NGO capacity building and sustainability in the Pacific

Will Low and Eileen Davenport

Abstract: As the work of NGOs broadens and becomes more complex, concerns about their capacity and sustainability will loom much larger and have more significant implications for development processes. The main issue addressed in this paper is how NGOs and donors variously view the relationship between capacity building and financial and organisational sustainability. To this end we firstly explore varying definitions of capacity building, highlighting distinctly Pacific perspectives of the concept and subsequently look at emerging practices used by Pacific NGOs to create sustainable organisations. The role of donor organisations in Pacific NGO capacity building is critiqued. We conclude that despite considerable rhetoric about the need for donors to adopt more coordinated approaches to capacity building, there is limited evidence to suggest that donors are prepared to act together to set up, for example, joint capacity building funds. Donors must accept that the long-term processes of development and the roles played by Non-Governmental and Community Based Organisations require a rethinking of the standard funding cycle and the focus on ‘exit strategies’.

Keywords: Capacity building, NGO, Pacific Islands development

In recent years the term capacity building has become very widely used by governments, donor agencies, NGOs and civil society organisations. Why the concept has attained such prominence is often answered by reference to the role NGOs and civil society organisations could play, should play, and are playing in their various national and local contexts, and crucially, their abilities to fulfil these roles.

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This paper is derived from a background paper prepared for an ADB (Asian Development Bank), AusAid and NZODA (New Zealand Overseas Development Assistance) funded workshop on NGO capacity building held in Vanuatu in November 2000 (Davenport, 2000). Our research draws on the international literature which examines the concept of NGO/civil society capacity building, combined with information from field interviews with over 80 key stakeholders in Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

Interviews were conducted by one of the authors between August and October 2000. Initial contacts in each country visited were suggested by the national NGO umbrella organisations such as Vanuatu Association of NGOs (VANGO). A snowballing technique was also used to expand the sample.

The main issue addressed in this paper is how NGOs and donors variously view the relationship between capacity building and financial and organisational sustainability. We go on to examine how emerging practices in NGO capacity building can best facilitate the development of sustainable NGOs in the Pacific.

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY CAPACITY BUILDING?

The need to strengthen the ability of NGOs and civil society organisations to fulfil multiple and increasingly complex roles has been identified time and again by NGOs themselves, by donor agencies and by governments (ASPBAE and IFCB, 1999a, 1999b; Fowler, 2000; PIANGO, undated; Kaplan, 1999). However, whilst the term capacity building is widely used, a review of the literature reveals that there is much confusion in the way that it is understood and implemented. It has become a catch-all concept and there is widespread concern that in encompassing everything it lacks coherence. Gunnarsson (2001) discusses a range of issues related to capacity building within the development process.

A number of contributors in the development field have suggested that the concept of capacity building needs to be given operational definition. A range of definitions have been suggested, including three examples presented below.

Capacity building includes institutional support in the form of finances for office space, salaries and vehicles (Makumbe, 1998).

Capacity-building is not defined through the instruments used, but through its goal to enhance the capability of people and institutions sustainably to improve their competence and problem-solving capacities (GTZ, 1999).

[Capacity Development is] the process by which individuals, groups, organizations, institutions and societies increase their abilities to: 1) perform core functions, solve problems, define and achieve objectives; and 2) understand and deal with their development needs in a broad context and in a sustainable manner (UNDP, 1997).

These examples illustrate the broad range of concerns encompassed in the concept of capacity building, including financial, operational and organisational
aspects of an NGO’s operations. The range of issues highlights the distinction
drawn (Gunnarsson, 2001) between administrative capacity (specific attri-
brates such as adequate staff, equipment, etc.) and institutional capacity (‘organic’
tributes of an organisation such as the ability to cope with change and to
remain viable).

When asked about capacity building at a multi-stakeholder workshop
hosted by the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO) in 1999, a
number of Pacific NGOs felt it should have a Pacific definition (PIANGO,
undated). PIANGO has developed a set of general characteristics that any
capacity building initiative should have: owned and driven by participants;
organised yet flexible; long term and process oriented; based on shared values
and builds on strengths; context specific; enhanced by strong working rela-
tionships; and, multi-faceted.

Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) in South Africa ap-
proach capacity building by asking what an organisation that has capacity would
look like. An organisation said to be a “capacitated civic being” (in essence
to be effective) must have the following attributes, in descending order of
importance (Kaplan, 1999: 23):

1. a conceptual framework which reflects the organisation’s view of the world;
2. an organisational attitude, which incorporates the confidence to act in, and
   on, the world in a way that the organisation believes can have an impact;
3. clear organisational vision and strategy and sense of purpose;
4. organisational structures and procedures supporting the vision and strategy;
5. relevant individual skills, abilities and competencies;
6. sufficient and appropriate material resources.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this range of definitions, the question of how
to assess the capacity of an organisation remains. Part of the answer may lie
in the notion of self-reflection: the ability of an organisation to honestly look
in upon itself, and to appraise and to learn.

One aspect that most if not all of these perspectives on capacity building
have in common is the idea of process; capacity building is not separate from
development. Allan Kaplan (1999), one of CDRA’s founders, makes the point
that development is not about transfer of resources, but about facilitating
‘resourcefulness’.

PIANGO (PIANGO, 2000: 18–23) and the UNDP representative at the 2000
stakeholder meeting (personal interview, 31/7/2001) identify the following list
of capacity-building priorities for Pacific NGOs. In the sections that follow,
we examine a number of these priorities:

1. Leadership development at all levels, but especially a ‘second generation’
of leaders.
2. Training in all areas of organisational development (including programme
design and planning, lobbying / advocacy, public relations / campaigning,
monitoring and evaluation, and financial management / budgeting).
3. Strengthening information and communication networks between stakeholders, especially through the Internet.
4. Enhancing the financial resource base of the NGO / civil society sector such as through foundations, endowments, corporate donations, etc.
5. Improving the effectiveness of NGO – government relations at all levels across the region.
6. More and better relations between NGOs themselves within the region.

THE CHALLENGE OF NGO SUSTAINABILITY

The issue of capacity building for sustainability is so central to all stakeholders (ASPBAE and IFCB, 1999a, 1999b and PIANGO, undated) that it is worth exploring in more detail and unpacking some of the related issues. We will consider just two concerns: the need to ensure on-going financial viability and the challenge of embedding capacity in the organisation rather than individuals.

Financial sustainability

Pacific NGOs are asking how they can reconcile donors’ expressed need for clearly articulated exit strategies after a given term of project funding with the difficulty they face in finding resources to continue their work. It is an issue facing even a number of the larger, well-established NGOs which are part of an international network.

Alison Van Rooy (1999: 5) has summed up the dilemma recently in the following terms:

Sustainability for northern NGOs has come to mean ability to make do with less or no government funding and for southern agencies, ability to make the project self funding within the project time frame.

She notes that the word ‘sustainability’ has taken on a normative tone (that it is bad to receive funding from someone else) and an accompanying aura of panic. As financial sustainability becomes the primary (and possibly only) issue, more important goals such as poverty reduction and participation may become lost.

In some senses, this dilemma goes to the heart of the way in which donors relate to NGOs. Donor funding is still overwhelmingly provided through project funding (Gunnarson, 2001: 24). Projects have a finite funding lifetime and within this framework the issue of core administrative costs remains a very difficult area for negotiation.

Essentially, the view from the NGO sector is that whilst it is possible to access project funding from donors, it is difficult if not impossible to obtain funding for core administration costs such as salaries, the cost of renting a building, vehicles for project use and so forth. The recent review of NZODA (MFAT, 2001: 48) acknowledges this shortcoming in the delivery of New Zealand aid.

A Pacific commentator, speaking at a Polynesian consultation on NGO capacity building, put the issue in these terms:
For most of the NGOs in the region, a key challenge is raising sufficient funds locally to sustain essential services. This is not surprising as most of the Pacific Island countries can barely provide enough locally earned revenue to meet their recurrent expenditure (Tuuu Ieti Taulealo, quoted in ASPBAE and IFCB, 1999a: 10).

The end of project funding all too often means beneficial impacts that should have been sustained are lost. A recent example in Vanuatu illustrates the difficulty. A Vanuatu based southern partner of an international NGO has been organising functional literacy programmes in a number of the outlying islands since 1992 and in that period has had one renewal of project funding from an affiliated northern partner NGO. The mid term project evaluation was positive and local people point to a number of beneficial changes in their lives, for example, increasing the ability for women to sell local produce in the local markets as they can now communicate in Bislama, the common language of commerce, and not just their own dialect.

However, funding is now about to run out for this project and no new funding has been secured. Failure to obtain project funding will mean in this instance that five project staff lose their jobs. Most importantly, the potential for sustaining the gains made at village level is not clear. Village women themselves say that they do not have many ideas on how to continue the project without the funding. They cannot afford books and writing materials to participate in the classroom and they do not know if the teachers will continue to teach without any pay.

In terms of exit strategies, the hope and expectation very often is that the village will find ways of continuing with the work that an NGO has been resourcing. However, as a representative from Wan Smalbag Theatre company (personal interview, 21/9/2000), an NGO active in health and environment issues in Vanuatu for over ten years, put it: ‘the village is expected to do everything and pay for everything, from water supply to education.’ This certainly raises the issue of impossible resourcing burdens at local level.

The issue of financial sustainability was summarised by a representative of UNDP (personal interview, 29/8/2000) in the following way:

Unlike northern NGOs, Southern development organisations are not usually rooted in their own economies and are therefore dependent on outside funding. This leaves them vulnerable to outside influence and ‘project based development’. NGOs often remain weak because they lack reliable funding to meet core institutional costs or build internal capacity. Project funding inhibits the ability of Southern NGOs to respond to their beneficiaries and creates problems when planning and mobilising resources. Further, this practice often restricts NGO expenditure to less than adequate levels for vital overhead expenses like salaries, communication, planning, monitoring and evaluation.

This UNDP representative also posed the problem in the following way:
The CSO and NGO sector is fluid and dependent on the energy and commitment of individuals involved. The whole issue of recurrent costs should be reconsidered in this light and if recurrent costs were needed to maintain impact, then agencies and UNDP needed to consider supporting these costs.

A few donor organisations have begun to broaden the funding base to provide core funding to NGOs. For example, New Zealand Official Development Assistance (NZODA) has provided core funding to a range of Pacific NGOs, including five environmental NGOs in PNG, the Women in Business NGO in Samoa, and a number of the national umbrella organisations, including SUNGO and VANGO.

Northern NGOs have also provided some element of core funding to NGOs in the Pacific. The Fiji Women’s Rights Movement, for example, has been supported for a number of years by Oxfam New Zealand.

Meanwhile, the payment of recurrent costs by Pacific governments is almost unheard of. The few exceptions usually occur where an organisation (for example the National Volunteer Service in PNG) has been set up by an act of Parliament.

Another way to address this problem is for donors to assist NGOs in mobilising resources. One commentator notes that:

"NGOs have the potential to attract donor funds for projects but continue to be faced with the ongoing problem for funds for basic administration – donors need to support NGOs through training in resource mobilisation. (Raitamata, V, Quoted in ASPBAE and IFCB, 1999b: 5)"

Fowler (2000) further argues that it will be a long time before NGOs find avenues of sustainable self-financing to replace official development assistance (aid).

Yet even when core funding is provided, a deeper financial dilemma remains, as illustrated by the Women in Business NGO in Samoa. Women in Business does a lot of work with women with few skills, often in remote areas, providing business advice and practical support to communities and groups of women wanting to set up small businesses. This work is expensive in terms of travel, and time consuming – it does mean, however, that women who previously had no income have been able to learn skills, earn money and improve the lives of their families and community.

This NGO has been widely recognised as highly effective and, unusually for an NGO, has received core funding for staff through NZODA’s bilateral funding programme in addition to other project funding from donors. There is still an expectation on the part of the donors that over time the core funding can be reduced as the organisation becomes more self-financing.

But even where the NGO is seen to be effective, efficient and highly innovative, management and board do not see a time when it can become financially self-sustaining. If this NGO chose to work with less marginal groups, and undertook lucrative fee earning strategies (for example by providing specialised training, which to a degree it already does) then perhaps it could just
become self-sustaining. But in so doing, what would it have lost? This is often at the heart of the dilemma – working with people who are on the margins of society rarely equates with financial sustainability for NGOs.

According to a UNDP representative (personal interview, 31/7/2001), NGO financial sustainability was probably the most talked about issue at the 2000 Vanuatu stakeholder meeting to which this research contributed (see also the review of the meeting (PIANGO, 2000)). Some of the attempts to address NGO sustainability in the Pacific are outlined below.

Organisational sustainability

A PIANGO representative interviewed for this study (22/9/2000) noted that it is one thing to be able to access funds and quite another to have the capacity to deliver what has been agreed to. Alongside finance, NGOs recognise the need to develop their own capacity in a number of areas. This PIANGO representative suggested that many Pacific NGOs would put training alongside finance at the top of their lists of priorities.

In many ways this high priority for training is not surprising as organisations are comprised of individuals who need to master a range of skills in order for the organisation to function effectively. Training is often about the need for staff to be competent in one or more areas, including programme management, proposal writing, accounting procedures, general administration and so forth.

Almost all of the NGOs who contributed their perspectives to the 2000 Vanuatu Stakeholder meeting and earlier Pacific consultations gave a high priority to the issues of NGO leadership and management. Managers in NGOs very often see the need to become better trained in management skills and better versed in leadership – this is particularly the case with medium and larger sized organisations with a number of staff positions.

However, the issue of training for existing managers is only one part of the equation. Second generation leadership in NGOs was also identified by a UNDP representative, in a personal interview (29/8/2000), as a critical factor in the sustainability of an organisation. NGOs are often left very vulnerable after a person who took a central role in the organisation moves on. There is a need for NGOs to start grooming some of their less senior workers to take on management roles. A lot of the training undertaken in the Pacific to date has been short workshop training, often with no follow up. A number of organisations provide management and leadership training for Pacific NGOs, but this is often not customised for NGO needs.

What is often missing, according to the head of a NGO umbrella network based in New Zealand (personal interview, 15/9/2000), is the link between the need for an individual to receive training and so improve his or her abilities in a given area, and embedding the learning that the individual gains within the organisation. A representative of the German Development Service supported this view. During a personal interview (2/10/2000), she offered the opinion that capacity building is too often reduced to ‘mere skills training, ignoring the
required quality input into organisational structures and a process orientated approach.’ These views are echoed in a review of a UNDP/CIDA capacity building project underway at present (personal interview with evaluation consultant Emele Duituturaga, 8/8/2001).

PIANGO suggests that many capacity building interventions fall short of their objectives because they lack a coherent strategy and focus primarily on individuals and not on organisations, networks or sectors (PIANGO and UNITEC, 1999). This concern echoes the findings from the IFCB work which again pointed to a neglect of organisational and sector capacity building (ASPBAE and IFCB, 1999a, 1999b).

As a result of these widespread problems, NGOs in some Pacific Island countries, perhaps most notably Papua New Guinea since the mid-1980s, have initiated a discussion about this aspect of capacity building. Organisational development as opposed to individual development emphasises the strengthening of capacities within NGOs for problem solving and for self-organisation. It is participatory, involves all staff members, and uses a number of different approaches. Some of these approaches are detailed below.

EMERGING PRACTICE IN NGO CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE PACIFIC

In 1997, a Canada Fund report (Taylor, 1997: 25) noted the following about future approaches to capacity building:

It is strongly suggested that any additional resources be used to consolidate and co-ordinate existing initiatives while building upon and expanding the options currently available for NGO strengthening. Ultimately what is needed are sustainable, culturally appropriate mechanisms structures and support systems to ensure the NGO sector becomes and remains a capable and equal development partner in regional affairs.

The same remains true some three years later and the multi-stakeholder workshop held in November 2000 was part of the co-ordination and consolidation work that the Canada Fund Report assessed as being crucially important.

A number of practical approaches to capacity building have emerged in the Pacific and it is worth noting just a few examples below, exploring capacity building initiatives in training, accessing alternative finance, and developing a uniquely Pacific approach to local development.

Organisational sustainability through training

PIANGO has identified the need for indigenous management training and has instigated the Pasifica Graduate Diploma in NGO Management for senior and emerging leaders in the Pacific NGO sector (PIANGO and UNITEC, 1999, 2000). This initiative has been designed to meet the need for longer-term training, and is rooted within a Pacific context.
There are a number of goals for this programme:

1. enable NGO leaders to build competent, learning organisations
2. give professional recognition to the NGO sector
3. ensure NGOs are equal partners in the development process.

The programme brings leaders together from a variety of backgrounds (churches, women’s groups, human rights groups, environmental organisations, etc.) from several countries and territories. Alongside the formal training is the opportunity to develop support networks and increase inter-agency collaboration.

The Graduate Diploma is currently running as a three year pilot scheme. Training has so far been offered in Vanuatu, PNG, Fiji and Samoa, with plans to extend the programme to Micronesia. According to the UNITEC programme coordinator (personal interview, 24/7/2001), course feedback shows that Pacific participants particularly value the empowering and holistic approach the Certificate takes to the ‘values and culture’ of NGOs adopted by the Certificate. This was at odds however with the Northern funding bodies’ view that a Certificate in NGO Management should primarily develop ‘professionalism, managerialism and administration, and especially financial management skills.’

Financial sustainability: the search for alternative funding

A number of organisations are currently working on aspects of what one national Vanuatu NGO termed ‘sustainability planning’ through accessing alternative forms of funding. The possibilities for funding that have been identified include:

1. Exploration of corporate gifting and relationships with the private sector in the Pacific. A number of NGOs, such as Fiji Women’s Rights Movement, have had donations of money or resources, usually on a one off basis. Other organisations are assisted longer term by service clubs such as Kiwis, Lions and Rotary.
2. Exploration of Pacific philanthropy, focusing on philanthropic giving and endowments. One NGO in PNG, which is part of an international NGO organisation and has been active in PNG for over 30 years, talked about the need for NGOs to become embedded in their localities. People provide small legacies to the NGO and also, in a Melanesian context, provide small gifts of home grown food or other items which the NGO is able to sell and raise income.
3. Establishment of trust funds which gather financial resources together on either an individual NGO or collective model. Investing those resources provides long-term income from interest or a combination of interest and principal. FSPI (Federation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International) is currently looking at the possibility of establishing a trust fund.
4. Accessing funding from Northern foundations.
5. Income generating projects. A number of NGOs are beginning to explore this route including Women in Business in Samoa and Foundation for Peoples of the South Pacific.

6. Pacific NGOs contracting with Pacific Island Governments to provide specific services, or Pacific Island Governments providing some element of recurrent costs to NGOs.

Also important will be changes to the legal and regulatory framework governing NGO/CBO ability to generate revenue (PIANGO, 2000).

A Distinctly Pacific Approach to Building Local Capacity

Volunteers undertake a great deal of the work in NGO and community based capacity building. However, the idea of recruiting volunteers from within the domestic population (national volunteers) is not yet widespread, though there are a number of initiatives planned. The practice has been stimulated by factors which include the downward trend in the numbers of international volunteers, concern about the longterm sustainability of the work undertaken by international volunteers within communities and organisations, and the potential benefits of involving national volunteers.

PNG has possibly the only Pacific example of an indigenous volunteer sending agency – the National Volunteer Service (NVS). NVS is very well regarded and receives core funding (60 per cent of income) from the PNG Government. It is also supported by NZODA, Oxfam New Zealand, and German Development Service (GDS), amongst others. Additionally, NVS manages the New Zealand VSA programme in PNG.

NVS has much to offer in the way of understanding of the role of indigenous volunteering and capacity building within communities. In particular NVS emphasises that within a Melanesian context, volunteering is not new. It is simply a Western word used to describe some of the ways in which people in rural areas have traditionally helped one another and have offered mutual support. These forms of community support are being lost to people as the cash economy and modern ways of life continue to erode traditional structures of society. For NVS the essential philosophy of volunteering is about recreating or strengthening a traditional idea of people supporting and assisting one another in communities. In the absence of even basic services in rural areas, this need is critical.

One capacity building activity undertaken by NVS volunteers is assisting community organisations to understand and take on board ideas of planning, monitoring and evaluation. These indigenous volunteers have helped NVS to develop typically Melanesian ways of approaching this ‘training’. It points out that far from seeing planning, monitoring and evaluation as alien concepts, communities should recognise them as activities that they engage in every day. In the garden, people plan what they are going to plant so that they can produce as much food as they need. After planting, they need to look at their gardens regularly to ensure the plants are not being overcome by weeds, eaten
by pigs or going short of water (in other words they *monitor* what is happening). After the harvest they think about how well their gardens have provided the food needed and why they have done well or not so well (that is they *evaluate*). The role of indigenous volunteers in capacity building in the Pacific and the development of indigenous models of capacity building may prove very important. Similarly the ongoing discussion of international volunteering, taking place mainly within the volunteer sending agencies, merits a wider audience, particularly given that volunteering is one of the most widespread forms of NGO/CBO capacity building in the Pacific. Assessments of volunteering and capacity building such as that recently produced by VSO in the UK, and work currently being undertaken by CUSO in PNG (CUSO PNG, 2000) and GDS in PNG, will contribute significantly to reviewing the role of volunteers in capacity building initiatives.

**CONCLUSIONS**

NGOs and community based organisations (CBOs) are a vital feature of Pacific Islands life (Swain, 2000). Given the retrenchment in the public sector resulting from the implementation of structural adjustment programmes, the role of NGOs in service delivery has become ever more critical. Pacific Island Governments are also coming to depend on NGOs to deliver essential public services ‘because of their cost effectiveness and ability to engage people at the village level, especially in remote areas’ (Taylor, 1997: 23). However, as this paper makes clear, NGOs and CBOs are often under-resourced and finding it difficult to meet the increasing demands being placed on them by donors, Pacific Island governments and the needs of the communities they serve.

The importance of strengthening NGOs/CBOs has been underlined by recent multi-stakeholder consultations in Fiji (1997), Papua New Guinea (1999) and Samoa (1999) which agreed that development assistance delivered through NGOs would ultimately fail if capacity building is undervalued, neglected or reduced to a notion of pre-packaged training. The November 2000 stakeholder meeting in Vanuatu, from which this paper derives, was an opportunity to review knowledge about NGO capacity building in the region. The hope was that the meeting would act as a springboard for the development of a regional strategy for capacity building, clearly owned and driven by NGOs themselves. For this to happen there was an acknowledged need to consolidate information about existing initiatives and share lessons learned. It was also acknowledged that the way in which capacity building was funded by donors was fragmented, often dysfunctional and required a far greater degree of co-ordination.

However, the lack of a regional approach to funding NGO capacity building on the part of donor organisations, the fact that Pacific Island Governments have not become actively engaged in the process of NGO capacity building (at least not in a sustained way) and the evidence that, as yet, the ability of NGOs to access non-conventional sources of funding has profound implications. Capacity building can be costly in financial and time terms.
However, without effective capacity building, owned and driven by Pacific Island NGOs/CBOs, the ability of these organisations to fulfil their missions will become more and more difficult.

Willingness to engage with NGOs about these crucial issues is at least in evidence, in part driven by the continuing instability of the state sector in Melanesia. The prospect of a renewed partnership between development stakeholders in the Pacific is signalled in the recent European Union agreement with ACP countries requiring involvement of ‘non-state sectors’ and donor reviews of their engagement with civil society.

However, despite considerable rhetoric about the need for donors to adopt more co-ordinated approaches to capacity building, there is limited evidence to suggest that donors are prepared to act together to set up, for example, joint capacity building funds. Indeed, the regional network of NGOs (PIANGO) continues to struggle for adequate funding and support, especially to fill its role as regional coordinator for capacity building (personal interview with consultant evaluating UNDP/CIDA Pacific capacity building project, 8/8/2001). Donors must accept that the long term processes of development and the roles played by NGOs/CBOs require a rethinking of the standard funding cycle and the focus on ‘exit strategies’, and more attention to the innovative strategies rooted in Pacific culture and practice outlined in this paper.

NOTES
1 While preparing the background paper on which this paper is based, Eileen Davenport was the Research Director for the Council for International Development in Wellington, New Zealand.
2 All these definitions, and a number of others, can be accessed through the website of Capacity.org, http://www.capacity.org/definit.html.

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