The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of Gaurav Sarma in writing this article, from discussions that helped bring to words key experiences that had made a dwelling in the subconscious to proofreading and editing. Gaurav is an independent researcher based in Assam specializing in tea plantation labour.

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Muskaan's Journey to Capacitate Communities and its Team

Samuhik Pahal Team

Muskaan was set up in 1998 in Bhopal. Since then, it has been working with marginalized communities on education, identity, violence, health, livelihood, and survival needs. Their primary focus remains on supporting learning journeys of children from these communities and developing their capacities as youths. In this interview, we discuss Muskaan's approach and journey with Shivani, founding member of Muskaan, and Brijesh, Savita, and Chandni, core team members of the organization. Chandni started her journey with Muskaan as a student in the classes that the organization facilitated.

Samuhik Pahal: It would be helpful if you could please share with us the vision with which Muskaan was set up.

Shivani: Muskaan started around 25 years back. Initially, the team focused on tutoring a few kids in a *basti* in Bhopal, and we tried to ensure that the out-of-school children were enrolled in appropriate grades. We quickly realized that our work could not be limited to a year or two.

To ensure that the children's learning is meaningful for them, we felt that we would have to deepen our support and touch various aspects of their life. That's how the scope and vision of Muskaan's work also expanded over the years.

It is heartening to see people like Chandni diligently pursue their dreams and passionately work with marginalized communities. In 1997, Chandni, now my colleague, was in the first group of children we started working with. She has been associated with the team ever since.

She completed her schooling from 1998 to 2008. After finishing her schooling, she completed two years of engineering, pursued her graduation, worked for a while, and is presently studying Law. When we closely observe her learning trajectory, we understand the role we need to play to ensure that children from a background like Chandni's can pursue their dreams.

Often the need to learn comes through community driven pressure – if you need to respond to community (needs) you need to learn.

Samuhik Pahal: How do you try to achieve synergy between the needs and learning journeys of individual team members and that of the organization?

Brijesh: I remember that I joined with three other individuals. We were all freshers without any experience. The thing that helped us in viewing our journeys in tandem with the organization's journey was our lengthy discussions with team members. When new team members join they learn about various aspects of the work by participating in these discussions, arriving at consensus and working on them. With time, synergies at different levels including aims, approaches, values and commitment become visible to individuals as well as to the organization.

Shivani: Allowing/encouraging new members to interact and work directly in the field helps bring in commitment to the community. This

individual attachment and commitment towards the community is what helps the organization bring in stability and synergy.

Samuhik Pahal: Could you please talk more on how working directly with communities has aided in augmenting the learnings and capacities of team members?

Allowing/encouraging new members to interact and work directly in the field helps bring in commitment to the community.

Shivani: Muskaan values field experiences to augment the learning of an individual. By actively working with the communities, we observed that our planning of training and programs was grounded. If an individual fails to work with communities, then their learning quickly stagnates. The entire team used to sit together for a month, talking, reading, listening to resource persons, discussing and reaching a common understanding for our work; and our experiences from working with the communities helped us plan better. It also helped us remain committed to the children of the *bastis* and always made us feel as if we are a family.

Continuously working with communities has allowed individuals to live important milestones of the organization together and build their own learning. Every three-four years, we witness some important milestones, whether it is with respect to the direction or new elements of work, and they impact the team members. Although people may decide to leave the organization, the milestones make their journeys exciting.

For instance, we had Heman, an Azim Premji University student, intern with us and then later join us as a team member. He specifically wished to focus on the issues of de-notified tribes that we work with. He was a witness to four significant cases of violence

against members of a community during his short stint. In a few years, he might move to another workplace, but his learnings would stay with him.

Samuhik Pahal: How do you think the organization and the members learned together? Could you please elaborate on this by recounting specific instances?

Brijesh: In 2004, the team was trying to understand the challenges that made the children we supported later drop out from government schools. These challenges were making the children not only drop out but also exit the formal schooling system altogether. We then revisited our approach and decided to closely start working with the teachers in government schools through trainings and classroom demonstrations.

However, we noticed that the teachers wrongly started viewing us as their substitutes in classrooms and there was a lack of acceptance. This challenge made the team again revisit our strategy. We decided to work with the Education Department only when we were invited. Continuous evolution of organization's purpose, approaches and strategy is in a way a outcome of our learning and reflections.

In terms of individual/personal learning, these experiences helped me dispel my myth around school being the only site of a child's learning process. I realized that a child could learn in any conducive environment.

Some of us had latent biases against marginalized communities that were quickly dispelled by working with the communities. By working in proximity with these communities, we understood the people, their challenges and various aspects of their lives better, and became friends and co-travellers with them.

Savita: Through my experiences of running centre/classes in one of the communities for three years without having any place as such,

I learnt to trust communities' intentions and desire to educate their children. And they found alternative places where I could sit and teach, and made me comfortable and cared for me as I worked with their kids.

Samuhik Pahal: How do you look at your work with children (in terms of capacities)?

Shivani: There was an event that made me more conscious about how the schooling system fails to build the capacities of children from underserved communities. I remember meeting a child in school. She would always meet me enthusiastically when I met her in the basti. But here where we had enrolled her, even as we made eye contact, the child would immediately look away. I then wondered what exactly education teaches our children. Our children were not learning to be confident enough to present themselves as individuals and their views. Education is supposed to build students' capacities and should not focus only on enhancing literacy. Unfortunately, the system fails the children from underserved communities. They do not get the power to voice their opinions even if they do learn literacy, which is also not happening.

Communities start to trust us when they see us responding to their needs. We might go there with some project; but we must address their needs and issues.

Samuhik Pahal: How do you approach the creation of second line of leadership within the Organization?

Shivani: When the scope of organization's work widens and expands, it is difficult, almost impossible, for it to occupy mindspace of one or two individuals. It is necessary that multiple individuals think

about different areas of work to maintain depth and pace of the work. Each such space needs leadership and people do come forward to occupy these spaces. And when people accept and come forward to occupy particular spaces, work in these areas grows. Each one of us brings in our own strengths and ways of working. Therefore, different people in the leadership role bring their own strengths and would lead work differently.

Samuhik Pahal: To build leadership within communities, Muskaan has encouraged the setting up of initiatives and organizations by community members. Could you please elaborate on this process?

Savita: Facilitating discussion around various issues of communities through various means like classroom discussions, games, and workshops has been part of Muskaan's core approach. Apart from that, efforts have also been made to facilitate discussions among members of communities to nurture different types of collectives within communities. Through a process of such meetings, youth from the Pardhi community decided to form a group to work on issues faced by their own community. They decided to name it – *Mazal* (मजल) - a Pardhi word which mean Destination (मंज़िल) – as the group felt they were deciding their own destination and direction.

The name Mazal was arrived at through democratic means through deep discussions around the meaning of the word. With Mazal, in the beginning, women representation was relatively less. But the group and members of the community made efforts to encourage women in their bastis or mohallas to engage more participation. Mazal operates on inclusive democratic principles and internal processes that allow each member to voice their concerns. The issues that are put forward by the community are collectively addressed. They cover various challenges ranging from access to education, problems with panchayats, legal issues and girls' independence.

Shivani: Existence of a group like Mazal, comprising of youth from the community, creates stronger hope for people both inside the community as well as outside it. Internally driven hope is more significant compared to the hope created by an external organization or an external individual as Muskaan or any one of us.

Chandni: I had enrolled in the classes by Muskaan. The value system of the organization ensures that team members remain close to the community. I finished my degree in Law a few months back. We facilitated the setting up of a group of 20 young people from the Gond community in Bhopal. The name of this collective is 'Sanghwaari' which in Gondi means companionship. The youth who form the core group of the collective have had varied educational levels and experiences. But all of them are committed to voicing the issues of their community. Members of the Muskaan team know that they might not always be with the community and address their issues. Thus, capacitating becomes imperative.

Tasveer (Mazal) and I (Sanghwaari) are part of different collectives. We wish to practice law and address the issue of police atrocities against marginalized communities. In the last one or two years, there have been substantial efforts to set up the process and recently towards registering Sanghwaari. I believe that disseminating information on relevant laws, constitutional rights, and historical injustices would aid the community to be aware of the wrongs meted out against them.

Shivani: All of us are happy that the community's youth took the initiative to set up their organization and voice their concerns. We might decide to pack our bags and leave the work that we are doing. It is better that organically, community members are empowered to defend their rights. We are waiting for that day when a group member says they have a relative in Itarsi and Nagpur and how they could collaborate to take the

initiative forward there and not limit it to their own geographies.

Two community specific groups Sanghwari (Gond) and Mazal (Pardhi) have emerged under the leadership of children and youth who have been associated with Muskaan in different ways. They have their own genuine reasons due to which they see the need of forming community specific groups. But at the same time, many of them are part of the core group at Muskaan which still remains a space where work continues with multiple communities. These groups work with strong respect and dignity for their own identity and stand for the progressive values they believe in. The good thing is leadership of these groups have 8-10 people and not just 1-2 people driving it.

Facilitating discussion around various issues of communities through various means like classroom discussions, games, and workshops has been part of Muskaan's core approach.

Samuhik Pahal: Since the team closely interacts with communities, they must be significantly invested in their problems. The challenges of de-notified tribes are multi-faceted. How does the team deal with setbacks in their work?

Shivani: The Muskaan team hears many stories of violence from various kinds of people. We have witnessed community members aged from ten years to seventy years committing suicide. Every death is a setback to us. Each life lost means that it was a person who could not receive the support they desperately needed. Some of these drastic disappointments we have lived with not for days but for weeks and months. During

these tough times, we reminded ourselves that it would take time and perseverance and we have to go on. There is a reluctance to speak and address mental health problems. There has been an appointment of counsellors in the *bastis* who could provide aid.

Samuhik Pahal: How does Muskaan ensure enhancing the capacities at a personal and a community level?

Brijesh: Opportunities play an important role in capacity building. For example, you are part of a project in which you get opportunities and responsibilities to write proposal or reports and that helps you develop certain skills and capabilities. On the other hand, need to act in a given situation also enhances capacities of different kinds. For instance, if there would be a visit to the police station, then community members would be encouraged or forced to voice their views.

Savita: When I joined the organization, I was nervous about taking classes and adopting new pedagogic methods. But the only way in which I was truly capacitated was by holding classes. Apart from learning by doing, sharing or presenting our work, understanding with others has also helped me gain confidence and capabilities.

Chandni: Capacity building could happen in any manner. I remember when I was in class ten, I was requested to go to the post office. I had to send something via Speed Post, and I was very hesitant about going there. It was the first time I travelled alone on a bus. I sought help at the post office and ended up completing the task. I could not believe how easy it was. Earlier my interaction was always limited to people in my *basti*. But, through the constant nudging by my team, I could comfortably travel and became confident about voicing my views.

Shivani: To connect to what Savita and Brajesh have said, these opportunities to do, share, present, reflect or discuss with

others are crucial for capacity building. Another important aspect is people's openness to learn, and that gravely hampers or contributes to their own growth trajectory. The curiosity of our team members has aided them in enhancing their capacities.

Often the need to learn comes through community driven pressure – if you need to respond to community (needs) you need to learn. At Muskaan we have tried to learn through combination of ways – both from training, and through working on the field (experience).

For example, we have been trying to learn about MLE by doing and experimenting. And then a training program by Prof Ramakant Agnihotri helped us understand what MLE is. With these learnings we further developed our understanding on MLE, thinking and working together.

When one works with vulnerable communities one has to keep learning, thinking and reflecting together. There is no standard thing that will work for sure.

Continuously working with communities has allowed individuals to live important milestones of the organization together and build their own learning.

Samuhik Pahal: In your experience, what is the role of communities' trust in building the capacity of individuals?

Brajesh: Communities start to trust us when they see us responding to their needs. We might go there with some project; but we must address their needs and issues. As parents when they see their children learning they trust us. When there are issues of violence in the community and we stand with them they trust us. When we fight for justice with them, they trust us.



Muskaan

Savita: We view the community as an ally in this journey. When our team is holding classes, they encourage parents to visit their children. The parents trust the team because they always stick around and see how classes are conducted. When parents first-hand see noticeable changes in the learning levels of the children and become confident about our pedagogy, then they organically start trusting the process and the team. That is very empowering for us as individuals and as a team. Sanghwaari and Mazal respond to communities' concerns. We do not hesitate in raising voices against violence by the police and custodial deaths. Since we remain open

to addressing these complex issues, the community has trust in us.

Chandni: There has been a growing trust between members from different castes and tribes living in the basti. Earlier, there used to be conflicts amongst various communities. Muskaan is working on problems of education, violence, etc. Since these problems span across communities, gradually, a feeling of collective solidarity has developed.

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Capacity Building of the Team in Swatantra Talim Foundation

Ridhi Aggarwal and Rahul Aggarwal

Team members are the foundation of all organizations. Without a good team, it is difficult to move towards the desired vision and mission of the organization. The key task here is to clearly articulate the organization's vision and mission as well as identifying the right set of people having the passion, skills, knowledge and mindset to help in achieving these.

While Swatantra Talim work on nurturing critical and creative thinking among children, a question that kept on arising during staff meetings was how to nurture this? One of the team members, after looking at children playing in the village and thinking of innovative ideas, suggested that play could be a good tool to nurture creative and critical thinking.

It sounded great! But, there were some questions like what does playful, making-centered learning and teaching look like in 'Khoj Shaala' and how can play and playfulness support children's academic learning and understanding?

Playing and Learning: Learning the State of the Art

Having grappling with this issue, the team did research, looked for articles in various magazines and journals, talked to mentors, and found out the course on teaching strategies for playful learning by Project Zero run by Harvard University Graduate School of Education (For more details, please see the 'Box Item' in this article).

The various elements of the course were looked at in terms its time duration, content knowledge, assignment commitments and

whether the same is done at an individual or at a group level.

The course was to be done at a group level (minimum of three members) in which four of our team members enrolled having interest in play-based learning. The structure of the course was in line with the different programs of the organization. The assignments were part of the work plan; therefore, very limited additional time was to be given in addition to the usual work responsibilities.

Swatantra Talim has a program called 'Khoj Shaala' which is around a maker space. Its goal is to enable children to question the status quo

The group courses helped in a wide variety of discussions within the team. It also helped in integrating learning and the consequent application of the same in day-to-day work with children. The course had an element of project work which helped in visualizing the impact of the course as well as in applying the learning immediately.

After doing the course, the team crafted the indicators of playful learning which helped in designing the framework and approach for the organization.

Thinking to Learn, Learning to Think

We as teachers are deeply curious about the way students think. We as teachers need to probe further when we are not sure

Useful Websites

<https://pz.harvard.edu/projects/pedagogy-of-play>

<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/visible-thinking>

<https://fablearn.org/about/>

<https://teacherauthor.in>

that a student has responded fully. We were interested in their thoughts, ideas and mental models; but it was difficult for us to make these visible.

Thinking is highly meta-cognitive and quite abstract as a process and very difficult to visualize. On this pretext, a teacher finds it extremely difficult to know the level of students' learning having to resort only to summative assessments. While most students are good with thinking, they might find it difficult to express themselves in the standard paper-and-pen test based on set curriculum and syllabus.

Through the same process of research, subscriptions and taking advice from the mentors, we found that there is course on 'Making Thinking Visible' by Harvard University. The course is based on three main principles: thinking routines, the documentation of student thinking and reflective professional practices.

Three of our team members did the course and their reflections were to apply, see, think and wonder about the thinking disposition to bring out our perspectives as a group on students' thinking and dispositions.

We as a group saw students being able to observe the creative things around them. They were able to identify these creative elements and appreciate them. They were also able to think about the nuances around creative objects and ideas.

As a teacher we all still wonder how students

have gone beyond the creative elements being restricted only to objects and things to the deeper level of emotions and feelings. For the first time the students were able to find the opportunity to apply their abilities.

The thinking routines provided an ideal balance to us which helped students identify and follow their creative pursuits; it helped us to simultaneously visualize students' thinking in a systematic manner as well. The best content is not which is fancy, elaborate or tech-savvy but the ones which enhance students' learning.

Through such workshops, at the individual level, there was a shift in the way team members approached their lessons as the focus became more on the process of learning rather than the product of learning.

It wasn't easy to find the most suitable course but when passion and purpose converge, then magic happens. This magic could be seen once again when we were thinking about our core work around 'maker spaces' that spark children's imagination, curiosity, critical and creative thinking.

Fellowship in Making

Swatantra Talim has a program called 'Khoj Shaala' which is around a maker space. Its goal is to enable children to question the status quo leading them to tinker and make something which could bring a change in their perspective and of the community.

But, to move ahead in the work one needs a set of like-minded people who are doing similar kind of work. Swatantra Talim thought of looking for a network of people or organizations working in the space of 'maker movement'.

Through our research we found about 'FabLearn Fellowship'. This is a two-year international fellowship which advocates and supports constructionist, equitable learning experiences for all children.

Their central idea this year is how to “make maker-spaces culturally and contextually relevant” which was quite similar to what Swatantra Talim was striving for.

Ridhi, co-founder of Swatantra Talim is now a FabLearn Fellow. The thought process of the fellowship is completely in alignment with the organization’s work. Therefore, the time allocated for webinars and for writing blogs etc. for this Fellowship program, has contributed towards its core work.

During the fellowship, Ridhi has had chances to interact with experienced educators in formal and informal learning spaces worldwide. This helped her in linking research and practice about making and maker-spaces in education, along with development of open-source educational resources.

Thinking is highly meta-cognitive and quite abstract as a process and very difficult to visualize.

This fellowship provides ample opportunities to interact and have dialogues with theorists as well as practitioners around the world. It has opened up a different spectrum for Ridhi as well, when people who have worked with Professor Seymour Papert for a long time implementing constructionist theories come and interact with the fellows.

Thus, this fellowship contributes towards organizational performance by helping the team build their understanding around the nuances of maker-spaces and making.

A Workshop in which Teachers Learn to be Authors

In a similar manner, one thought that completely resonates with Swatantra Talim’s work is writing stories and poems for children and how can teachers be reflective writers, authors and practitioners.

Since the community teachers expressed their need for a course related to these concerns, three team members subscribed for the ‘Teacher Author’ workshop conducted by Sheetal Paul this year.

In this workshop, teachers read, discuss and reflect on existing children literature. Efforts are put towards enhancing skills and knowledge of the participants to write children’s literature from within their own context as well. This way, children would learn easily and more effectively.

One of the reflections of the participants in this workshop was “my highlight of the course was the literature shared during the course, some incredibly beautiful, funny and crazy stories.

I think I have enough to sustain me for a year or two, be it all those beautifully illustrated story books or be it a poem all in texts. Every assignment we tried was returned with a nice little feedback from Sheetal. The feedback definitely helped me understand where I’m lacking better”.

One other reflection is “I understood the different psychological theories and aspects of children, like how children of different ages react to other stories and story patterns. The importance of rhythms and rhyming in the poems was explained very well”.

In Conclusion

The central idea for building capacity of team members is to first identify the direction in which the individual or the organization wants to move, keeping in mind the mission and vision of the organization.

It is important to look at the strengths of the team members and perform a need-gap analysis. Further, to identify the right set of courses and workshops, different research tools are to be adopted. Then one has to finally square down to the course or the workshop that best suits the organization and the team members.



Swatantra Talim

Once the course is done, it is important to reflect on the learnings of other team members and implement it with a set of students and other teachers through project work, day-to-day lessons and many more experiences.

As teaching is not mere ‘teaching’ but ‘lifelong learning’ too. We feel that if organizations work collectively and build capacities of each other, then it is quite certain that changes can surely be brought about at a systemic level.

Ridhi Aggarwal (along with Rahul Aggarwal) is a co-founder of Swatantra Talim. It is a non-profit that nurtures scientific temper among children in an effort to develop the villages. Ridhi holds a postgraduate degree in education from TISS, Mumbai, and is graduate from Delhi University (DU).

Prior to Swatantra Talim, she worked as a teacher and a special educator at Sahyadri School, Pune (KFI India); she has more than 7 years of experience in corporate, NGO and education sector having worked with leading organisations like TOI and Edelweiss.

Before co-founding Swatantra Talim, **Rahul Aggarwal** did a stint in Sahyadri School as a bursar-cum-teacher. In his corporate career he worked as a Financial Analyst in Airtel and PepsiCo for 10 years. He is a qualified Chartered Accountant and holds a Bachelor’s degree from DU.

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What is Capacity and How to Build It

Learnings from Experiences of Resource Organizations

S Routray

Capacity is a complex thing. But at its core is the idea of the ability to do things and the process of gaining this ability and executing it. The capacity in question might be for something concrete at the individual level. For example, it might refer to the ability to take a class on the number line with young children and contribute to their understanding on the subject. Or it might refer to some more abstract and intangible individual attainment; e.g., the ability to interact with colleagues in a non-judgmental fashion without the burden of personal expectations. At the organizational level, similarly, it might refer to something concrete, like learning to work in a new thematic area such as making coding fun for high school students. Or it might refer to something far subtler – like the ability to create a culture of meetings in the organization where these are conducted democratically, with all voices being heard, respected and given equal importance.

In this piece, we share with you a few audio-visual resources of interactions with Resource Organizations from Wipro's Partners' Network, that cover the whole range of this terrain. In these videos, organizations share a bird's eye view of their journeys, and tell us fascinating stories of learning to work in the various areas they have chosen for themselves.

Jodogyan

Jodogyan is a Delhi-based non-profit that has been active as a resource organization, working in the field of math learning in

schools, for more than two decades now. In the videos that we share, two senior people from the organization discuss many relevant themes related to capacity building. They link processes related to capacity building to questions about motivation and experimentation in pedagogic processes.

In this context they foreground the centrality of the classroom as a site for learning for everything related to school education. They stress the need to link insights borne from classroom practices to policy making and program development exercises.

They also highlight the importance of keeping abreast of relevant research. They also foreground that processes of capacity building at the individual and organizational levels are slow and organic, and need time for their unfolding.

Website: <https://jodogyan.org/>

JodoGyan Video Playlist:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmc8c2ZHF-scq_gQkjTmlIF9xqqnxpNGd

Nature Conservation Foundation

Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) was set up in 1995. It works in the fields of conservation, biodiversity, ecology and human-nature interactions. Research, education and conservation are the modes through which it intervenes in the field. Their offices are in Bengaluru and Mysuru,

but they work all over the country in these areas. When Wipro Foundation approached NCF for conversations about the possibility of starting a nature education program in schools, they thought of it as a great opportunity.

They had done some work in this area, especially within the framework of science popularization earlier. To be able to execute the Nature Classroom Project, NCF used this experience as a springboard and started talking to relevant organizations and individuals.

They also took stock of already existing research and learnt from similar initiatives from across the world and India to build their capacities for this program. To learn about the fascinating journey of how an established organization built its capacities to do something new, please watch the videos on the NCF playlist whose links are shared below.

Website: <https://www.ncf-india.org/>

NCF Video Playlist:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmc8c2ZHF-sfeHiSxOlpmCCemezd2bbJ>

Vikramshila Education Resource Society

Vikramshila is a technical support organization that works in the area of education in the state of West Bengal. It was founded in 1989.

As the founders' initial competencies were in the area of early childhood education, that is the domain in which they started intervening first. The organization had a steep learning curve in the first few years of its existence. It soon started working on all aspects of K12 education.

Learning how to do this has involved working through formal channels such as participation in workshops and training programs for team members. The organization itself has been learning from its membership of the various forums and networks it is a part of. These are more outward facing.

Inward facing processes include study groups, apprenticeship of new team members including courses/field immersions for them, and facilitation of informal interactions etc.

Many of the processes of capacity building at Vikramshila have involved relatively finer aspects of organizational culture, such as learning how to keep the teacher at the center and a foundational reflexivity. For Vikramshila, building one's capacities as a member of its team also means successfully internalizing these values and then having the ability to translate these in the field.

Website: <http://www.vikramshila.org/>

Vikramshila Video Playlist:

<https://youtu.be/9FyUOi6rGkE>

In Conclusion

Capacity refers to both an individual's ability as well as an organization's or a team's bandwidth to do something. It can be something concrete and measurable. It can also be something subtle, intangible and impossible to measure. Capacity building processes need to be seen as unfolding over long time horizons and sometimes can be seen only in conjunction with other aspects of organizational culture. Building our abilities meaningfully to contribute effectively to teaching learning processes entails asking the following questions continuously – what are we here for, and what is it that we want to achieve.

Introducing ‘A Guide to Organizational Capacity Assessment Tools’

K Desai

It has already been pointed by other contributors in this issue that there is a lack of shared definitions and understanding around the term ‘capacity building’, its features and essential elements. Some people refer to it as a vague term that describes a wide range of activities, knowledge, and resources that non-profits need to be effective, while others have focused on defining the process of capacity building (Connolly & Lukas, 2002; Light & Hubbard, 2002).

For the purpose of our discussion here, let’s define ‘capacity’ of an NGO as, “the ability (a wide range of capabilities, knowledge and resources) of non-profit organizations to fulfil their missions in an effective manner”. And therefore, Capacity Building would be – supporting activities that help an organization build its capacity.

Capacity building is not simply participating in workshops or hiring consultants to engage in strategic planning. It is about implementing the learning from those activities that will strengthen an organization.

The skills and systems learnt must be translated into day-to-day operations so that they become part of the organization’s culture. In other words, capacity building involves change – what to change, how to change, and incorporating those changes into the daily routine of organizational life. Ultimately, capacity building is a means to an end and the organisation needs to ask itself: what is the end goal?

Building capacity can seem never-ending, as change in one area often impacts others, thereby requiring further change. Therefore, capacity building should be seen as an on-going process and not as a one-time effort.

That’s where ‘Frameworks for Capacity Building’ can help bring clarity of goals and objectives and provide an appropriate structure, without which capacity building activities can seem disconnected and piecemeal.

A tool has merit if it supports an efficient process for understanding an organization’s strengths and weaknesses, and identifies capacity areas needing attention.

There are many frameworks and tools that can help organisations during different stages of the capacity building process. Large number of these frameworks focuses on similar elements of the organisation but the main difference is in how those elements are groups into components.

Regardless of the organisation size, domain and specific areas of capacity, there is one key factor/step that needs to be considered in order to effectively build capacity of the organization, that is – the entire effort of capacity building should be ‘Assessment-based’.

A thorough assessment of its needs and assets can help the organization understand its current status and goals for growth. It can then help in the planning of priorities and measures for progress.

Here again, a variety of comprehensive tools are available to help nonprofits perform Organisation-level Capacity Assessment. An organizational assessment tool provides funders and nonprofits with a framework to prompt organized thinking about an organization's trajectory, first by individuals as they work their way through the questions and then in shared or collective discussions.

Use of a tool will identify common concerns shared by stakeholders as well as diverging opinions. A tool has merit if it supports an efficient process for understanding an organization's strengths and weaknesses, and identifies capacity areas needing attention.

Capacity building should be seen as an on-going process and not as a one-time effort.

A good starting point could be "A Guide to Organizational Capacity Assessment Tools: Finding and Using the Right Tool for the Job" from William & Flora Hewlett Foundation. In 2017, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Effective Philanthropy Group (EPG) partnered with 'Informing Change' to better understand the landscape of existing (publicly available) Organizational Capacity Assessment tools, and to outline best practices for using these tools in various contexts. The result of this exercise was a database of organizational assessment tools they assembled and a guide to use them.

The people involved wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences people have when they are selecting and actually using organizational assessment tools and to better understand the contexts in which a

tool might be more or less useful. To achieve this, they interviewed funders, leaders of non-profit organizations, and consultants.

The 'Guide' puts across the learning/findings from these interviews in insightful ways. It covers important aspects of any tool-usage like how does a successful usage of tools look like, selection of appropriate tools, (specific) situations for using tools, aids to selecting a tool, and things to keep in mind (cross-cutting learning).

The guide starts with a short section on 'how does a successful Organisational Assessment experience look like?' highlighting important aspects, like shared interest, time-frame, accountability, individual reflection, collective meaning-making and commitment to action, which play a key role in effective execution of an assessment.

The next section covers 'overarching learning' from non-profits' usage from a range of tools. Some of the key learnings discussed in this section includes, importance of adaptation, need to focus on the process more than a tool, power of good facilitation processes, and the significance of selecting the right tool.

The most important section of the Guide, 'selecting a tool', intends to help users choose an appropriate tool for their purpose and context. It emphasizes that a right tool not just tries to elicit information about an organisation but also acts as a lever for change.

This section tries to explore factors that can help match organisation needs with contextual features better. Some of the factors explored include, purpose of assessment, organisational characteristics (size, budget, culture, leadership, needs, and logistics), organisational priorities, and different variables of the tools.

The next section discusses specific situations in which non-profits, and funders have used these tools and shares findings

from those experiences. It also provides some important questions for non-profits which can help them plan the organizational assessment process in a more informed way.

This section also explores situations relevant for funders and discusses some useful insights for them. The last section before the 'Conclusions' introduces the Organisational Assessment Tools Database and provides some instructions on how to use the database.

The Guide reiterates a few critical things as reminders to users. First, clarity on organization's needs, ultimate goals, and intentions for using the results, as well as logistical characteristics, makes it easier to find tools that can meet its needs.

Second, the database was designed to help users narrow down their search for a tool, and there is no 'one best tool' for a situation.

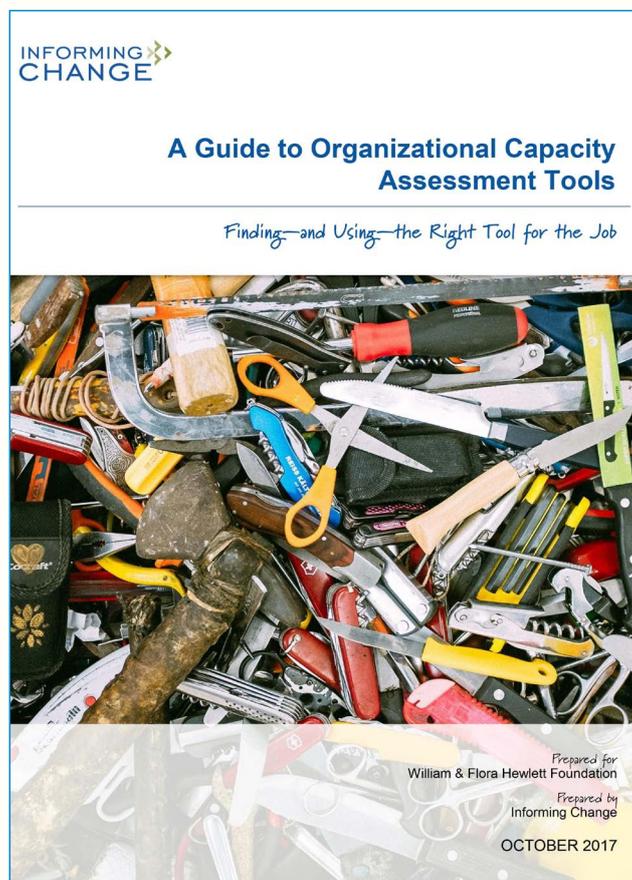
It is up to the user to select a tool that they like and that best fits with their time, budget, resources, and organizational capacity development needs. Third, a tool should prompt and support organizational reflection, decision-making, and improvements.

Bibliographic Details: *A Guide to Organizational Capacity Assessment Tools: Finding and Using the Right Tool for the Job.* Prepared by 'Informing Change' for William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. First Published in October 2017.

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Rethinking Capacity Building

C Sutar

Why is it critical to reflect on what Capacity Building means for your organization?

Nonprofits in India have consistently shown enthusiasm and interest in capacity building. Over the years, specialized programs that assure better impact through needs assessments, impact assessment, workshops, or mentorships in different organizational development areas have grown in scale.

While there are ambiguities in how capacity building can help an organization, the emergence of hundreds of free and paid online and offline channels has made it more critical than ever for each organization to rethink what capacity building means to them.

“Organizations specifically concentrated in metro cities and rural areas have different views of what capacity building is...”

- Adwait from Vardhishnu

The Importance of Context in Capacity Building

According to the United Nations, capacity-building is defined as the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes, and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world. At an organizational level, it is an opportunity to boost knowledge and understanding, becoming more confident, and working efficiently towards systemic change. But before organizations navigate through challenges in a system resistant to

change, they must also delve deep into what can and cannot help them in the process.

For instance, a majority of nonprofits in India have team members who are from the community and work as full-time employees. Often these team members may or may not have formal education and require additional training. In addition to arranging capacity-building resources for such team members, organizations are also required to address their societal challenges.

“Organizations specifically concentrated in metro cities and rural areas have different views of what capacity building is. Those in urban areas are more tuned in to new developments, and in general, a relatively supportive environment. In rural areas, despite team members having a formal education, they may not feel very confident due to language, technology, or cultural barriers. Access to resources and overall exposure makes a difference,” feels Adwait from Vardhishnu.

Based out of Jalgaon in Maharashtra, Vardhishnu organizes ‘Knowledge Club’ on Saturdays as a part of its capacity-building activities. Each member presents a book, a movie, or an article that could be related to the organization’s programs. Then there are also Reading Circles, where team members pick a book to help them in their work or self-development. These activities help Vardhishnu’s teachers develop their skills and create lively spaces for learning for street children.

“Language is certainly a barrier as most of the capacity-building sessions are offered in English. If we attend a workshop in English, we repurpose the content in a language the

Knowledge Club by Team Members



team understands and contextualize it to our programs. Another challenge is accessibility as we work with female staff and their families are often uncomfortable sending them for workshops to a different city,” adds Pranali from Vardhishnu.

For the Vardhishnu team, all team members are like a family, and most often, someone from the leadership teams accompanies the staff during workshops. Still, it’s a luxury that can be afforded only in exceptional cases as there are logistics and costs involved.

“Personal development of individuals is certainly a factor in organization growth. If team members feel confident about themselves, they can contribute more effectively to further our organization’s goals. To achieve this, we often conduct workshops that could benefit them personally, such as a workshop on financial literacy,” says Adwait.

While Vardhishnu earmarks some funds for its capacity-building initiatives, they primarily rely on utilizing freely available resources, in-kind support from partners or volunteers, or

participating in paid workshops.

Over the years, Vardhishnu has realized that if approached in the right way, capacity-building workshops can inspire team members to co-create and contextualize their learnings. Recalling one such measurable outcome of a capacity-building workshop, Adwait says, “Once we attended a TLM (Teaching Learning Materials) workshop. After we were back, the team worked on how we could internalize the learnings. As a result, the team converted traditional gambling games played by street children into a TLM for mathematics. Children who otherwise found it difficult to concentrate on mathematical concepts were now engaging and learning to everyone’s surprise.”

Capacity Building Goes Beyond Skills

Deconstructing and adapting learnings from capacity-building sessions is a skill that comes naturally to some or may require time to be developed, but nevertheless, it is essential. Karnataka-based Makkala Jagriti strongly believes that having capacity-

building workshops that support building the right attitude towards learning and development must be prioritized to achieve this.

Sunayana from Makkala Jagriti says, “We don’t look at skill-based capacity only. We look at personal effectiveness, self-awareness, motivation as priority areas. Developing skills required to implement a program efficiently is necessary. But it can only be implemented after one feels motivated and personal growth leads to the organization’s growth.”

Makkala Jagriti conducts a survey to understand training needs and supports the team with the necessary avenues and sessions for learning. The annual performance reviews also act as an essential reference point on growth areas within the team and help plan workshops accordingly.

Given the consequences of COVID on mental health, over the past one and a half years, Makkala Jagriti has focused on hosting well-being workshops for their team members. The

team continues to host well-being sessions such as empathy circles every week. It is also using art as a tool for stress relief.

“We underline the importance of capacity building to our donors, and some are supportive, but it’s not easy to get their buy-in to support such activities. Some donors are dismissive because they assume that these activities have no direct connection to the program,” adds Sunayana.

Ironically, a plethora of online and offline courses, workshops and webinars have made capacity building into a buzzword. Many facilitators and organizations claim to have the expertise. But in reality, they end up undermining, instead of strengthening, organizations.

Many organizations would concur that they have attended a capacity-building workshop but gained nothing from it. As a result, and for good reasons, more time is now spent reflecting on who from the team should take a capacity-building workshop and whether the session would be beneficial to an individual or the entire group.



Makkala Jagriti

Experiential Learning Activities



Reflexivity as the Missing Link in Capacity Building

Shravan from i-Saksham says, “To participate and reap long-term benefits from capacity building, we should be clear on what we are aspiring for. It’s imperative to consider whether we are endeavoring to bring capacity or build capacity in the organization.”

i-Saksham was started in 2015 in Bihar by three ex-Prime Minister’s Rural Development Fellows. Its capacity-building focus has primarily been on developing ‘Edu Leaders’, to invest in their skills, and help them to understand their communities better. An Edu-Leader is a local youth from the community, mainly females/differently-abled, in the 18-25 age group. They are engaged with local government schools to enrich the education experiences of underserved children for their continued success.

“We have had our hits and misses with capacity-building trainings and workshops. We are becoming more conscious that it does not become a one-time exercise and team members come back with some application. We ask how we can institutionalize learning and how others can benefit from capacity building?” adds Shravan.

The i-Saksham team feels that it is important to consider and review before taking any capacity-building training, to assess the programs’ relevance and prerequisites.

“To participate and reap long-term benefits from capacity building, we should be clear on what we are aspiring for...”

- Shravan from i-Saksham

The peculiarity of capacity building workshops is that these are focused on specific subjects, and give tangible learning to the participants. So organizations must reflect on their purpose and reason to engage in a capacity-building workshop. It is equally vital for facilitators to reflect on their learnings and scope for implementation on the ground, feels Bikash from Karunodaya.

“A capacity building workshop can be a co-creating space for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working in different domains and different parts of the country. It must give participants scope to talk and interact

Before Starting your Capacity Building Journey

- Understand your understanding of capacity building
- Focus on enabling a culture of learning within the organization
- Discuss and identify areas of growth with team members
- Prioritize simple topics and then move to complex ones
- Spend time on identifying the right person for training
- Focus on personal growth and developing behavior and attitude of team members
- Develop on learning from other experienced organizations
- Leverage capacity building expertise within your network
- Apply, internalize, and contextualize learnings for team members
- Invest in opportunities that would help you understand the communities where you work better
- Thoroughly review whether you are meeting all prerequisites of a capacity building training
- If you are participating in too many training programs, then track and follow-up
- Prioritize facilitators having a mindset of learning and co-creating
- Capacity building is an ongoing process; keep creating new benchmarks after developing a competency

with each other at the deepest level and opportunities to multiply their learnings,” he adds. Based in Gaya (Bihar), Karunodaya works on enrolment and retention and enriching the curriculum to go beyond textbooks in Government schools.

“We don’t look at skill-based capacity only. We look at personal effectiveness, self-awareness, motivation as priority areas...”

-Sunayana from Makkala Jagriti

It focuses on holistic and tangible solutions for improved teaching practices and creating sustainable, innovative learning environments for children.

With capacity building and developing an approach to it, there are no easy answers. But what helps is a reality check so that the investment in capacity building is not short-lived. While some organizations have seen incremental benefits, the learnings on what works and what doesn’t in the Indian context may not be readily available.

Ravi from i-Saksham says, “In my view, the moment an organization is conceptualized, capacity building starts. It is not a ‘one-time’ activity. And as the model grows, and as organizations achieve a level of competency, their benchmarks for capacity-building must also shift.”

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Participation in a
Theatre in Education Workshop

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