Executive Summary

Community capacity building has a critical role to play in local development. With its focus on enabling all members of the community, including the poorest and the most disadvantaged, to develop skills and competencies so as to take greater control of their own lives, community capacity building contributes to inclusive local development. Not only can communities be more cohesive but they can also be more resilient and better placed to confront economic and social challenges. Meaningful and effective community capacity building can be stimulated and fostered by national and local governments, and by the capacity which communities have already developed, so that power becomes increasingly embedded within them.

It is important to recognise that meaningful community capacity building does not focus on "top-down" or imposed interventions and activities, but rather emphasises the importance of community capacity building as a tool for the identification of "bottom-up goals" – ones which are owned by the community. This notwithstanding, the role of other actors upon community capacity building activities should not be overlooked. Governments, agencies, non-governmental and social economy organisations, as well as individuals, can have a profound impact, both positively and negatively, on the facilitation of community capacity building.

Community capacity building: The evolution of an idea

Whilst there are elements of community capacity building in approaches such as community development, the idea and practice of community capacity building and its distinctive elements have evolved over the decades.

Noting the uneven development of community capacity building, especially in the social policy areas, it is nevertheless evident that the language of community capacity building is too often deployed to advance the implementation of a "top-down" agenda. The potential for governments and other actors who seek to align local communities with their own agenda, rather than to engage with local communities themselves, and therefore to effectively "hi-jack" the language of community capacity building poses a real threat to community involvement.

Such tendencies must be avoided if community capacity building is to be meaningful, rather than merely a "label" used to add greater legitimacy to government interventions.

At the same time, the power disparities which exist between public and private sector actors and communities, particularly those confronting poverty and disadvantage, not only limit the ability of communities to challenge imposed programmes, but also to engage effectively in community capacity building activities. Such power is about both differences in access to resources, and the use of knowledge and information as tools of power. For instance, community capacity building in the area of healthcare continues to lag behind other social policy areas partly as a result of the individual nature of healthcare, and associated issues *vis-à-vis* knowledge, but also, critically, because of deeply engrained attitudes of health professionals and a seeming reluctance on their part to respond to community initiatives and needs. Overcoming disparities in power poses real challenges; however, actors must be cognisant of their existence and actively seek to limit their impact. With regard to knowledge and information this can be done through ensuring the timely provision of information in a way which is most effective for the community, something which is also echoed in the chapter on environmental justice.

Issues, such as those noted above, emphasise the importance of clearly identifying the internal and external factors which promote or hinder capacity building within communities. Internal factors, such as a lack of skills, experience and resources can be addressed by various partners. Indeed, the importance of adequate resources being made available for community capacity building has to be underlined. External ones may, however, pose a greater challenge by demanding that other actors be prepared to cede authority and control. Such potential hindrances can be overcome; but it is only by recognising them that steps can be taken to address them.

Local economic development: Partnerships and community capacity building

Long-lasting, sustainable local economic development can never be achieved through the work of a single actor, whether they be from the public or private sector, or a social economy organisation; working together in partnership is crucial. Nor can the role and importance of the community in local economic development be overlooked. What is required is an explicit focus on creating stronger, more cohesive communities by building and enhancing human and social capital, which is an important factor for both community capacity building and for fostering local economic development.

In examining community capacity building and local economic development, it is essential to recognise the importance of building links between social economy organisations and the private sector, as well as governments and government agencies in order to address the complex social and economic problems which all communities, and particularly poor and disadvantaged ones, confront. Examples from the United Kingdom highlight how such links – particularly those between the social economy and the private sector – have served to generate greater levels of success in fostering local economic development and developing stronger communities. Other examples, such as those from Sweden and Barcelona, demonstrate the need to integrate community capacity building into local economic development activities from an early stage as well as the need to create a physical space in which communities can interact. However, such success depends on policy makers and programme implementers recognising a number of key lessons.

Ensuring the construction of strategies and services which explicitly seek to stimulate social capital and community capacity is something that should not be overlooked. Community capacity building does not happen by chance. There needs to be a deliberate focus on creating an appropriate environment for its development which includes not only public services, the private sector and social economy organisations but also communities, both as households and individuals. This demands interlinked strategies which address individuals and communities, and which focus on a wide range of services, including public services, as well as programmes to support social economy organisations, the private sector and entrepreneurial activity. Such interlinked strategies should also seek to lock-in growth within local communities as a further tool for building social and economic assets.

The environmental and community capacity building

Increasing evidence demonstrating that poorer, more disadvantaged communities disproportionately confront environmental ills has led to an awareness of, and demands for, environmental justice. Accompanying this has been a recognition that capacity building provides communities with the opportunity to access resources and expertise in order to address these ills and to challenge environmental decisions, bringing with it not only the potential for an improved environment for communities (often with positive outcomes on health) but also fostering stronger, more cohesive communities.

The idea of environmental justice is now well developed and the ways in which the movement for environmental justice can potentially be used as a political and procedural tool for community capacity building are being analysed. Examining the actors and resources used by the environmental

justice movement to mobilise communities and to enhance their participation provides important insights into the contribution it can make to community capacity building and allows for policy recommendations to be addressed to governments and non-governmental organisations.
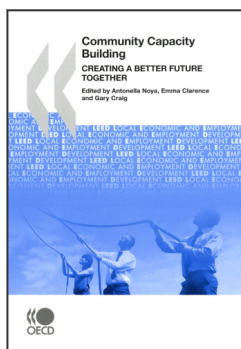
Governments can contribute to environmental community capacity building not only through the provision of practical support, in terms of resource provision and through the opening up of information and communication channels for communities, but also by ensuring that there is meaningful collaboration with communities, which takes into account the disproportionate impact of environmental injustice on the most disadvantaged within society. Such collaboration demands the early involvement of communities in environmental decision making and the provision of support schemes in which communities can access objective "policy mentors". Ultimately, the focus of governments must move beyond environmental inequalities to one which incorporates support for community capacity building initiatives framed by both environmental and social justice principles.

Non-governmental organisations are often best placed to contribute to community capacity building. Whilst they need to ensure a sound understanding of environmental inequalities, they can make good use of their strong community links and relationships by working with vulnerable groups and ensuring that those who confront environmental injustice develop a greater voice for themselves.

Conclusion

It is evident that community capacity building has the potential to reach into every facet of social and economic life and contribute to building stronger, more cohesive, more resilient communities. Ultimately, however, it is important to remember that community capacity building is a process rather than a final destination which offers both communities and other actors opportunities to learn and to develop. Community capacity building can make an important contribution to community well-being but it can only do so if key messages are acknowledged and acted upon.

Perhaps the most important message which emerges is that community capacity building must be a community driven activity. This does not mean that other actors have no role to play, indeed the public and private sectors and social economy organisations have a critical role as a catalyst for community capacity building, but rather that community capacity building is not something which can be maintained from outside communities, or sought after in top-down initiatives. Governments must be prepared to cede power and to create the political space for communities to take greater control of their own empowerment.