'Taking Stock' – A Snapshot of INGO Engagement in Civil Society Capacity Building

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INTRODUCTION

The last decade saw a marked growth of interest and engagement in civil society capacity building, with diverse actors involved in the funding, design and implementation of such work. The INTRAC Anniversary Conference provides an opportunity to bring together participants from the different sectors to debate the nature of such work and its contribution to ensuring effective civic action for change.

One key group of actors engaged in civil society capacity building are the International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), who themselves are part of global civil society. INTRAC believes that it is important to understand more about the civil society capacity building approaches being undertaken by members of this influential group, and has undertaken a survey aiming to uncover the policies, practices and trends of a number of INGOs. This paper presents findings from the completed questionnaires of almost 70 self-selecting INGOs, from 18 different countries, who responded to the survey carried out between August and October 2006.

The survey also aimed to build on similar studies undertaken by INTRAC in 1994 (James 2004) and 1998 (James et al, 1998) using a similar methodological approach. The second of these studies took place within the context of an initiative led by Southern NGOs, known as the International Forum on Capacity Building (IFCB). That initiative, which provided a vital opportunity for multi-stakeholder debate on civil society capacity building, also undertook studies on the topic from the perspective of the Southern civil society actors. Unfortunately the IFCB is no longer in existence, and there has been no opportunity to gather together a picture of current capacity building approaches as experienced by the Southern/Eastern civil society counterparts of the INGOs. In addition, although this study may provide a good overview on how some INGOs are viewing their civil society capacity building work, due to distribution and methodology constraints[1] it cannot claim to be representative of the sector worldwide.

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[1] Further details regarding the methodology used are to be found in a more detailed report to be produced by INTRAC.

INTRAC believes that some critical issues have been identified which it hopes will aid reflection and debate. A picture is emerging of a core group of INGOs with a breadth of experience who are exploring the complex challenges of ensuring quality capacity building work. The broader picture however, is of a continuation of some of the limitations identified in the earlier studies, related to areas such as conceptual clarity and policy formulation, the role played and self-reflection undertaken by INGOs as they engage in this work.

It is hoped that the study will provide a useful resource for INGOs involved in supporting their partners and civil society in general, and be of interest also to the increasing number of academics and consultants who are reviewing such work; donors and supporters; and most of all the Southern/Eastern civil society organisations who are involved in, and recipients of, capacity building interventions.

FINDINGS

'Framing' the Capacity Building Work

Informants were first asked *what they understood by the **term 'capacity building'***. Of the 63 responses to this question, 10 indicated that they had no formal or standardised definitions, with some saying that they had drawn on references taken from a number of different organisational documents and policy papers. 15 replies were in the form of complex statements which included references to the nature of the process, the goals pursued, the type of organisations they worked with and the kinds of activities undertaken. A few of these also referred to good practice principles and quality issues, such as "*…facilitation without bias"* or *"Capacity building is a process. It is to be owned by all concerned."*

The majority of the responses however, were in the form of shorter statements and tended to bring together an emphasis on the overall goal with a description of the process of capacity building. This was often phrased with reference to the performance of organisations:
"…an explicit effort to strengthen the capabilities of communities and community based organisations to more effectively achieve their development goals."
"…approaches, strategies and methodologies….used to improve performance.."

A minority also expressed an understanding of capacity building linked to organisational resilience, as well as performance:
 "A deliberate effort aiming at strengthening an organisation and its effectiveness and sustainability in relation to its purpose and context."
"Supporting partners/beneficiaries to build the knowledge, skills, attitude and experience necessary to achieve their own goals and develop viable and vibrant organisations."

Many informants indicated that they understand capacity building as a process which is undertaken at a variety of levels – with individuals, organisations, networks and at an institutional level. A couple of replies referred explicitly to capacity building as also incorporating a focus on the 'space' available for action by civil society organisations and citizens in general.

It is striking that 55 out of the 67 INGOs do not have a **formal policy framework** for their work in this field - far less than in the 1998 survey. Whilst this may not be unexpected with the smaller organisations (those with less than $3 million overall income), it is perhaps surprising that even most of the larger better resourced (and perhaps bureaucratic) organisations do not have such policies. In addition, the presence of a capacity building specialist does not appear to make much of a difference, and barely one-quarter of organisations with such staff expertise have used them to develop a formal capacity building policy.

With regard to the **goals** that the INGOs are pursuing when engaging in civil society capacity building work, the responses can be grouped in three ways:
- Over a third (29) made reference to the goal of increased civil society engagement in processes of decision making, change, governance etc. and used words such as 'inclusion', 'empowerment' and 'participation'.
- A similar number (28) made reference to increased quality of life goals such as poverty reduction, peace, human security. These would tend to reflect the specific mission focus of the INGO itself.
- A smaller number (20) referred to improved organisational performance or sustainability as end goals.

A number of responses combined some or all of the above goals.

Critical Issues:

The relatively high proportion of INGO respondents who do not have capacity building policies is consistent with INTRAC's practical experience. We might wish to investigate further the reasons for this, but it is important to consider the implications. A primary concern may be a resulting lack of consistency and coherence in the capacity building work undertaken by different units within the INGO. Learning opportunities may be reduced without common conceptual, definitional and methodological references. Articulation and dissemination of experiences may also tend to remain at the 'micro' case study level. All of this may have a 'knock on' implication for the level of debate and discussion on capacity building within the sector as a whole.

Resourcing the Work

There are encouraging indicators that responding INGOs are prepared to commit organisational resources in order to achieve the above goals. Nearly three-quarters (48) indicated that they have 'capacity building specialists' within their workforce, although this may include individuals who have a 'remit' for this work within a broader job description rather than being full-time specialist advisors.

The level of **financial investment** in capacity building amongst this group of INGOs is impressive if taken at face value, as 45% (30 organisations) estimated that almost one-third of their overall programme funds is spent on this work. Just over a quarter (19 organisations) indicated that they were allocating over 40% of their general programme budget to capacity building. However, these responses may be taken with a little caution, as INTRAC's evaluation experience tells us that INGOs often encounter considerable difficulty in identifying the amounts being dedicated to capacity building. This is due to the fact that often the expenditure is subsumed within sector or geographical programme budgets and no specific coding is given to the capacity building interventions.

The survey question on **sources of funding** threw up some interesting information. Of note is the fact that almost three-quarters of the INGOs use their own unrestricted funds for capacity building work, again highlighting the degree of commitment and investment they are prepared to make. Just over half indicated that they receive funding for this work from their own government – from both the official aid programme and from the government's civil society/NGO unit. Interestingly, the same proportion of INGOs also indicated that they obtained financial support from Foundations – a category of donors who rarely figure highly in overall analyses and debates on international cooperation and 'aid architecture'. However, the information obtained does not indicate the proportion of funding from each source, thus making it impossible to identify their relative weight (and subsequent influence).

Critical Issues:

- The stated degree of investment in civil society capacity building is impressive, although it may be worth doing a few more in-depth studies to fully explore these initial findings. Some implications of the findings include:
- The heavy predominance of use of INGO's own unrestricted funds for this work may raise questions about how they are communicating about this work to the general public or their own supporter base (the probable main sources of such funds). Telling a motivating 'capacity building story' is quite a task, with the need to show the link to improvements in people's lives being the critical challenge of such efforts at public dissemination.
- There may be scope for further work to understand more fully the role played by Foundations and Trusts in supporting civil society capacity building work. Certainly it is critical that this donor segment is represented in all debates about 'back-donor' influence.
- What kind of professional support to building the expertise of the INGO 'capacity building specialists' exists? Unlike most other development topics, there are virtually no formal studies or in-depth practitioner-based courses available for such specialists. Is this something for debate?

'Shaping' the Work

Two-thirds (45 organisations) indicated that they have a specific **programme** which is solely dedicated to civil society capacity building. This is significant because such programmes require a level of strategic thinking and reflection which is very different from that used when incorporating individual capacity building initiatives within sectoral, thematic or geographic programmes. However, the most common approach used by nearly 80% of the INGOs (53 out of 67) is this 'cross-cutting' of capacity building in all programme work. Also of interest is the fact that just 20% of responding INGOs (13 organisations) rely on only one way of implementing this work, with the overwhelming majority combining two or more different approaches.

This degree of flexibility is echoed in the responses to the question on **timeframes** used for capacity building work. Three-quarters (51 of the INGOs) reported that there are significant variations in timeframes, spanning from 1 to 5 plus years in duration. The factors influencing these variations included the: diversity of context; level and nature of the capacity building objectives; nature of the

relationship with the participating organisations; and donor requirements. With regard to the last factor, concerns were expressed that donor timeframes are invariably too short in relation to capacity building work.

Despite the existence of such variations, 40% of the INGOs (27 organisations) indicated that the most commonly used timeframe was 5 or more years. This may be because a high number of informants indicated that the capacity building work took place within a context of long-term 'partnership' in their response to the earlier questions on framing their work. Fewer than 20% (13 organisations) however, reported using timeframes of 2 years or less.

Critical Issues:

- The use of multiple approaches to shaping the work raises the issue of whether the INGOs are conscience of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. It may be useful to facilitate reflection, for example, on what particular advantages a 'stand-alone capacity building programme' brings in relation to the cross-cutting or 'mainstreaming' approach.
- Whilst sensitivity to context and relationships is stated by the respondents as being a major factor in influencing the timeframes used, there is also acknowledgement of the realities of the aid environment. Would it ever be possible for INGOs to stand up to their 'back donors' and state that they would not be willing to sacrifice quality of work because of the requirements to work within inappropriate timeframes?

The Different Strategies Employed

A critical choice to be made when developing a capacity building strategy is of the _level_ at which to intervene: whether to focus on individuals, individual organisations, groupings of organisations (sectoral networks or coalitions), the civil society sector as whole and its positioning within society, or on the general environment which 'enables' civic action in its associational form to take place.

Over a third (24 out of 67) of the INGOs had earlier in the survey expressed a conceptual understanding of capacity building as operating at multiple levels. This would appear to be borne out in practice, as nearly all of the INGOs said they implement strategies which span more than one level, and over 40% (28 organisations) stated that they operate at all four levels described in the survey question[2]. Whilst unsurprisingly nearly all informants reported that they are working with individual organisations, over half indicated that they engage in work with 'collectivities' of CSOs at sub-sector or sector-wide levels.

The answers to the question about the **type of CSOs** engaged in INGO capacity building work reflected this multiple level approach. Long gone are the days of 'southern NGO capacity building' as expressed in the previous surveys. Instead, a picture emerges of a complex portfolio of diverse CSOs. Over three-quarters of the informants work with NGOs, CBOs and networks in their capacity building

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[2] INGOs were asked to indicate the levels at which they aimed their capacity building work: individuals; individual partner organizations; sub-sector and sector wide.

initiatives, and around half work with Faith Based Organisations, Professional Associations and Support Organisations.

40 organisations provided more detailed information regarding the factors which influenced their choices of who they do capacity building work with. Shared interests, approach, philosophy and programme focus were stated as being crucial factors for consideration rather than the type of CSO. Other factors included: the level of existing skills and capacity; context specific factors, and programme and funding requirements.

Most of the replies indicated that the INGOs are using a diverse range of **methods**, indicating the versatile approach taken to capacity building. However, information on the degree of emphasis placed on each method shows that (as in previous surveys) the top two methods are the traditional ones of training and technical assistance/skillshare. Between 50% and 60%[3] of the INGOs placed a high emphasis on these, despite some of the known limitations of these methods.

Between 40% and 50% of informants[4] reported a high priority for methods focused on the relational such as information sharing, strengthening networks/coalitions and facilitating networking/peer exchange opportunities. This emphasis corresponds to the earlier finding which showed how the INGOs were engaged with sector and sub-sector level work. It also is different from the previous surveys which did not indicate such priorities.

Amongst the less popular methods are the provision of support to cross-sectoral initiatives and to local capacity building support providers (given a high emphasis by around 20% or 13 of the 67 INGOs). In particular, the first of these methods would appear to reflect the general trend in development work over the past decade, which has increasingly approached societal change from a multi-actor perspective.

The methods used by fewest INGOs, and given lowest priority by all the informants, included two which are more commonly found within the public and private sectors – namely management consultancies and support to long term organisational change. These are also methods which are used by some INGOs for their own capacity development and it might be interesting to reflect upon why they are less commonly used with Southern/Eastern civil society actors. One possible reason might be that resourcing implications (time as well as funds) are felt to be too great, or alternatively that the methods themselves are considered inappropriate. (Further enquiry as to the reasons for this are still needed).

Over half of the replies reported significant variations in the choice of methods used, stating that they often developed tailor-made approaches according to a range of factors. These included contextual issues; the nature of the participating organisations; resource constraints; programme objectives and in response to the demand and requests of partners.

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[3] 42 organisations gave training a high emphasis, and 36 indicated the same for technical assistance/skillshare.
[4] 34 organisations emphasized information sharing; 29 indicated they placed a high emphasis on strengthening networks, alliances and coalitions and 27 emphasised facilitation of peer exchange opportunities.

Critical Issues:

- The continued heavy reliance on training and technical assistance capacity building methods does raise issues of concern. It would be important to know in what ways, if at all, the INGOs are mitigating the known limitations of such methods by, for example, ensuring follow up to training inputs with on-the-job accompaniment, introducing project-oriented modular training etc.
- Working with a diversity of CSOs and at multiple levels brings with it some specific challenges, particularly as regards the INGOs having available to them a corresponding range of methods and tools appropriate to the different CSO types and levels of intervention.
- Employing such diversified strategies raises a challenge of how to ensure linkages between them across the different levels – horizontally across organisation type (between different groups of CBOs for instance) and vertically (between grassroots through to 'apex' CSO entities).
- The INGOs are engaged quite deeply in strategies which are focused on the 'relational'. How deep an understanding is there of the complex nature of relational capacity?

The Content of the Work

Nearly all of the INGOs incorporate a 'broad stroke' approach which attempts to cover most of the key organisational capacity areas (similar to the previous survey of 1998). Half of the respondents however provided details of factors which influence the choice of subjects focused on in any particular context or group of organisations. Many reported that the choice was often based on a needs assessment, and took into account the priority, preferences and work of the CSOs.

The survey gave participants the opportunity to indicate the current emphasis placed on different subject areas, as well as share their views on how they might see this changing over the next five years. The INTRAC framework of the three dimensions of organisational capacity was used – namely that of the internal 'to be' dimension; the programme or 'to do' dimension and the relational or 'to relate' dimension.

With regard to the ***internal capacity*** areas, a high emphasis was given by just over half of the INGOs to strategy development; organisation development & change and the realm of financial management (transparency, systems development etc). This echoes the 1998 survey responses which also placed organisation development and renewal as the top capacity issue. Whilst this may be seen as an understanding of the importance of investing strategically in the internal capacity development of CSOs, it is interesting to note that the *way in which* the support is delivered does not necessarily correspond. This may be evidenced in the high priority given to the capacity building methods of training and technical assistance over more process oriented approaches (mentoring, organisational change consultancies).

It is not surprising to see the subjects of M&E systems development and accountability high up the priority list of the INGOs, given the general trends of 'results oriented management' which emphasizes the need to prove effective organisational performance. The group of subjects which received the lowest prioritisation include several which focus on internal organisational policies related to gender, diversity and HIV-AIDS. It might be interesting to investigate further the reasons for such apparent

reticence to engage in these areas, although it is worth noting that 10 respondents indicated that they envisaged an increased emphasis on these over the next 5 years.

With regard to the **programme dimension** there is a striking emphasis on project/programme design and implementation, with nearly all the INGOs indicating they incorporated this topic in their work and 70% (47 organisations) giving it a high emphasis. The capacity to measure impact was also given a high emphasis by 40% of the respondents (27 organisations). These capacities are the core ones that enable CSOs to effectively manage their programmes of work and show whether they are making a difference.

Over 90% of the INGOs (61 out of 67) incorporate advocacy-related capacity issues within their initiatives (e.g. capacity for policy dialogue, developing advocacy strategies, monitoring public policies). However, whilst slightly under a third gave a high emphasis to the capacity to develop advocacy strategies, the specific capacities for policy dialogue, analysis and research were lower priorities.[5] A few replies stated they were looking to increase their work in the areas of policy research and dialogue capacities in the future.

The lowest proportion of INGOs were working on strengthening capacities for disaster risk reduction, social and humanitarian protection and work on issues of HIV/AIDS. It may be of interest to explore the reasons for this – it could just reflect the interests of the respondents, or it could potentially reflect the fact that these are areas of programme work where the INGOs themselves are still very active in an operational sense, and thus may not be so focused on strengthening the capacities of southern/eastern actors as potential replacements.

In the **relational dimension** the subject of greatest priority was that of civil society networks, alliances and coalitions (nearly 60% - 40 INGOs gave this a high emphasis). This subject had been identified in the survey of 1998 as one which the participating INGOs saw as most likely to grow in importance (along with monitoring and evaluation). The group of INGO respondents to that survey had not thought that they would increase substantially their work on CSO capacity to collaborate with governments (22% gave it a high emphasis then). The results from this 2006 group of INGOs however, indicate that this capacity area is second in importance, with over 40% stating they gave it a high emphasis.[6]

The lowest prioritisation was for building an understanding of the general aid environment (6 organisations), although this topic has been identified as a growth area for a number of informants. The second to bottom priority was the subject of relationships with northern partners/donors (13 organisations) - a subject which touches upon issues of relationships with the INGOs themselves. It might be of interest to investigate the reasons for this apparent low prioritisation.

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[5] The capacity to develop advocacy strategies was given a high emphasis by 21 organisations, but the related capacities for policy dialogue, analysis and research were prioritized by lower numbers (14, 13 and 6 respectively).
[6] Whilst recognising that the informants are not the same group of INGOs, it is of interest to notice this difference – one which probably quite accurately reflects the shifts within the general development sector.

Roles of INGO Staff

The survey replies indicated that INGO staff combine a number of different roles within the capacity building initiatives they undertake. However, the emphasis was on direct capacity building implementation, with the contracting of local support providers being the least commonly used (by just over 50% or 34 organisations). The most common primary roles played by INGO staff were those of designing the overall approach, making funding decisions and direct delivery of support services. Whilst nearly all saw signposting capacity building information and contacts as part of the range of roles played, only 3% (2 organisations) indicated that they saw this as their primary role.

Looking at the issues of power and control within capacity building initiatives, it is clear that the emphasis given by the INGOs is on local CSO consultation and participation in shaping, monitoring and evaluating the initiative. Only 37% of the respondents (25 organisations) stated that they let local CSOs have total management of the capacity building initiatives, but when referring to shared management this figure rises to almost 60% (39 organisations).

Impact

Respondents were given the option of filling in a narrative section which focused on impact and learning. It is very encouraging that 44 out of the 67 organisations did choose this option and took the time to share their reflections and challenges in this area. Quite a number were able to provide examples and references of what they considered to be the impact of the capacity building work they

are engaged in[7]. Some referred to evaluations and impact studies that could be accessed. However much of the commentary was qualified by statements on the methodological difficulties of measuring impact in this area of work.

It is possible to analyse the responses by referring to the ultimate goals of the capacity building work (see 'framing' section above) i.e. changes in:
- the CSO capacity itself (whether individually or collectively);
- the way they engage in society as actors for change (and the space available for them to do so);
- and ultimately changes in the quality of life of the people they represent/serve

When referring to changes in organisational capacities, a few people specifically referred to seeing impact at multiple levels – that is, they saw changes in individuals' behaviour, within organisations, between organisations and across sectors. There were some interesting references to increased organisational sustainability, with about a quarter of the respondents stating they had seen improvements in the multiple dimensions of capacity – internally, in their relationships with others and in their programme work. Some cited indicators such as *"partner independence";* increased *"recognition in society"* and a number quoted seeing an increased *"confidence and competence in partners to effect their own development."* Quite a lot of emphasis was placed on improved relationships, both in terms of cross-sector relationships as well as amongst civil society actors themselves. Outcomes of these improved relationships were also referred to – namely in terms of increased learning and cross-fertilization as well as increased cooperation and trust.

A number of responses referred to impact in relation to 'civic space' and the engagement of civil society actors in influencing and holding decision makers to account. Some referred to local level social change such as the *"growing confidence and cohesiveness in rural communities"* and "*strengthened local social change processes".* One respondent cited an increase in *"the ability of constituents to understand their rights".* Others made references to effective lobbying and policy influencing and to seeing CSOs playing *"a stronger role of protoganist."* One person cited seeing "*influence on African governments."*

However, concrete improvements in peoples' lives was the most commonly cited type of impact, largely seen as a result of improved service delivery by participating CSOs in fields such as health, water, housing, education etc. As one respondent put it, there were now *"communities with access to critical services previously unavailable to them".* This emphasis on improved service delivery capacity is not surprising given the strong drive within, and external pressures upon, the INGOs to show 'results' that link with the global agendas such as the MDGs.

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[7] The limitations of a survey method are evident here, and what follows is based on the respondents' own statements of evidence of impact.

Critical Issues:

The challenge of developing appropriate and effective forms of assessing impact is one that is much debated, and this survey echoes the concerns of many who recognise this as an area for further development.

Principals and Lessons Learnt

In commenting on *key characteristics and good practice principles for effective capacity building,* many respondents referred to those of effective partnerships – namely, shared vision, goals, trust, communication etc. A few took this further, and explicitly stated that effective capacity building work involved "*being transparent about our own wider organisational objectives"* and stressed the importance of "*clarity on non-negotiable values"* as well as clarity on roles. This relational dimension to the work was also referred to as being critical by one respondent who noted that this would enable "*dialogue regarding sensitive internal organisational issues".*

The majority of those who provided narrative responses regarding principles (25 out of 44) stressed the importance of what was termed 'ownership' and the 'participatory' character of the capacity building initiative. Some placed the emphasis on the initial *'felt need'* and expressed their view that the capacity building initiative should be 'demand driven'. Some wrote in terms of *'local identification of issues',* or stressed the importance of using participatory techniques in the assessment phase. One respondent went further and saw this in two phases : .."*a good upfront participatory assessment that provides a basis for guided self-assessment by local organisations over time".*

Around 12 respondents emphasised the importance of 'tailoring' interventions in accordance with the characteristics of the organization(s) participating in the initiative. However just half that number referred to the importance of taking into consideration specific contextual factors, although a lot of emphasis was placed on this in the answers to the main part of the survey. It would appear perhaps, that relevance to the local and wider political and socio-economic context is more of an operational, programming reference point rather than a guiding principle.

Some individual replies show a further degree of depth of reflection about good practice principles and effective practice, but these are isolated comments and do not appear to build a picture of a consolidated body of thought amongst the INGO informants. A few people indicated that they thought that flexibility of approach was a key characteristic of effective work, and a similar amount suggested that the key lies in capacity building being part of "*ongoing practice" and "embedded in programming."* One or two respondents stressed the importance of taking a 'holistic' approach and a few stated that doing effective work means recognising that capacity building involves change or working with a long-term change perspective. Some identified characteristics linked to effective programme management such value for money; effective M&E, adequate resources and ensuring sustainable outcomes.

A group of narrative responses did indicate a greater emphasis on principles related to the INGOs themselves and their behaviour. One referred to the principle of being a role model, or practicing what they preached. Others mentioned the importance of 'transparency' or referred to the need to practice

"good donorship" principles. One reply suggested a key principle was to "*separate funding from non-funding support".*

Half a dozen made reference to being open themselves to learning and change as a valued principle. There were statements on the importance of an approach based on a two-way process which involved "*mutual learning and respect"* and developing the capacity of the capacity builders. One highlighted the need to "*realise when we need to change and not vice versa".* However, it is to be stressed that these self-reflective responses were just a few out of a total of 44.

An interesting, possible contradiction to this however, may lie in the responses to the question which specifically asked about what the INGOs had **learnt about themselves** and their capacity as a result of engaging in capacity building work. More than a third explicitly indicated in their responses that they saw capacity building as two-way – double the amount who had identified this as a good practice principle. Typical responses included: *"We always learn more about ourselves from these engagements – both our capabilities and our limitations."* Some emphasised how they had learnt that learning itself is important, which means investing in time for learning and being open to changing approaches and concepts.

Nearly half wrote about the 'safe' ground of learning about programme work in general and capacity building programming specifically. This included several references to the difficult, high-risk and experimental nature of the work and its long-term nature. Some referred to the challenge of 'tailoring' the responses, with one stating that they felt they often were juggling the need to do that with the desire to achieve efficiency through more standardized approaches. A number recognized how rewarding the work could be.

The minority of responses which referred to learning more about themselves and their own capacities gave a mix of examples. Some referred to learning about the leadership and management of their own organizations, others about ensuring they have the right 'people mix' and of the importance of these people themselves being willing to change. Half a dozen responses referred to learning about the nature of relationships and the need to invest in new types of relationships, with some specifically mentioning power issues. One answer in particular went into this in some depth, and included a reference to how working with an "*in the know' perspective can defeat the core empowerment objective".* This respondent referred also to an "*INGO corporate brand which can also be a problem here, enveloping civil society in a new form of patron client relationship".* Another respondent referred to learning that "*we have a lot to learn from them, and would be greatly enriched ourselves if we would only relinquish control and let them in to the global arena a little more."*

CONCLUSIONS

This 'snapshot' of a self-selecting group of INGOs does reveal some interesting facets of how they view their work in strengthening civil society. In comparison with the similar 'snapshot' of 9 years ago there are some marked advances – in particular in the ways in which around two-thirds of the respondents were fairly nuanced in their replies. This group of informants state that they place an emphasis on adapting and responding to partners' needs when making choices about the strategies and content of their capacity building work. They acknowledge the relevance of context and the

constraints within which they work – whether these constraints originate from donor conditions or from their own organisation's interests.

A smaller 'core' of responses express a more complex understanding of the realities and potential of this work. Of course, this core of 15 or so respondents may just reflect the fact that these individuals took the time to fill in the questionnaire with greater care and reflection. However, it is noticeable that throughout their replies they are expressing a consistency of reflection on how they understand civil society capacity building. This core group of INGOs express a more complex conceptual understanding of capacity building, they seek to articulate different levels of intervention, are knowledgeable about good practice principles and are grappling with the challenges of assessing the impact of the work.

When looking at all 67 responses, it is striking that nearly all are working with a broad portfolio of CSO types, operate at more than one intervention level and draw on a range of methods and content topics. Two thirds are engaged in dedicated 'stand-alone' capacity building programmes which have the potential of generating much in the way of strategic reflection and learning about this kind of programme work.

Despite the positive nature of these responses that indicate that the informants feel that they are learning from their work and that they are attune to local and wider contextual issues, the following points should be recognized:
   a) Firstly, there is continued conceptual 'muddiness' despite the large amount of investment being made in this specialist field of knowledge. There are expressions which indicate confusing implementation of capacity building work with other concepts such as that of working in partnership. The majority of the INGOs did not have formal policies or easily accessible, written framework papers which allow them to ensure consistency of understanding (and practice) across their organisation.
   b) Secondly, the majority of respondents are heavily involved in the direct delivery of capacity building services and only a minority appear to be reflecting on the implications of this in terms of their 'good donor' role. Might this be the new expression of 'INGO operationality'? It is still the minority who are placing an importance on investing in local capacity for sustainable CSO support provision.
   c) There is still a predominant reliance on training and technical assistance, despite the known limitations of these delivery methods.
   d) The heavy emphasis on ensuring that southern/eastern CSOs effectively manage their programmes of work raises issues which may need further exploration and debate. How far is this a reflection of the INGO role within the 'aid chain' whereby upward accountability and good practice regarding use of donor funds are paramount concerns?
   e) Only a minority of the INGOs expressed an understanding of capacity building as a two-way process of learning and change. The majority shared reflections on the technical questions – no doubt sincerely motivated by a desire to improve their capacity building work, but possibly shying away from any reflections on the implications that a stronger local Civil Society might have for their own role in development.

Such kinds of issues or limitations resonate with those emerging from the survey previously conducted on this theme in 1998. This raises questions about why they continue to be unresolved and where and how the INGOs are being challenged to reflect upon them. It is quite possible that these limitations will persist whilst there is no continued *forum for joint reflection and debate* where, most importantly the Southern/Eastern perspective can be heard. The earlier efforts of Southern civil society actors to generate such a forum (the International Forum for Capacity Building) did start to provide such opportunities. However, that multi-stakeholder Forum is no longer in operation and in addition many INGOs who are involved in capacity building initiatives did not participate. The responses suggest that re-establishing a Civil Society Capacity Building Forum – focused on civil society actors from all parts of the globe might contribute to challenging some of these issues.

Another potential way forward is to explicitly recognise and build on the real positives expressed in some of the replies to this survey. Undoubtedly many of the INGOs have undertaken evaluations and sponsored independent research to gather evidence of their progress. Reviewing this material, and supplementing it with further research if necessary, could allow us to identify the degree to which the stated good practice principles and mature reflections of the committed 'core' are a reality on the ground. If this information could be gleaned it would need to be effectively disseminated, in such a way to influence a broader cross-section of INGOs.[8]

In conclusion, this survey has provided us with an opportunity to hear what some INGO staff engaged in capacity building work feel about the ways in which they are approaching their capacity building work with civil society actors in the South/East. Despite methodological limitations, the results are of interest and do prompt us to ask critical questions about the role of International NGOs and their relationships with their Southern/Eastern counterparts. These are not new issues but what is encouraging is that it would appear that there is a growing nucleus of INGO staff who are actively engaged in reflecting on them in the context of their capacity building work. It is our belief that we can and should do everything that we can to encourage and support such critical reflection.

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[8] See annex 1 for further ideas on how this might take place.

ANNEX ONE: EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE STEPS FOR DISSEMINATING GOOD PRACTICE

- *Increased investment in INGO reflection on good practice* – both within the individual organisations and across the sector as a whole. One way of achieving this might be to build a body of 'INGO good practice' case studies which should take as the starting point the perspectives of the southern/eastern CSOs involved. These could focus on a set of agreed 'good practice principles' and aim to illustrate how these principles can actually be put into practice.

- *Shared learning on working with 'relational' capacities* - most of the respondents are engaging with capacity building efforts which include focusing on groups of organisations working together, or even cross-sector working. Pooling together a body of knowledge about the concepts, methods and lessons learnt about this specific capacity area may be of shared interest. It may also be a way in which some of the issues about power dynamics and changing power relations might be addressed.

- *Shared learning on working with diversity of CSOs* – again, pooling the lessons learnt about the specific challenges faced in this work.

- *Encouraging innovative ways of reviewing work in progress* – peer reviews; joint missions with local CSOs and INGO staff; 'twinning' more experienced INGOs with those working with less nuanced approaches etc.