

# Local Government Capacity Building and Development: Lessons, Challenges and Opportunities

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## Abstract

The conceptualisation of capacity building is rather an oversimplified subject but is a very complex and in most cases one which has been misappropriated by scholars and practitioners. The term capability, capacity and capacity building have become the rhetoric of public officials and students of Local governments who have unfortunately misconceptualised them. The notion of local government and community capacity building is both explicit and pervasive in the rhetoric, missions, and activities of a broad range of contemporary community development efforts. However, there is limited clarity about the meaning of capacity and capacity building and development which clarification becomes one of the central discourses of this paper. Against this background an extensive conceptual analysis of capacity development, reflecting its historicity, elasticity and dynamic nature will anchor this paper. Justification for local government capacity building and a contextual analysis of local capacity development in Zimbabwe, particularly the Rural District Councils Capacity Building Programme (RDCCBP) and the Urban 1 and 2 programmes will be reviewed on a case by case basis.

**Keywords:** Local government; Capacity building; Capacity development

## Introduction

### Capacity building and development: A conceptual framework

Nwankwo et al. defined capacity as the capability of a person, an institution or organization to perform a given task effectively, efficiently and on a continuing basis and with reduced dependence on external resources. Capacity building is therefore concerned with human resource development (people), institutional development (local government system) and the overall policy environment within which the local governments (as public service organizations) operates and interact. Capacity building can also help to determine the efficient utilization and allocation of human resources among competing demand(s). Simply and generally defined, therefore, capacity building implies activities which strengthen the knowledge, abilities, skills and behavior of individuals and improve institutional structures and processes such that the organization can efficiently meet its mission and goals in a sustainable way. Grindle [1] argued that, "capacity building is intended to encompass a variety of strategies that have to do with increasing the efficiency, effectiveness of government performance. [1] Grindle further suggested that capacity is seen as a variation of a strategy which include inside dimensions of building capacity inter alia human resources development, organizational strengthening dimension and institutional reform dimension. The discussion above therefore clarify that there are numerous definitions of capacity development, each reflecting a particular bias or orientation. Some describe capacity development as an approach or process, e.g. towards reduction of poverty, while others see it as a development objective, e.g. targeting the development of individual or organizational capacity. Many definitions fall somewhere in between these two perspectives. The definition by [2] CIDA suggests that capacity development includes various "approaches, strategies and methodologies" which seek to improve performance at different social levels. In other words, it argues that there is no single approach or prescription ('one size fits all') for capacity development. At the same time, as underlined later in this review, capacity development as an approach is based on certain principles and orientations which collectively do distinguish it from other approaches to, or perspectives on, development.

Capacity development, according to the Rwanda capacity building

strategy for local governments 2011-2015 is understood as a "process through which individuals, organizations and society obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development agenda. As such, capacity development is advanced through a comprehensive and holistic working approach, which shall be local government driven to be effective and relevant". Blair's conclusion that capacity development is about making local government "effective and accountable" brings unquestionable centrality of capacity building in local governance.

### Capacity gaps and needs: Justification for local government capacity development

With state decentralisation rapidly becoming the key features of intergovernmental relations around the world (Zimbabwe is no exception to this trend), with higher expectations for bridging the gulf between the state and civil society and government structures and bodies, building the capacity of local government should be a key agenda of central governments and other development partners in order to empower local governments to provide services efficiently to their constituencies Dillinger. Nickson stressed that this process of decentralisation followed a long period in which local government had no major functions, little financial resources and practically no political autonomy. The centrality of capacity development for sustainable local governance is therefore unquestionable and can best be summed up in Blair's statement that "good local government is not just a matter of creating the right legal, political and institutional framework. It is also about actively building local authority capacity, particularly the understanding and skills, and the ability and desire to learn." Effective local government according to Blair requires good leadership and strategic management, good service provision, and good community

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