Since the cold war ended, governments and the international community have begun to address today’s development challenges in new ways. In developing countries, a remarkable opening towards more democratic and transparent governance is in progress. Development is coming to be seen as a joint responsibility of governments, communities, civil society and the private sector. Participation, empowerment, public-private partnerships and joint action are new ways to win the fight against poverty.

These changes are mirrored in development cooperation. Here, development agencies seek more effective ways to address development. They are adopting different roles, acting as partners instead of donors. They are paying more attention to processes, building local expertise instead of providing technical assistance, focusing on qualitative rather than quantitative results, and more generally reforming the way they work and who they work with.

Together, these trends stimulate a demand for tools suited to an environment where informing, learning, and sharing are key words. These tools need to be widespread, easy to use, powerful and offering empowerment, capable of fostering change and democratisation, supportive of decentralisation, and useful in that they provide social or material benefits to those using them.

For many people, new information and communications technologies (ICT’s) are the right tools at the right time. If wisely used, investments in information, knowledge, and ICT’s can help generate wealth and jobs, build bridges between governments and citizens, forge relations among organisations and communities, and improve the delivery of essential services to poor people. While some people are skeptical about their direct contribution to poverty alleviation, there are signs that ICT’s can contribute to development goals - if they are used properly. Proper use is crucial and is based on local needs and circumstances. It is required to avoid or reduce negative impacts. It is necessary to actually derive
benefits.

Proper use presents policy makers and managers, at all levels, with a set of policy and organisational challenges. It requires actions to enhance the connectivity of countries and people, to ensure that the new tools are accessible, and to foster and develop suitable content. Most critical, the capacities and skills of people and institutions need to be mobilised and shared.

This brief explores ways to improve 'information' capacity building activities in developing countries. Focusing on the capacity building process, it presents some principles and key questions for actors in this area. It concludes with a call for capacity 'builders' to invest more in knowledge sharing as a way to improve the relevance of their efforts.

**Information for Development**

In rich countries, information and communication technologies and especially the Internet are spreading throughout society, the work place and the market. For those who have access to the new tools, the opportunities are immense. Countries investing in the Internet are likely to benefit from wider and cheaper access to informational, educational and medical resources and services. The Internet and related technologies can create value, jobs and help people to engage in trade. In Bangladesh for instance, the use of cellular phones in rural areas has helped increase the income of women. Using new technologies, small enterprises can form clusters and networks, gaining access to specialised resources and pooled business services. Community groups and small traders in developing countries are finding global markets for their local products, via the Internet.

The business sector is not the only beneficiary. Researchers, non-governmental organisations (NGO's), and community groups can join or form virtual networks and alliances, using ICT's to address social goals, to build collective resources and tools, and to share ideas and knowledge.

Governments and public bodies can also benefit. Aside from the internal efficiencies gained in data handling and information management, these technologies can be used to help turn notions of 'open government' into reality, facilitating access to government information and services, fostering dialogue between citizens and governments, increasing the transparency of elected bodies, and supporting administrative decentralisation. More generally, new ICT's can be used by government to protect global and local 'public goods', safeguarding public access to important local knowledge and cultural heritage.

While the opportunities seem to be clear, there are also barriers to the widespread use of new ICT's. In general, there are few documented examples that show how ICT use can reverse poverty. Governments and donors are therefore reluctant to take the opportunities seriously and the private sector focuses mainly on less risky developed markets.

Use of ICT's is limited by lack of awareness and skills, and by insufficient access to trained personnel, know how, equipment, services and infrastructure. The initial and recurring costs of acquiring a computer and an Internet connection are often prohibitive. A lack of appropriate content can also limit use. In rural areas, there is little or no infrastructure to connect to the Internet. For these reasons, access to the Internet in developing countries is limited to those who can afford it. Today, while all African countries are
connected to the Internet, less than 1% of all Africans actually use it. For most people, other media like radio or newspapers are more affordable and far more widely used.

To overcome these barriers and to thrive in an inter-connected world, governments, enterprises and individuals need to connect with sources of ideas, technology and finance. They also need to connect with markets where ideas, goods, and services can be shared and traded. This 'connectivity' requires that people have access to technologies - local and global telecommunication networks, computers, etc. and that they have necessary skills to make use of them. Aside from the technical steps needed to install connections, politicians need to help create an enabling environment that encourages investment and competition, respects intellectual property rights, delivers affordable access, and also addresses equity issues by promoting appropriate social and developmental applications of the new technologies.

Beyond connectivity, people and organisations in developing countries need to acquire new capacities and skills suited to a knowledge economy.

**Capacity Building and Information**

Capacity development is the “process by which individuals, groups, organisations, institutions and societies develop abilities (individually and collectively) to perform functions, solve problems and set and achieve objectives.” More specifically, it is a way for groups or organisations to increase their ability to contribute to poverty elimination.

While these purposes of capacity building apply in the information ‘sector’, here it is argued that capacity building approaches can be quite different than in other sectors. The differences can be ascribed to some characteristics of information and knowledge management that set them apart from other development activities. These include:

- Information is the only commodity that **multiplies** when it is shared. The management challenge is therefore not only to find ways to conserve use of a scarce resource, but to cope with its over-abundance.

- The information revolution has a **high profile**. The media constantly report on new initiatives to extend access to the Internet, to connect school children and to deliver more information to larger audiences. A growing enthusiasm is apparent - with world leaders, politicians, entrepreneurs and development professionals caught up in a modern 'gold rush', looking for opportunities to turn ICT's to good use.

- A striking feature of the information revolution is **speed**. Transactions are accelerating, time to decide is shrinking, keeping up is a full time task, information exchange is almost instantaneous, and the pace of work is fast increasing. While more tasks can be done more quickly than before, organisations and individuals need to be flexible and adaptable to deal with change. Far from being part of a single information revolution, organisations on the information superhighway can almost measure the speed of change in 'revolutions per minute'.

- Information has a **pervasive influence**. Changes to information management systems tend to spill
over into other parts of an organisation or community, often in unpredictable and surprising ways. Organisations with fairly well established structures and channels to direct communication and information flows need to be aware that ICT's frequently challenge existing communication channels, introducing all sorts of horizontal and multi-directional information flows. Frequently cited as a positive feature of new technologies, such boundary-crossing and 'democratising' can pose problems simply by increasing the quantity of information circulating, by 'diluting' its quality, or by enabling the activities of anarchic or even destructive elements.

- Information exchange and knowledge sharing are now accepted in the development sector as essential to effective partnership and collaboration. Where past ambitions often exceeded what was feasible, new approaches to information management are particularly suited to fostering relationships among communities and organisations, opening the flow of ideas and information, promoting ownership, and ensuring greater transparency. The 'decentralising' potential of new ICT's is especially important in this. The technologies can also help build wider and longer-lasting relationships between organisations and partners. This is in contrast to more time-bound capacity building projects in other sectors. The new-style information-based relationships are usually longer-term, perhaps indefinite, are based around mutual interests, and the focus may evolve from capacity building to something more like capacity sharing.

- New ICT's are also well suited to approaches that seek to build joint products and tools with content and resources from many 'owners.' In such cases, ownership need not be handed over, it can be shared and presented in different ways. Collaborators have their own responsibilities, and can manage their own intellectual property.

- Finally, information specialists have long wrestled with the evaluation of information and knowledge activities, seeking methods to measure their benefits and impact. Unlike in other sectors where tangible outputs and outcomes can be counted and assessed, data on the results of use or non-use of a specific piece of knowledge is very difficult to obtain.

These factors suggest that capacity building in the information domain is different to capacity building in other development sectors. In particular, the potential linking and sharing characteristics of the new ICT's seem to be particularly well-suited to a policy environment that emphasises the value of relationships among organisations, and puts participation and partnership first.

Capacity 'building' efforts should therefore be organised around partnerships where mutually beneficial relationships are fostered and capacities are mobilised and shared.

What is meant by partnership in this context? Participants at a recent workshop identified a set of principles to be used in setting up these new relationships.

**Principles for Partnership**

*Forge new relationships*

For donor agencies and development actors who seek to build information and knowledge capacities in
developing countries, the biggest challenge is the shift in the roles expected of them. Liz O'Donnell, Irish minister for overseas development assistance recently argued that "capacity building is ... about changing the relationship between the donor and the recipient... It means that donors are less benefactors and more like strategic partners in development." (IAAC. 1999).

Simply providing advice or money or delivering assistance to a recipient is no longer sufficient. Effective development requires that recipients and donors work together as partners, jointly identifying the issues, tackling the problems, and sharing responsibility for the results. This has nothing to do with the often-encountered situation where any collaborator is called a partner but where power and decisions actually remain with one side. In these situations, it is often assumed that little is known locally and that the outside 'partner' has all or most of the expertise. Instead, partnership is about mutual respect and the acknowledgement that each has expertise and skills to offer and share. It assumes that some capacities already exist, on both sides, but that they need to be mobilised and strengthened. Partnership means learning together, sharing the lessons and results with each other, and with others.

Foster ownership

All partners should feel responsible for a development activity and its results. This commitment - or 'ownership' - is central to the notions of partnership and of capacity building as a process. In the past, too much ownership was with the donor or supporting agency (the 'stockholders') and too little with the local partners (the 'stakeholders') whose capacities were being developed. The fostering of ownership is closely linked with the way in which an intervention is formulated, implemented and evaluated, and the roles played by the various participating agencies and individuals. Ownership should be fostered at three main levels: at the highest political level, among the people or groups acting as champions of the process, and among the widest group of people likely to use or benefit from the new activity.

A key factor in fostering ownership is that the collaborating parties trust each other. The organisations promoting interventions must be transparent in their policies and in their behaviour. This transparency needs to be extended to monitoring and evaluation where indicators and criteria for evaluation can be developed jointly.

Focus on processes

Capacity building is more successful and more sustainable when it responds to an internal initiative and when it is supported through a process approach. Recognition of capacity development as process carries implications for the roles performed, and approaches used by external agencies in working with local organisations. Issues of ownership, commitment and leadership are central to this notion of capacity as process. In general, it means avoiding single one-time events and one-off contacts. Instead, it means building relationships and taking time to develop both local ownership and trust among the partners. Most important, it means adjusting timetables, priorities, and expectations to the capabilities of local actors and their local situation.

Give priority to local capacities

When working with information and ICT's, it is often easier to focus on the usually imported technologies or systems, almost forgetting the real purpose. Creating local content and using local expertise to serve the
development needs of local partners is essential. The precise approach should depend on existing infrastructure and resources, such as local networks of expertise, traditional knowledge resources and local information, often in local languages. Using local expertise contributes to the relevance of an activity and helps foster local ownership in it. Moreover, involving and helping to build up an experienced cadre of local experts who themselves can address local capacity building challenges is a valuable step to strengthen national capacities in this area.

**Use open standards**

In the same way that 'tied' aid limits the options and opportunities of countries receiving assistance, partners in capacity building need to consider the impact of locking their partners in to proprietary applications and systems. These may not be supported locally and may burden local partners with recurrent purchases of costly user licenses and upgrades. More generally, open 'thinking' can also be extended to areas like information content where partners are committed to making information publicly available (where appropriate) and easily accessible. Capacity builders, particularly those in the public domain, can encourage the use of open systems to share and exchange both their information and the tools developed to manage it.

**Prepare an exit strategy**

Many interventions, whether in project or partnership mode, foresee an end to the involvement of one or other partner, usually the one whose main role is to build capacities. In such cases, an 'exit' strategy helps to ensure continued sustainability when the external intervention stops. This is particularly the case for partners such as donors or consultants whose support is usually targeted towards specific shorter-term results or impacts in the developing country. Where capacity building is part of a longer-term relationship between partners with shared common interests, there may not be an exit strategy as such. Instead, the partners may review whether the relationship still brings benefits to both parties and whether it therefore deserves to be renewed or discontinued.

**Key Questions for Capacity Builders**

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<th>1. Whose capacities are being built?</th>
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<td>• <strong>Decision makers.</strong> Political enablers, policy makers, people with power. It is essential to mobilise top-level support and commitment.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Champions.</strong> Key individuals who drive the process, volunteer to be test cases, and sell ideas to peers. They are often capacity builders themselves.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Information custodians and producers.</strong> Information professionals. Sometimes also champions, these groups must be convinced to participate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Ultimate beneficiaries.</strong> The users. They have to be involved in the process. The real test is whether they use or take up the outputs of the intervention. Often not the group whose capacities are built in the first instance.</td>
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</table>
2. What capacities are being built?

- **Awareness and empowerment.** People need to be made aware of the possibilities, to see results for themselves, and to be convinced that they will benefit (be empowered).

- **Skills.** New information management approaches as well as ICTs require that new skills are learned.

- **Resources.** Access to content and equipment.

3. How are capacities being built?

- **Partnership.** Through joint activities with organisations whose capacities are to be built.

- **Collaboration.** By working with other development agencies, sharing resources and expertise. This often means developing a specific niche that complements others.

- **Appropriate methods.** These include training, mentoring, networking, process facilitation, impact assessment, and lessons learning. As far as possible, methods and approaches used should be replicable and allow maximum re-use. An ‘open’ approach to lessons learned ensures that other agencies can also benefit and improve their efforts.

Following this approach, as well as the principles listed earlier, requires that development agencies actually have the skills and capacities (and attitudes) to put them into effect. This also applies to the developing country ‘partners’ whose capacities to manage their part of the cooperation process are often limited. Managing cooperation well requires that capacities are enhanced.

**Capacity-sharing for Capacity Builders**

While development agencies seek ways to make beneficial use of information and ICTs for development, relatively poor linkages seem to exist between the numerous international initiatives in this area. This results in a disconnection between rather ambitious agenda’s and the action on the ground, and many missed opportunities for joint action. While diversity can stimulate creativity and innovation, the various initiatives need ‘glueing’ together to form useful relationships. A concerted approach by the various actors should include the following elements.

**Complementarity**

A complementary approach aims to build on the varied experience of many actors, to bring quality into capacity building approaches, and to ensure that developing countries get the best and most appropriate advice, not just what’s at hand. Avoiding duplication through task division and collaboration is important. Complementarity means accepting that many actors, including the private sector, have legitimate roles to play and that each has its own added value. It requires that each actor is clear about its aims and roles, is transparent on its strengths and weaknesses, and is committed to working together. Information sharing tools such as the GK-AIMS database, illustrate how such issues can be tackled.
Incentives

As was indicated above, complementarity flows from attitudes and cultures and the extent that people and organisations are willing to cooperate. Cooperation and partnership do not always flow of their own accord. A key factor is incentives. Funding agencies can help stimulate 'cooperativity' by the way they fund activities. To foster partnership, sponsors need to be more creative, perhaps becoming 'partners' themselves, perhaps financing process and preparation as well as implementation, perhaps funding issues or problems rather than institutions.

Multipliers

One of the most important parts of capacity building is to share and pass on skills and knowledge. Training of people in partner organisations, both in developing countries and among donor organisations continues to be necessary. However, in the information 'domain', it is rare for the ultimate users or beneficiaries to be directly reached by international efforts. It is crucial therefore that partner organisations in developing countries also learn to become capacity builders, to multiply and apply the skills they have learned. This is sometimes difficult for a development agency to implement, as every partner whose capacities are enhanced is potentially a future 'competitor.' It is nevertheless essential if sustainability is the objective.

Invest in knowledge

All the partners in development can benefit from capacity building. This applies as much to the 'developed' agency as to the Southern partner. As well as developing resources, tools, and skills to share, development agencies need to know about capacity building and the roles they can play.

This means that capacity builders should critically assess their own capacities, ensuring that they are appropriate and help address real development problems. Learning to facilitate and catalyse and nurture and support is essential. It also means looking critically at how aid is delivered and managed, seeking to speed up and improve internal procedures that may erode the process of capacity building. It means investing in cooperation and partnership and learning to do these well.

Policy Management Briefs are intended for policy-makers in public and private organisations concerned with aspects of international development cooperation. Drawing from work of ECDPM, its partners and its associates, our aim is to provide succinct and readable summaries of current issues in the management of development policy.

This brief draws on discussions in a workshop on Strengthening Information and Knowledge Management Capacities through International Cooperation, organised by ECDPM and FAO, and held in Maastricht from 29-31 March 2000. a complementary report was presented to the First Consultation on Agricultural Information Management, held in Rome in June 2000. (http://www.fao.org/coaim/)

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