ACC Guidance Note on Capacity-Building

Approved on behalf of ACC by the Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions (CCPOQ) at its 16th Session, Geneva, March 2000
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I. Introduction

1. This note attempts to provide an agreed set of guidance elements designed to highlight the importance of capacity-building in the operational activities of the UN system. It is addressed to all involved in such activities at the field as well as at headquarters and regional/sub-regional levels.

2. Capacity-building has emerged as a core central concern in all UN system operational activities. The concept itself has gradually evolved over time deriving from the accumulated experience of and partnership in development cooperation with member countries: from the earlier approaches of institution building and transfer of organizational technology through training and technical assistance to emphasis on institutional change, development of systems and processes, including accountability and transparency, knowledge and skills, and participation and commitment. It is becoming increasingly evident that the individual and collective ability of people in a country to collaborate, manage conflict, make societal choices, learn new skills, develop confidence - in short, to sustain themselves and make progress - depends critically on the quality, performance and legitimacy of their institutions and organizations at all levels of society.

3. The General Assembly, in considering the Secretary-General's report on the 1998 triennial policy review of operational activities for development of the UN system, reaffirmed "That capacity-building and its sustainability should be explicitly articulated as a goal of technical assistance provided by the operational activities of the United Nations system at the country level, with the aim of strengthening national capacities in the fields of, inter alia, policy and programme formulation, development management, planning, implementation, coordination, monitoring and review". (Resolution 53/192, paragraph 37) Furthermore, ECOSOC, at its 1999 substantive session, "stressed that the UN system should adopt flexible responses to specific capacity-building needs as articulated by the recipient countries in accordance with their national development plans and priorities" (please refer to paras. 14-18 of resolution 1999/5 in Annex).

4. The comparative advantage of the UN system for capacity-building is based on its mandate, history, experience and the participatory nature of its development cooperation with member countries and its neutrality, its multi-component structure and worldwide reach, organizational culture of experimentation, facilitation and partnership, and the skills of its multinational staff.

II. Guiding Principles

5. The following guiding principles on capacity-building should be followed by the UN system in all its operational activities for development at the country and regional level.

   (a) National ownership and commitment, in the form of priority setting, skills, resources and energy remains the single most important determinant of the effectiveness of capacity-building programmes supported by the UN system. UN system activities in policy, advocacy, partnership, dialogue, programme design, implementation and support should be carried out with the objective of strengthening those dynamics. The felt needs of the country in capacity-building and its existing capacity, in the form of organizational culture, abilities and individual expertise should be taken into account in all activities of the system.

   (b) Capacity-building should no more be seen either as a component or a bye-product of development programmes and projects. It should be accepted as one of the principal and explicit goals of all UN system activities.
(c) Capacity-building should be pursued on the basis of a holistic approach and a broader and shared understanding of its definition. Sustainable capacity-building encompasses the building of organizational and technical abilities, behaviours, relationships and values that enable individuals, groups and organizations to enhance their performance effectively and to achieve their development objectives over time. It includes both strengthening the processes, systems and rules that shape collective and individual behaviour and performance in all development endeavours as well as peoples’ ability and willingness to play new developmental roles and to adapt to new demands and situations.

(d) The differing mandates of UN system organizations provide a varied approach to capacity-building. This diversity is a source of the system’s strength. The growing efforts of the specialized agencies of the system to incorporate capacity-building into their regular programmes of technical support offers an excellent basis for mutually supportive action by the system. In this regard, there is need for greater coherence and complementarity of efforts and the adoption of shared objectives and strategies for capacity-building at the country and regional level.

(e) Many capacity-building programmes will require a comprehensive approach with a wide variety of actors contributing their particular skills and resources. Creative partnerships, alliances, networks and joint ventures will be required both internally within the UN system and externally with national and international development partners.

(f) Few capacity problems have predetermined solutions. Most effective approaches emerge incrementally from accumulated experience and adaptation during implementation. It is, therefore, important to design capacity-building interventions with flexibility, a sense of experimentation and imagination and an openness to learning. The development of sustainable capacity needs long lead time. This, in turn, has implications for programme design and management. Emphasis should be balanced between capacity-building process and capacity outcomes and substantive development outcomes.

III. Action Steps for Mainstreaming Capacity-Building

6. The mainstreaming of capacity-building into the operations of the UN system will depend upon consistent commitment, direction and support to its effective pursuit. It will have implications for further change and reform in UN system programmes and activities. Many of the current reform efforts are supportive of systematic capacity-building work. The challenge is to accelerate and intensify efforts to build the system’s own capacity to support capacity-building work. The following action steps should be considered in this context. In addition, more specific suggestions for follow-up and support measures are included in section IV below.

(a) The complexity inherent in the work of capacity-building requires a more systematic development of a culture of organization learning within the UN system. It is necessary to revisit on a continuing basis, the assumptions, objectives and methodologies underlying capacity-building work.

(b) The UN system should seek a greater range of partnerships and collaborative arrangements with multilateral and bilateral agencies, civil society organizations, including community-based organizations, and the private sector as part of a concerted effort to build a critical mass of experience and resources to support capacity-building programmes.

(c) Better use should be made of the in-house skills, expertise and experience that already exist or are being developed by individual members of the UN system. More effort should be made to share skills and emerging insights and experiences including through suitable regional programmes or mechanisms.
(d) The current efforts to strengthen a common system wide approach at the country level through national execution, programme approach, and programming instruments such as Country Strategy Note (CSN), Common Country Assessment (CCA), UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), the strategic framework approach and other cross-agency mechanisms should be accelerated, and the need for collaboration across organizational boundaries in support of capacity-building should be stressed.

(e) A number of field offices have tested and used participatory techniques for capacity assessment, monitoring and evaluation. Such in-house learning should be spread within the system by creative partnerships both at the headquarters and the field. Effective capacity-building programmes can be best supported through decentralised field structures. The operational staff of the system, particularly at the field level, should be provided continued organizational support for their work on capacity-building programmes including appropriate guidance, training, incentives, tailored learning, and the opportunity to exercise initiative.

(f) The monitoring and evaluation activities should be focused more systematically on programme and organizational learning with respect to capacity-building. More inter-agency and thematic evaluations and assessments should be undertaken.

IV. Follow-up and Support Measures

Future efforts by the UN system to ensure the explicit integration of capacity-building objectives into its development cooperation activities should be underpinned by a number of measures. Among others, the following should be considered:

(a) Development of suitable joint and system-wide training programmes to promote greater awareness, advocacy, and understanding of capacity-building issues, concepts and approaches in both generic and thematic contexts to facilitate the translation of capacity-building in the design and appraisal of programmes and projects.

(b) Continuation and strengthening of the programme approach and the national execution modality in support of national capacity-building through country commitment and ownership.

(c) Greater use of flexible and experimental approaches to programme design and support including iterative programme design, pilots and smaller programmes for learning and innovation.

(d) Documentation and sharing of experience in monitoring progress in capacity-building to demonstrate the value and performance of such programmes including the development of quantitative, qualitative and proxy indicators of the process, its effect and impact;

(e) Further development and sharing of capacity assessment tools developed and applied within and outside the system.

(f) Greater use of aid coordination mechanisms to address capacity-building issues at the systems level.

(g) Creation of data bases on "good practice" in capacity-building methodology and/or programmes both in the generic and specific/thematic contexts through posting the results of evaluation of capacity-building interventions on existing suitable web pages or creation of new web sites; promotion of workshops, seminars and interactive debate on specific issue; and dissemination of insights as feed-back into the development of training modules with a view to facilitate results-based management throughout the United Nations System.
(h) Systematic information sharing between headquarters and country teams, and at the country level amongst country team members and national counterpart staff on capacity-building issues to foster shared appreciation and approaches.

(k) Continuation of UN system efforts to integrate appropriate capacity-building into humanitarian relief and post-conflict situations.

(l) Continuing review of various arrangements for support (e.g. training; ready access to advice, knowledge and practice; incentives and encouragement; revised work assignments, supportive supervision) that shape and facilitate the performance of the operational staff of the system with respect to capacity-building.

(m) Greater efforts to enter into longer term financial commitments for capacity-building measures at the country/regional level through increased flexibility of budget cycles.
Annex

ECOSOC Resolution 1999/5 - Poverty eradication and capacity-building

The Economic and Social Council,


1. Takes note of the report of the Secretary-General;¹

2. Recognizes that investment in human resources and domestic and international policies supportive of economic and social development are essential prerequisites for the eradication of poverty;

3. Calls upon the programmes, funds and agencies of the United Nations system to continue to give priority and to further enhance support to developing countries in their efforts to eradicate poverty;

4. Recognizes that formulating, coordinating, implementing, monitoring and assessing integrated poverty eradication strategies, including through capacity-building initiatives, is the primary responsibility of the Governments of recipient countries and calls upon the United Nations system to support these efforts upon the request of national Governments;

5. Also calls upon the United Nations development system organizations to support the strengthening of the capacity of Governments to establish data banks and to carry out poverty assessments at the country level;

6. Further calls upon the United Nations system, upon the request of Governments, to support policy analysis activities at the national and international levels, in particular regarding indicators relating to poverty eradication and human development strategies;

7. Requests the organizations of the United Nations system to continue to support, in a coherent and coordinated manner, national efforts to empower people living in poverty, in particular women, through, inter alia, education, sustainable livelihoods, health services, in particular health care, and employment-creation policies;

8. Reaffirms the importance of mainstreaming gender perspectives into all poverty eradication policies, including through gender-impact analyses, as women constitute the majority of persons living in poverty;

9. Stresses that national Governments have the primary responsibility for their country’s development and for coordinating development assistance, as well as enhancing its effectiveness;

¹ E/1999/55 and Add.1 and 2.
10. **Urges**, in this context, further progress in harmonizing United Nations system support to national poverty eradication programmes through mechanisms such as the common country assessment and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, fully consistent with and in support of national priorities as expressed in the country strategy notes or relevant national development plans, as appropriate, as well as full use of thematic groups and other coordination mechanisms within the Resident Coordinator system, in order to provide an integrated, coordinated and collaborative response by the United Nations system to national priorities for poverty eradication;

11. **Calls upon** the United Nations system to strengthen cooperation with all development partners in supporting national development priorities and policies, reflecting the cross-cutting nature of poverty eradication and capacity-building, including by increased collaboration with multilateral financial institutions, particularly the World Bank, taking note of its new initiatives, the International Monetary Fund, regional banks, as well as other donors, the private sector and other civil society organizations, as appropriate;

12. **Encourages** the United Nations system to take further steps to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of its support to poverty eradication programmes, including by undertaking impartial, transparent and independent joint evaluations under the overall leadership and with the full and effective involvement of the Government;

13. **Underlines** the importance of the interdependence and the interlinkage between development assistance and national capacity-building;

14. **Stresses** that the United Nations system should adopt flexible responses to specific capacity-building needs as articulated by the recipient countries in accordance with their national development plans and priorities;

15. **Takes note** of the steps being taken to implement General Assembly resolution 53/192, paragraph 37, dealing with capacity-building, particularly the development of United Nations system guidance on capacity-building, with a view to making it an explicit objective of programmes and projects supported by the system, within the context of the 1998 triennial comprehensive policy review, including by revising, *inter alia*, relevant programming guidelines of the United Nations programmes and funds;

16. **Encourages** the Governments of recipient countries to work towards ensuring that all programmes have capacity-building components;

17. **Calls upon** the United Nations system to take further steps to collect and disseminate relevant information on capacity-building, including best practices;

18. **Stresses** the need to address the subject of sustainability and adaptability of capacity-building in different development contexts and in response to a range of sectoral, cross-sectoral and technical requirements of recipient countries, and in particular to take appropriate steps to ensure the sustainability of capacity-building created in priority areas;

19. **Requests** the Secretary-General, in preparing documentation on resources for the operational activities for development segment of the Council’s substantive session of 2000, as stated in paragraph 5 of its resolution 1999/6 of 23 July 1999 on the implementation of General Assembly resolution 53/192, to give consideration to the effect of the declining trend in core resources for operational activities on the capacity of the United Nations system to implement effective development programmes that support poverty eradication and capacity-building.

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38th plenary meeting
23 July 1999