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## Participatory capacity building in NGOs

By **JUDITH CHAUMBA AND JOUWERT VAN GEENE**

Capacity building is a buzzword commonly encountered in the work of NGOs. It is often interpreted as being concerned only with training and staff development, but it actually encompasses much more than this, as we discuss in this article. In Zimbabwe, NANGO (the National Association for NGOs) together with an external consultant has developed a method for participatory capacity assessment and planning. Facilitated by NANGO, organisations have begun a process of self-diagnosis, analysis, and strategic capacity planning. This has brought together NGOs from one sector to identify their similarities and to find ways of assisting each other in building sustainable capacity.

### Capacity for what?

Capacity is the power of something (a system, an organisation, a person) to perform or to produce. It may be defined as the ability of individuals and organisations to perform functions effectively, efficiently, and sustainably. To clarify capacity in its context it is necessary to answer the question: capacity for what? Here we narrow down capacity as the ability to solve a problem, to achieve or sustain a mission, or to reach a set of objectives. NGOs need capacity to achieve their planned objectives, to have an impact, and to fulfil their organisational purpose.

It has been widely acknowledged that insufficient capac-

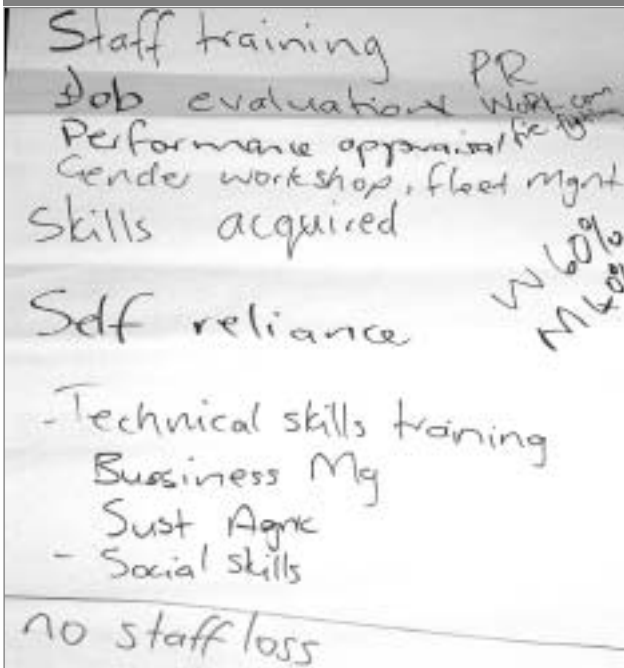
ity of development organisations hinders sustainable development. This problem however cannot be defined simply in terms of gaps in human resources, financial resources, or training. The issue is a function of several aspects including:

- excessive dependency of NGOs on external resources and technical assistance, leading to:
- limited sense of local ownership of the development processes by the NGO and its target groups, also caused by the top-down approaches of projects;
- inadequate consideration of broader environmental or systems factors, such as undeveloped NGO legislation; and/or
- poor integration and coordination of multiple development/programme initiatives between different stakeholders such as government, NGOs, and private sector partners.

### The Participatory Capacity Building (PCB) process

To address issues of 'lacking' capacity many organisations seek external assistance, expertise, or resources. Capacity building often turns out to be externally driven: external experts define an organisation's problems and bring in external solutions. Capacity building strategies are then likely to fail due to lack of ownership and limiting internal understanding of the problems.

Figure 1: Sharing information about staff training



The PCB process, developed by an independent consultant, Jouwert van Geene, in partnership with NANGO, breaks radically break with this tradition. It consists of three steps: participatory capacity assessment, strategic capacity planning, and operational planning. The first two steps use predefined methodologies and involve externally facilitated one-day workshops. The last step is carried out internally by the organisation, without external facilitation, and it may be done as a collaboration with a wider group of NGOs in the same sector.

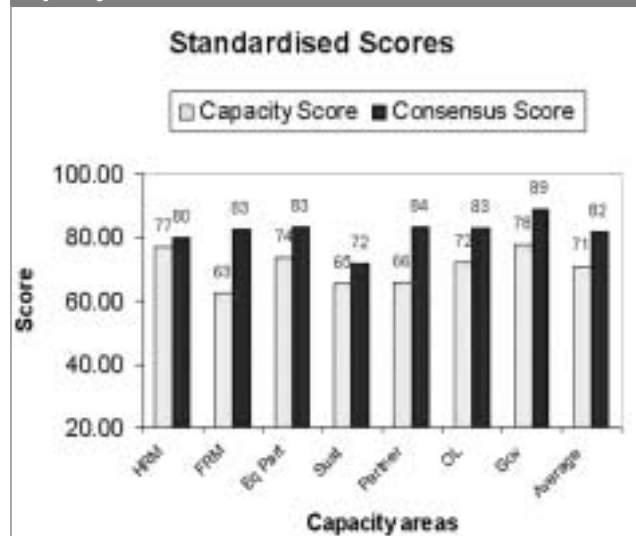
**Participatory capacity assessment**

The first step is based upon a tool developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) called POET.<sup>1</sup> In a one-day workshop the assessment team of the organisation is guided through a set of discussions to assess the current capacity of the organisation. Seven capacity areas of the organisation are discussed:

- Human resource management: how the organisation deals with staff.

<sup>1</sup> Participatory Organisational Evaluation Tool (POET) was developed in 1998 by Beryl Levinger of the Education Development Center and Evan Bloom of Pact, with assistance from the UNDP and numerous Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Based on a methodology called PROSE (Participatory, Results-Oriented Self-Evaluation), POET focuses on the needs of Southern CSOs and their partners. The POET Users' manual can be downloaded from the UNDP website: [www.undp.org/csopp/poet.htm](http://www.undp.org/csopp/poet.htm).

Figure 2: Example of the results of a participatory capacity assessment



Note: the consensus score is the standard deviation of the respondents' answers at a scale of 100

Figure 3: Analysis of the participatory capacity assessment

<b>Human Resource Management</b>	Total scores: capacity 77, consensus 81
<i>Strong capacity items:</i>	<i>Reasons or Causes:</i>
• Staff training (88)	– we look after staff
• Staff diversity (92)	– we honour skills
• Staffing (85)	– we are well organised
	– membership organisation
	– well defined roles and responsibilities
<i>Weak capacity items:</i>	<i>Reasons or Causes:</i>
• Staff numbers (65)	– low funded
• Promotion opportunities (62)	– difficult to get funds
• Staff skills (73)	– 'flat' organisations
	– few different job types
	– new types of projects require new skills
<i>Low consensus on:</i>	<i>Reasons or Causes</i>
• Staff training (55)	– some people go for training more often
• Personnel evaluation (46)	– personal grievances or conflicts
• Conflict resolution (44)	– not so well defined systems of evaluation
<i>Recommendations:</i>	
• Do more research on career planning possibilities	
• Hold staff meeting on conflict resolution policy	

**Figure 4: An example of envisioned capacity****Envisioned Capacity**

- @ All project officers trained in facilitation skills
- # New financial system and procedures in place
- % Three new computers for our secretariat
- & Sustainable funds from a variety of donors
- & Fifty-one board members gone through fund-raising course
- % New office in more convenient place (transport)
- @ All target groups trained in facilitation methods
- !! Ongoing staff reflection in monthly meetings
- <?>All staff have been chosen as staff person of the month at least once!
- (\*) Membership of five networks established
- (\*) Chosen as NGO of the year by NANGO
- <?>New job descriptions and job performance procedures
- <?>All staff have career plans and yearly follow up
- <?>Competitive salaries that can hold staff
- % Two new project cars to visit projects more often
- # Administrator has all invoices by end of month
- !! Rotating 'chair' of meetings to enhance participation
- (\*) Clear understanding of core business presented

**What capacity do we want to see in place in 3-5 years?**

- <?>Well managed, rewarded and motivated human resources
- (\*) Well formulated, marketed successful corporate image
- % Enabling organisational environment established and kept in place
- # Well working financial system
- & Sustainable funds from various donors
- @ High levels of participation of target groups
- !! High levels of participation in own organisation

Note: the symbols alongside the different vision elements on the left were used to cluster the elements. Each cluster was then given a name, as in the chart on the right.

- Financial resource management: getting and dealing with money.
- Equitable participation: involvement of target groups.
- Sustainability of programme benefits: how the organisation's projects have impact.
- Partnering: effective liaisons with other stakeholders.
- Organisational learning: sharing of and learning from information.
- Governance and strategic management: looking at the bigger picture.

Each of these topics is further divided into 12 to 16 sub-items. The assessment uses the 'critical incident' technique to focus group discussions. The assessment team is led through a number of questions about incidents that have happened in their organisation in relation to a certain capacity area. For instance, on staff training, the group will first be asked when their most recent staff training was, and how often staff training has been held over the past 12 months. When participants have shared information on staff training, each participant then 'scores' the level of capacity in staff training, based on the discussion and their own views and opinions. All scoring is done anonymously to create a safe space for each person to make their own assessment. The external facilitator has no input to the conversations, but will probe as much as needed to get clarity on the level of capacity of the organisation. The facilitator uses flip charts to write down the discussion topics and specific examples that are brought forward by the group (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Figures in this article include documentation from different workshops. Due to the sensitive nature of the documentation the authors did not want to share actual transcripts of workshops. All examples represent documented flip charts or 'visualisations' of brainstorm.

The assessment team should represent all levels of the organisation. Usually it includes general support staff, project staff, management, and board members. Most effective group sizes are between 7 and 15 participants.

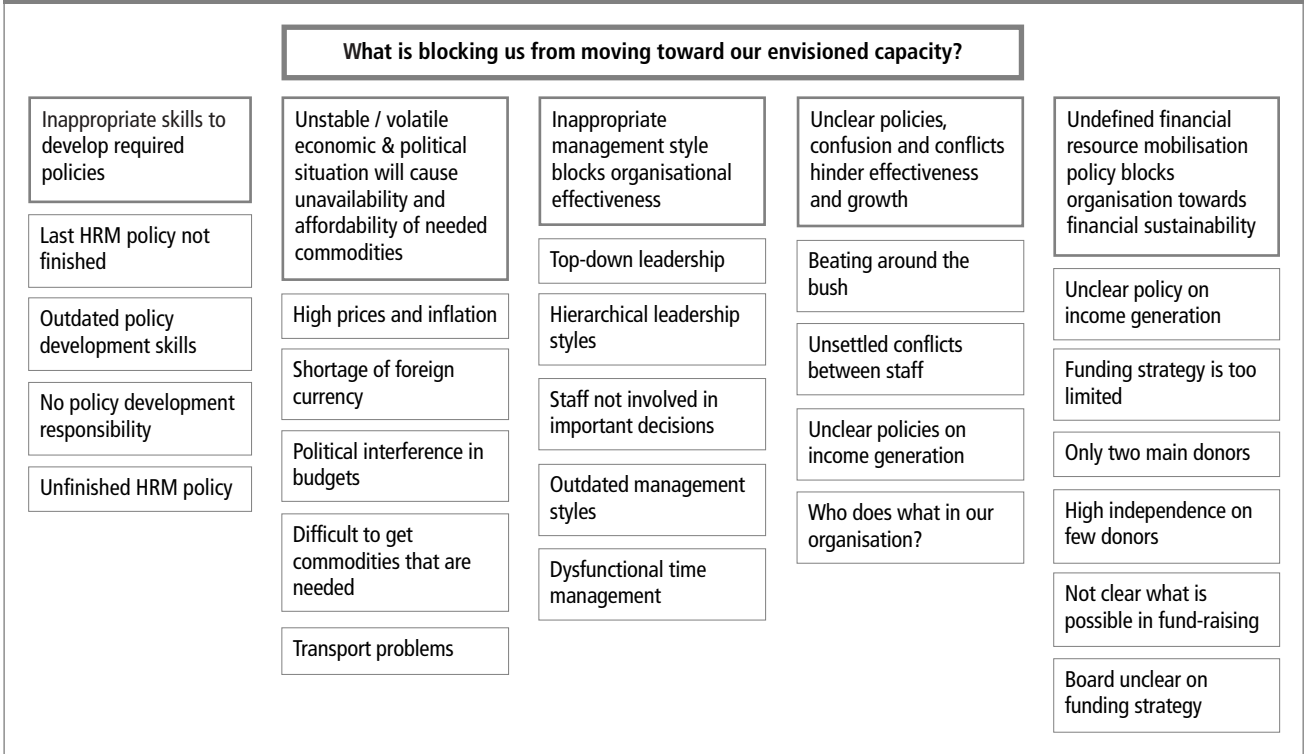
After the workshop the external facilitator will enter all the individual scores of the participants into a simple computer application, using MS Excel. This application will automatically calculate the capacity levels of the organisation in all assessed areas. It will also show the level of consensus among participants for each level. The facilitator then writes a first report for the organisation with the capacity scores that have been assessed (Figure 2).

**Feedback and strategic capacity planning workshop**

The second workshop provides a space for participatory reflection and planning, using a Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP) process, developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA)<sup>3</sup>. It starts with a reflection on the results of the participatory capacity assessment. Participants analyse the assessments either individually or in small groups. For each capacity area they look for areas of high and low capacity and brainstorm possible reasons for this. They also analyse areas where there was a low level of consensus among

<sup>3</sup> ICA is a global network of organisations which has created and developed participatory methods since 1966. Following the publication of *Winning Through Participation* by Laura J. Spencer in 1989, ICA packaged these methods as the Technology of Participation® (ToP)®. ToP® is a registered trademark of the Institute of Cultural Affairs. Amongst other methods, ToP® includes: Focused Conversation Method, Consensus Workshop Method, Action Planning Process, Participatory Strategic Planning and Participatory Project Management. There are national ICAs in more than 30 countries, which train and facilitate in these methods. More information can be found at [www.icaworld.org](http://www.icaworld.org).

Figure 5: Identifying underlying barriers to building capacity



participants. They then make a set of concrete recommendations for each capacity area (see Figure 3 for an analysis of human resources management capacity). All capacity areas are presented to the plenary and again discussed and the facilitator presents the scores of the organisation compared to those of peer organisations.

Based on these presentations the group prioritises the areas that need most attention.

The group is then asked to start dreaming about their organisation's future capacity. They brainstorm what their ideal capacity would be in three to five years' time, focusing on priority capacity areas. The facilitator asks the participants to group these elements and name them (Figure 4).

The group then identifies blockages that keep the organisation from reaching this vision, focusing on the elements of the vision and weaknesses in the organisation's capacity. The blockages are clustered according to the same root cause and participants then identify the key underlying barriers to building capacity (Figure 5). This process forces the organisation to look beyond the obvious 'lack of something' towards social patterns of behaviour and attitudes that cause lack of capacity. For example, when exploring lack of staff participation in decision

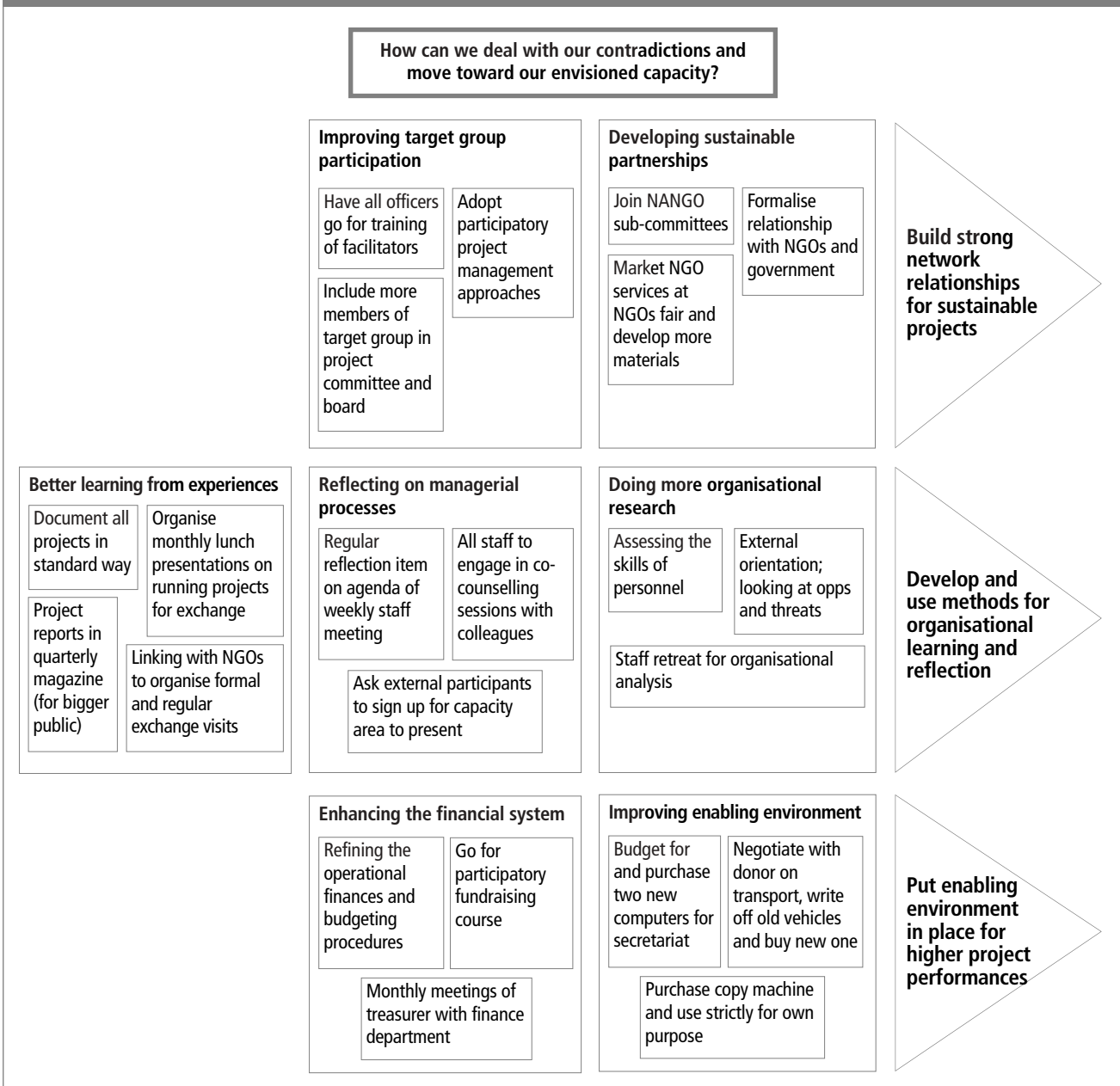
making, the group may identify an inappropriate management style as a blockage to organisational effectiveness.

The envisioned capacity and underlying barriers guide the group in defining strategic directions for capacity building. The group is asked to brainstorm creative and innovative actions that will remove the blockages and lead to the envisioned capacity. Activities with the same intention or objective form distinct action arenas. These groups are then grouped into strategic directions with the same thrust of action. In the end the participants come up with two to four strategies to build the capacity of the organisation, based on their own assessment, priorities, vision, and analysed blockages (Figure 6). An example of a strategy in a workshop was 'to develop and use methods for organisational learning and reflection' which included three action arenas: 'better learning from experiences'; 'reflecting on managerial processes'; and 'doing more organisational research'. Each of these arenas included some examples that showed the general direction of action, which would later be turned into activity plans.

The feedback and planning workshop is ended with a reflection on the next steps, including:

- how the process relates to other plans of the organisation;

**Figure 6: Strategic directions for capacity building**



- what other types of assessment or research are needed;
- what internal and external assistance could be mobilised; and
- concrete steps to start implementing the capacity building plan.

The workshop is documented by the organisation, together with the external facilitator, if needed.

**Operational planning**

The organisation takes the strategic capacity building directions and prepares a more detailed activity plan within the organisation. These plans include specific actions, timelines, responsibilities, and resources. This process does not require external facilitation since all organisations have their own planning mechanisms.

The group of NGOs that has been part of the assessment and planning exercise may come together to synthesise their strategies and develop a comprehensive capacity building plan to combine their efforts. In a typical planning seminar the NGOs will reflect on the process so far, define common capacity building strategies, and discuss their goals, objectives, operating values, roles and responsibilities, and next steps.

### **NANGO's experiences with PCB**

NANGO is a membership organisation of NGOs in Zimbabwe. Its mission is to create a conducive environment for NGOs to be effective in their work. One strategy to achieve this is building the capacity of NANGO members. In the past this was mainly done by organising and co-ordinating training for NGOs but last year NANGO shifted its focus to capacity building in a broader sense. NANGO invited ten NGOs from the women and gender sector to participate in the capacity building process. NANGO had already established a working relationship with these NGOs through training events and all the NGOs had shown interest in capacity building during meetings. Most organisations are relatively small (five to fifteen staff) and are community based. Most are membership organisations, active in literacy, small business development, community development, and women's empowerment.

The NANGO officer in charge of capacity building, Judith Chaumba, was introduced to PCB by Jouwert van Geene, a local consultant. She conducted the capacity assessments and feedback and planning workshops with ten NGOs from November 2002 to July 2003. After these workshops, a coordination seminar was organised with representatives of all the participating organisations. This meeting created an opportunity for the NGOs to exchange ideas on capacity building and see how best capacity building strategies could be integrated. A comprehensive capacity building proposal will now be developed to combine all efforts.

### **Reflections on the PCB methodology**

The PCB process combines a relatively formal method of organisational assessment with participatory action research. In its design, the following guiding principles were used:

- Maximum participation: capacity assessment is conducted by a wide variety of people from all levels of the organisation and is based on their realities.
- Minimum external input: processes may be externally facilitated but presentation and analysis of assessment results, prioritisation, and decision making is mostly done by the organisation. Capacity building strategies are mainly

focused on internal solutions that do not need many external resources.

- Comprehensiveness: capacity assessment includes important internal and external aspects of an organisation, and capacity planning is linked to all parts of the organisation. Moreover, the planning process integrates different capacity aspects when looking for underlying blocks and strategic capacity building directions.

The experiences with PCB showed several strong points in the methodology (as reflected by the participating NGOs during the coordination seminar) :

- The participatory approach really created a lot of involvement and made NGOs aware of their own capacity to analyse and plan for themselves. The method creates a lot of energy for and ownership of capacity building plans.
- Groups composed of participants from all across the organisation have extensive knowledge to make a thorough analysis of their current capacity.
- PCB provides a good foundation for monitoring the capacity of the organisation, by repeating (parts) of the capacity assessment on a yearly basis.

Some challenges in the use of the tool were also discovered:

- When analysing the current capacity of organisation, it was sometimes difficult for members of the organisation to be completely honest about the root causes of problems. Some causes were very sensitive, such as hierarchical leadership, problems with the board, and corruption. The method does not provide specific tools to tackle this challenge.
- In the capacity assessment, some capacity areas (such as equitable participation and sustainability) are quite difficult for participants to understand, especially when they are not involved in this area. Since a lot of ground must be covered during the assessment, sometimes time is short to explain all the topics. In general, though, there will be sufficient knowledge available in the room to do the full assessment.
- The capacity assessment provides very detailed scores of the level of capacity and consensus in the organisation. The scores are based on the answers of the participants after group discussions and therefore they have a high degree of subjectivity. The assessment results should be seen as giving a general indication of the organisation's capacity. It is the closer analysis in the workshops that gives meaning to these scores.
- The fact that the assessments include staff from all levels of the organisation results in wide variations in levels of understanding. Even though there are discussions of crit-



ical incidents, general support staff are less assertive so they may not make further inquiries about an unfamiliar issue before scoring. Since the calculation of assessment results uses statistical methods, the scores from some inadequately informed respondents might lead to anomalous conclusions. It is therefore important to spend enough time on presentation and reflection on the assessment results by participants in the feedback and planning workshops.

- Though the capacity assessment questionnaire is designed to facilitate a certain depth of analysis it could be too sophisticated workers from community-based organisations, who may be of lower literacy levels. This makes the assessment sessions longer as more simplification and interpretation of terms is necessary.
- In the course of the programme it became more difficult to keep organisations interested. It was clear to them that the assessments and planning sessions were very time-consuming. Also, some organisations were afraid of being

'judged' by outsiders. In the end, however, all the participating NGOs were still motivated to carry on with the programme. To get maximum involvement throughout the process more groundwork may need to be done before the sessions. The process approach must also be adopted in the NGOs' annual plans to ensure their participation.

### Future developments

This exercise of participatory capacity building should be followed by more work. In the final seminar for NGOs an outline plan for collaboration in capacity building was formulated which will lead to a three-year programme of activities including training, exchange of staff, study tours, organisational consultations. After one year, all organisations will be offered the opportunity to monitor their capacity using an adapted tool based on participatory capacity assessment. NANGO also plans to expand PCB services to other NGO sectors in Zimbabwe. The method is now available to all organisations who want to get involved in capacity building.

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#### NOTE

The Participatory Capacity Building process has been developed and packaged by Jouwert van Geene, an independent consultant in capacity building and community participation in Zimbabwe, in collaboration with NANGO, and with support from ICCO-PSa (Interchurch Organisation for Development Co-operation) and PSO (Association for Personnel Service Overseas) co-financing agencies in the Netherlands. A practical toolbox, with all the steps to facilitate capacity assessments, planning workshops, and monitoring and evaluation of capacity building is now available. This includes a CD-ROM with all the materials and software needed to analyse the capacity assessment results. For more information, please visit [www.geocities.com/part\\_cap\\_building](http://www.geocities.com/part_cap_building) or contact: Jouwert van Geene at the address above, or contact NANGO at [info@nango.org.zw](mailto:info@nango.org.zw).