Local Capacity Building
In Humanitarian Crises

Patronage or Partnership

Edited by **Ian Smillie** for the
Humanitarianism and War Project

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IDRC ❋ CRDI

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Foreword

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One of the core commitments of most international humanitarian organizations is to strengthen the capacity of local agencies to respond to crises and to participate more fully in their respective civil societies. To do anything less, the agencies argue persuasively, would be to leave those societies vulnerable to recurring emergencies. The track record of humanitarian organizations, however, is better in delivering life-saving assistance than in strengthening local capacity.

The externality of major international relief undertakings raises serious questions about the scale and appropriateness of the assistance provided. The essentially foreign character of such interventions also works against the expressed preference of the agencies for greater local participation and mutuality. In the heat of each new crisis, the scramble to save lives often eclipses the goal of partnership with local institutions. Moreover, patterns of relationships established during the relief phases of conflicts, many of them distressingly long-lived, are difficult to alter as reconstruction and development possibilities open up.

More than three years in the gestation process, this book reviews recent experiences in strengthening local institutions, governmental and nongovernmental alike, in six countries on five continents. It examines various aspects of the tensions between international initiatives to save lives, or, in the case of postconflict settings, to reconstruct the fabric of societies, and the parallel and sometimes competing international commitment to "capacitation." The story is a variegated and uneven one, with many successes and failures in the particular crises examined in this study. The candid review of experience that follows, however, provides a necessary step in the process of revisiting a perennial issue and charting a more effective course.

That, in fact, is the purpose of the Humanitarianism and War Project, under whose auspices the book has been written. The Project, an independent policy-research initiative based at Tufts University (see the brief explanation about the Project at the back of this volume), seeks to assist practitioner organizations to reflect on their experience and to adapt their policies and programs accordingly. Drawing on frontline insights from selected settings, the volume proceeds inductively from field data

to broader conclusions. The spirit of the writing, too, is in keeping with the approach that animates the project. "In an era of slash-and-burn exposés of bungled aid efforts," writes Smillie in his introduction, "the book balances candor with constructiveness."

There are, it goes without saying, no easy solutions to the dilemmas inherent in building institutional capacity, and this book, to its credit, does not attempt to provide any. If all-purpose solutions were available, they would have been identified and implemented well before now. What Smillie and his collaborators do provide, however, is a demonstration of the importance of struggling—country by country, conflict by conflict—with the vexing dilemmas of capacity building in all of their complexity. The varied experience marshaled and examined under a common rubric offers the reader and the institutional actors some clear pointers for the future.

Experiences of individual countries flesh out Smillie's initial presentation of history, definitions, and a typology of capacity building. There is no doubt among the writers about the need for strengthening local institutions, although the difficulties of succeeding in today's conflicts emerge in stark terms. Readers will be struck by how different capacity building looks when viewed from the ground up rather than from agency headquarters. Providing further context and realism, Smillie frames capacity building in terms of such larger issues as competing understandings of "civil society," trends and tensions in North-South cooperation, and the ever more insistent need for fundamental reforms in international humanitarian- and development-assistance methodologies and institutions.

Strengthening local institutions is a major objective of Canada's International Development Research Centre in Ottawa (IDRC), which has provided significant funding for the research and writing of this volume. Dr. Neclâ Tschirgi, IDRC's team leader in its Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Program, has underscored from the start of the undertaking the need to tackle the difficult issue of capacitation and the need to do so in collaboration with colleagues and institutions from the countries in conflict, incorporating local perspectives throughout. We are grateful for IDRC's support and encouragement.

Other funds have been provided by supporters of the Humanitarianism and War Project, listed by name on the Project's web site (see back of the volume). We wish to thank all of our contributors for making this work possible. Special thanks go as well to CARE Canada, which in the spring of 2001 hosted a discussion with government officials, NGOs, and others in Ottawa on the issues discussed in the book. We also extend appreciation to our editor Mary Lhowe, who has worked with the individual contributors to refine their contributions and to harmonize their prose. Other Project staff, including its former coordinator, Laura

Sadovnikoff, assisted at earlier points in the process when the project was located at Brown University's Watson Institute.

The Project welcomes comments from readers. We are committed to refining our understanding of these issues as we continue to engage the international community.

LARRY MINEAR, Director
Humanitarianism and War Project

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Introduction

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It is early 1998, on the outskirts of Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. "People are dying like flies," says an understandably emotional American missionary running a refugee camp for four thousand Hutus. Asked by a reporter about a series of nearby conflict resolution workshops being run by a British nongovernmental organization, the missionary watches four more corpses as they are carried out of the makeshift shelter he has constructed. The missionary says, "I do not like to criticize other groups... but I wish someone was giving me that sort of money."

Stories like this one, which appeared in the *Sunday Times* under the headline "Burundi 'peace-shops' squander British aid,"[1]encapsulate the dilemma that this book seeks to address. The dilemma is the tradeoff between outsiders doing things themselves—meeting human needs in the midst of a humanitarian emergency—and working to build longer-term capacities among local organizations so that people will be better able to deal with their own problems.

Much has been written in recent years about the need to build local capacities in emergency and postemergency situations. Good intentions notwithstanding, outsiders appear to have great difficulty working effectively with local organizations—civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community organizations, local government authorities—during humanitarian emergencies. When they do, the relationship is more often one of patronage than partnership. For a local organization, the task is more often about following the instructions of others than about meeting its own objectives. Five years—even ten years—after the emergencies in Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique began, local organizations do not seem better able to cope with humanitarian assistance than when they started. Is this true? If so, why? Is it because local organizations are congenitally deficient? Is it because outsiders know best, or because they do not know enough? Is it because the urgency of saving lives preempts all other considerations? Or is there another reason?

This book goes beyond rhetoric and prescriptive nostrums and examines the dynamics of what actually happens on the ground during and after emergencies. Case studies written by international aid practition-

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ers and journalists have been enhanced by commentary from the point of view of the people and organizations most affected by wars. Kathy Mangones writes from her vantage point as the executive director of a Haitian NGO umbrella organization attempting to function under military rule after the overthrow of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Goran Todorović survived the Bosnian war while working for an international relief agency in Sarajevo, but the greater challenge was his attempt to establish a postwar organization that could help build local civil society. Thomas Turay accepted the assignment to write a chapter on Sierra Leone following a series of peacebuilding workshops in 1998, only to become trapped during the January 1999 Revolutionary United Front (RUF) incursion into Freetown, barely escaping with his three daughters and his life. To these chapters are added firsthand accounts of the problems and opportunities created by the would-be kindness of strangers in Sri Lanka, Guatemala, and Mozambique.

The chapters present a cross section of emergencies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The cases were selected to bring out different aspects of the challenge at different moments in time. The chapter on Bosnia looks at the immediate reconstruction following the Dayton Peace Accords. The chapter on Mozambique takes a longer postwar view, while the chapter on Sri Lanka deals with an ongoing conflict. The Sierra Leone case deals with the immediacy, panic, and confusion of war.

Each chapter presents a different perspective on the relationship between international humanitarian actors and local civil society. Stephen Lubkemann's chapter on Mozambique highlights reasons for success in the rural health efforts of a European aid agency. Mike Leffert applies a journalist's eye to problems encountered by women returning to Guatemala after years of gender training provided by well-meaning international agencies in Mexican refugee camps.

In Bosnia, the story is one of external agencies looking for fast and efficient service delivery and dressing it in the language of civil society. The Haitian case demonstrates that much-maligned food aid can actually play a key role in building local capacities and local self-esteem, even during the worst of times. Thomas Turay describes a personal descent into aid-agency hell in Sierra Leone, and the return, at least, of hope. Although the book is about a form of aid delivery, it is not written primarily from the perspective of the people who deliver it. Rather, most of the chapters are written from the perspective of the people who receive it.

The primary purpose of the book is to identify and examine innovative practices that have contributed to building short- and long-term local capacities, which are then brought to bear on the challenges of emergency assistance, peacebuilding, reconstruction, and development. The book also distills real-life experience and aims to encourage reflection among practitioners, thereby setting it apart from most traditional

analyses. In an era of slash-and-burn exposés of bungled aid efforts, the book balances candor with constructiveness.

Chapter 1 reviews the international development literature on capacity building and finds that, while the language has been successfully transferred to humanitarian organizations and complex emergencies, there are very real problems in making the reality fit the words. The chapter expands the definition of the term *capacity building* and discusses the very real constraints faced by practitioners: knowledge, time, the sources of and expectations behind available funding. It is worth keeping in mind from the outset, however, that—theory and definitions aside—the purpose of capacity building is straightforward. In chapter 7, Thomas Turay says it well:

> I understand capacity building as a process through which people of a given society are motivated to transform their physical, socioeconomic, cultural, political, and spiritual environments for their own well-being and the advancement of their society. Capacity building is about empowering people to take control of their lives. It enables people to rediscover their strengths and limitations, and the opportunities to develop their fullest potential. The process enables people to build self-confidence and self-respect, and to improve the quality of their lives, utilizing their own resources, both human and nonhuman. Capacity building provides opportunities for local organizations to establish networks at both local and international levels. Capacity building is also a process of creating opportunities for people to be creative and imaginative, to dream, and to be able to live their dreams.

Chapter 2 examines the relationship between external humanitarian actors and Bosnian civil society at three moments in time. The first section examines the situation at the end of 1996, two years after the Dayton Peace Accords. This was a period of early transition from relief and rehabilitation to efforts dealing with longer-term social and economic issues. The second section describes a specific effort by one international NGO to work with civil society; it charts this NGO's progress from confident proposal-writing to the complex reality of helping traumatized people form organizations where none existed before. The final section is a sobering reflection on the progress made by Bosnian civil society and external agencies' progress in understanding that society at the start of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 3 deals with Haiti. It examines the provision of alternative types of food aid following the 1991 military coup d'état. The focus is not the prevalent critique of traditional food aid; rather, it is on attempts by Haitians to create alternative food aid programs to strengthen local food production and to promote the institutional development of

local organizations during a highly volatile political moment in a country with endemic structural problems. The perspective is unabashedly that of Haitian civil society—a diverse collection of organizations and groups reflecting the vibrancy of Haitian organizational expression and Haitian commitment to social change.

The fourth chapter considers the challenges and possibilities in building local capacity in the health sector in Mozambique over the last two years of a long civil war, and the transition to reconstruction and longer-term development. The chapter examines the building of local capacity in two distinct yet critically interrelated senses. Narrowly, it examines the interaction among international actors (donors and operational agencies) and national actors (in particular the ministry of health) in rebuilding the modern health sector's local-service capacity in a postwar situation. It also examines how foreign aid in the health sector has contributed to a broader sense of local capacity and to the potential for a genuine civil society. These changes follow a long history of heavy-handed state intervention and a political culture in which disengagement became the primary strategy for dealing with it.

Chapter 5 deals with Sri Lanka. Once a beacon of hope and an exemplar of good development, Sri Lanka has suffered almost two decades of debilitating civil war. A country with a well-developed civil society, Sri Lanka has nevertheless suffered from serious human rights abuse perpetrated by both sides in the conflict, and it has seen its long-standing commitment to democratic process repeatedly challenged by assassination and constitutional manipulation. This chapter explores the relationship over time among outsiders, local organizations of civil society, government, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. It asks whether humanitarian assistance in Sri Lanka—intended to end suffering by addressing the effects of war—is failing because of its inability or unwillingness to address the causes of war.

Chapter 6 considers relationships and capacities generated during the fourteen-year period in which forty-five thousand Guatemalans took refuge in camps in Mexico. It focuses particularly on international support for women's organizations in refugee camps and the acquisition of greater gender awareness among both Guatemalan men and women in the camps. Conditions in the camps bore little resemblance to everyday life, and for many women this was not altogether bad. Many took advantage of the time to organize, meet, discuss, and learn. What they learned, however, could not necessarily have been predicted from what was taught. The chapter follows returnees to Guatemala in the mid- and late 1990s, finding a notable dispersion of women's organizations, along with a decline in international efforts at organizing returnees and a regression to traditional gender roles. The chapter argues that emergencies, by definition, mark a break with a population's history, often accompa-

nied by shifts in environment, production, community ties, and relations with outside actors. The exceptional nature of these shifts places severe limitations on external efforts at long-lasting change. In fact, the social relations created by new dependencies during a prolonged emergency may disguise underlying realities, giving false indications of both change and the sustainability of new ideas.

In chapter 7, Thomas Turay describes going back to Sierra Leone at the end of 1998. The Revolutionary United Front attack on Freetown in January 1999 unexpectedly cut him off from his family—and from the assignment. He spent the next twelve months working with local and international agencies, observing their interaction and their isolation firsthand, while at the same time trying to rescue his three daughters from behind rebel lines. This is an unanticipated and highly personal firsthand account of what happens when hell breaks loose, when theories fall victim to panic, and when aid agencies confront their worst fears. It is also a story of possibilities, with important lessons for outsiders from those on the inside.

The eighth and final chapter draws together the lessons, potential lessons, and anomalies in the case-study chapters, with crosscutting themes and policy considerations for practitioners, international human-itarian organizations, and organizations in countries attempting to cope with emergencies and with international help.

Information about each of the contributors appears at the back of the volume. Many other individuals assisted in the development of this book. Matt Creelman, Isabel Soares, and Bob Maguire provided valuable assis-tance on Guatemala, Mozambique, and Haiti, respectively. Larry Minear, director of the Humanitarianism and War Project, accepted the book's ambitious premise without demur, and he supported it throughout a ges-tation period that included endless electronic transfers and disappearing files, not to mention the occasional disappearing author. Without the sup-port of Neclâ Tschirgi at the International Development Research Centre, the book would not have been written. And without the assistance of Mary Lhowe it would not be as polished as it is. The contributors, how-ever, take full responsibility for their own work as well as any errors or omissions.

Note

1. Andrew Malone, "Burundi 'peace-shops' squander British aid," *Sunday Times,* March 29, 1998, 20.

Chapter 1

Capacity Building and the Humanitarian Enterprise

IAN SMILLIE

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What is "capacity building"? That is the problem.
— MICK MOORE

In recent years there has been a perceptible upturn in commentary on building local capacities in emergency and postemergency situations. Despite this trend, many relief programs remain characterized by their preponderant externality—as demonstrated by their sources of input and their accountabilities in their approach to management and in their dependence on expatriate staff. Agencies often fail to recognize local resources and skills, and they miss real opportunities to include civil society—NGOs, community organizations, trade unions, religious organizations, professional bodies, foundations, local government—in the management of relief and peacebuilding. Channeling bilateral and multilateral resources through international NGOs can shift accountability and responsibility away from national and local leaders, undermining local capacity and creating further dependence. Emergency assistance can create tensions among local organizations and between refugee and host populations over access to external resources. In short, relief assistance can undermine rather than strengthen indigenous capacity.

The reality of what often happens in emergency assistance programs flies in the face of stated donor policy and oft-expressed good intentions. Virtually every serious major external actor in emergency situations is committed to strengthening local capacity. But clearly, this is easier said than done. Knowing *whom* to work with (for example, women, traditional leaders, or indigenous NGOs) is as important as knowing *how* to work with them. Sometimes the wrong capacities may be enhanced, or the capacities of the wrong people may be strengthened, as in the case of freelance militia in Somalia or Hutu militia in the Goma camps. Gender is an especially important area of concern. Women may have been pro-

tected from violence in some emergencies, but in many they have been
targeted, and in most the burden for children and for the care and feeding
of their families has increased.

Capacity Building: Some History

Capacity building, often used synonymously with *institution building,
institutional development,* and *organizational development,* is in some
ways as old as development assistance itself. Slogans such as "helping
people to help themselves" point directly at capacity building. The prov-
erb "teach a man to fish" is about building capacity for self-sufficiency. In
the 1950s and 1960s, community development focused on building self-
help capacities within rural communities. A major purpose of technical
assistance has always been to enhance the capacities of individuals and
institutions through training, research, and counterpart relationships.
Schools, vocational training, and universities all aim to build human
capacities for self-development.

   The 1969 Pearson Commission Report on international develop-
ment—the first of many such commissions—spoke extensively of the
need to build administrative capacity in developing countries, especially
capacity to absorb political and economic change.[1] In 1974, the United
Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) coined the
term *capacitation,* suggesting that

> A "capacitating" operation does not try so much to define or con-
> trol the future as to establish present conditions or capacities that
> will permit a given society to meet its problems in the future. The
> emphasis in such an approach is not on setting future appropriate
> output targets but on diagnosing current weaknesses and potentials,
> finding appropriate policies and constantly monitoring the course
> of development.[2]

Peter Morgan has tracked the concept of capacity building from its
origins in the 1950s and 1960s, when it was based to a large extent
on the idea of equipping developing countries with a basic inventory of
public sector institutions and, later, strengthening them to improve their
performance. By the 1980s, the idea of institutional development had
gained several new features. In addition to government, the private sector
and NGOs had been added to the mix. The time frame had also changed,
with institutional development seen as a longer-term process of restruc-
turing and institutional change. It had become "more concerned about
the adaptability and responsiveness of development institutions...[and
it had] moved beyond the framework of individual organizations. For
the first time institutional analysis began to look at sectoral perspectives

and at groups of institutions. . . . Finally, institutional development began to address itself to the sustainability issue—not just the 'what works?' question, but the 'what lasts?' question."[3]

Despite its long history, growing sophistication, and a renewed emphasis in the 1990s, capacity building, or the way it has been managed, has in many cases resulted in the opposite of what was intended. Capacities have not been built, institutions have failed, organizations have not met expectations. In a damning critique of international assistance to Rwanda prior to the genocide, Peter Uvin discusses the capacity building efforts of Belgium, Switzerland, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP):

> As Rwanda's farmers were facing crises without precedent, as inequality and corruption reached endemic proportions, as hope for the future was extinguished, and as violence, hatred and human rights abuses became government policy, the international community was congratulating Rwanda for its improved capacity to overcome its "limited absorptive capacity," and to "improve its capacity to design and implement development projects."[4]

The realization of failure is not new. Writing less dramatically in 1978—a time so long past in the development experience that age almost disqualifies it from relevance—John Oxenham and Robert Chambers described the weakness of capacity building as it was then conceived: an effort basically designed and implemented by outsiders. Usually styled as "technical assistance" or "technical cooperation," capacity building judged what people did not know and what they required. "Providing specialist people-services necessarily implies that [outsiders] have the expertise which the people lack and must transmit it to the people. So the people 'to be developed' start out on an unequal footing. . . . the fairly strong human bias towards authoritarianism is legitimized and reinforced through the explicit authority of professional expertise."[5]

Writing in 1984, Majid Rahnema, a former aid official and once a minister in the government of Iran, criticized the idea of community development by outsiders "as if [villagers] could not develop themselves. This infantilization of the deprived population . . . is the primary reason why development activities do not take root in the life of communities."[6] A decade later, he observed that instead of enhancing the development process or reducing poverty, capacity building had too often enhanced the abilities of predatory governments, building "their capacity to 'milk' their own people, and . . . the assistance they receive from their richer foreign patrons."[7] These early critics foreshadowed the call for and the widespread acceptance by the early 1990s of *participatory development* and *empowerment*—terms that are also fraught with definitional problems. But the story is getting ahead of itself, and a more systematic considera-

tion of capacity building typologies is in order before determining their relevance to the emergencies and postconflict situations of the twenty-first century.

A Typology of Capacity Building

> What is "capacity building"? That is the problem. It includes everything that was covered by the different definitions of "institution building" and much more besides. . . . Aid agencies would be wise to have no truck with the new jargon of "capacity building" and to insist on using language and terms that have identifiable and precise meanings.[8]

Moore's imprecation notwithstanding, it is impossible to avoid a term that is in such widespread use. Part of its definitional problem has to do with target and purpose. In some cases individuals, a community, or an organization are to be strengthened. In others, the target is a sector, such as agricultural or health, while in others the target may be an entire societal subset. Alan Fowler has helped to sort this out by separating organizational development from sectoral development and institutional development, the latter representing a broad cross section of organizations, such as informal sector entrepreneurs, or "civil society."

A second area of necessary clarification has to do with the purpose of a capacity building effort. In some cases, capacity building may be seen as the means to an end—for example, enhancing the capacity of a local NGO to deliver emergency assistance. In others, the end may be more important than the means—the development of an organization capable of developing and managing its own programs and strategies independently of outsiders. In some cases, the process of capacity building may be more important than either the means or the ends—such as the stimulation of greater coherence around an issue or within a community. Figure 1.1, adapted from a typology created by Fowler, is an attempt to distinguish both target and purpose in capacity building.

This sort of typology suggests that capacity building is considerably more complex than originally conceived in the training programs and technical assistance of the early development decades. It also suggests that capacity building requires serious attention to target and purpose, as well as to considerations of process. And it helps to explain why capacity building seems to have had little success over four or five decades of experimentation. The reason is that it was usually and unambitiously lodged in the upper-left sector (under "Means") of figure 1.1, strengthening the capacity of organizations to carry out specific functions, often designed by outsiders.