PRACTICE NOTE

By Design or by Default: Capacity Development in Fragile States and the Limits of Program Planning

Frederik F Rosén[*] and Søren Vester Haldrup[†]

This practice note offers an analytical narrative that is intended to provoke thinking about the design of capacity development programmes. It takes as its example the IGAD Initiative, a regional capacity development initiative for South Sudan. Based on extensive fieldwork, the authors point out how some of the IGAD Initiative's biggest successes have developed out of freedom, voluntarism and decentralised initiatives rather than through detailed top-down design and implementation. A vague project design appears to have afforded the space needed for capacity development to genuinely take the context as the starting point. The authors suggest that the IGAD experience provides important lessons for the discussion and design of capacity development initiatives in fragile states.

Introduction

State fragility is generally understood today as a question of capacity deficits. There will be no resilience, development or peace without governance capacity. In this sense, capacity is not an abstract value or feature: it is the concrete competence and will of the individuals inhabiting the offices of governance. The international community thus acknowledges capacity as a *sine qua non* of resilience, development and peace. This has been recognized in a number of recent reports and statements, including the United Nations Civilian Capacity (CIVCAP) initiative and the 2013 Security Council Resolution 2086 on multidimensional peace building.[1]

Despite the recent focus on capacity, no one has come up with a proven workable solution to the problem of capacity deficits in the world's most fragile states. The last decades of alchemistic toying with various concepts of and approaches to "state building" failed to deliver any golden formula. Capacity development remains the weak link, if not the key conundrum, in international state and peace building. Nevertheless, lessons have been learned, perhaps the most important of which is that the reform of government institutions and civil servants cannot be installed from above – it needs to grow from below. The calls for local ownership, contextualisation, and bottom-up and inside-out approaches all express this realism. Though these concepts have become increasingly popular, there is still a lack of understanding of how the ideas can be translated into actual programming. Apart from project evaluations, few case studies have been made in this field, and expertise is generally feeble.

This article builds on a research project on the IGAD Initiative, a capacity develop-

* Danish Institute for International Studies, Denmark
  frro@diis.dk

† Independent researcher, Denmark
  sorenvh@hotmail.com

ment initiative in South Sudan. Our research comprises more than a hundred interviews with people working with the Initiative on the diplomatic, management and implementing levels. We have discussed various aspects of the IGAD Initiative elsewhere.[2] This article points out a peculiar aspect of the IGAD Initiative which has general relevance to the broader capacity development agenda. It seems that the IGAD Initiative's success in facilitating locally owned and context-embedded capacity development has emerged more by default than by design. A vague project design seems to have provided the space needed for capacity development to genuinely take the context as the starting point. It should be noted that we are not concerned with the overall output of the IGAD Initiative here, which remains to be assessed. In this article, we are simply presenting an analytical narrative for the purpose of provoking debate and thinking about the design of capacity development programming.

The IGAD Initiative

The IGAD Initiative, also known as the Regional Capacity Enhancement Initiative (RCEI), is a regional capacity development cooperation for South Sudan. As part of the initiative, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda have seconded (by April 2013) 199 Civil Service Support Officers (CSSOs) to South Sudanese ministries at the state and national levels for two-year terms. In these ministries the CSSOs have been 'twinned' with South Sudanese civil servants. The Initiative seeks to address the grave capacity gaps in South Sudan's civil service while accommodating the calls for culturally and technically appropriate capacity, local ownership and regional cooperation. The project presents itself as an alternative to conventional short-term technical assistance, which has demonstrated limited success in fragile state environments. It also reflects strong Ethiopian, Kenyan and Ugandan interests in a resilient South Sudanese state, with whom they all share borders, a region and markets.

As a development aid program, the IGAD Initiative can be described as triangularly organized south-south cooperation in capacity development. The CSSOs will remain on the payroll of their home countries for the entire two-year deployment period. Norway is providing an additional US$ 18 million to cover project costs and UNDP is contributing with project management along with the Government of South Sudan's Ministry of Labour as the key implementing partner.

The CSSOs have been deployed to nineteen South Sudanese ministries at the national and state levels, and the stated aim of the CSSOs is to 'coach and mentor' their south Sudanese 'twins' through on-the-job training with the aim of developing their twins' capacity to perform the duties of civil servants. The IGAD Initiative lists this 'knowledge transfer' from CSSO to twin as its ultimate objective. During our field research in South Sudan in January 2013, we encountered CSSOs, among other places, in the air control tower at Juba Airport, next to the minister's office in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in the laboratory at the Ministry of Animal Resources and Fishery, in the National Legislative Assembly, and in the hospitals in Juba and the regional states.

Best Practice

The IGAD Initiative appears to accommodate most recommendations from the United Nations and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) framework for engagement in fragile states in terms of south-south cooperation, ownership, addressing local needs and priorities, and developing local capacities, bottom-up approaches, long-term engagement, flexibility, context and nimbleness (da Costa et al. 2013a). Considering this performance it would be reasonable to assume that the project has had a sophisticated design and tight management. However plausible, this appears not to have been the case. The purpose of the project, its desired outcomes and the CSSOs' Terms of References were very

general and did not specify what exactly was to be done and how. Needs assessments and matching procedures were part of the IGAD Initiative's design, but they had not been translated into actual implementation plans and clear Terms of Reference. Most CSSOs therefore more or less arrived in South Sudan with vague mandates and unspecified terms of reference. Similarly, on the South Sudanese side, there was little awareness or understanding of what a CSSO was and how to engage with one. Consequently, there was also a lack of immediate work for the CSSOs to take on when they arrived in Juba and elsewhere.

This confused situation, however, allowed for considerable flexibility on the ground. It gave the CSSOs the time and freedom to familiarize themselves with their new work context, as well as an opportunity to identify existing capacities and to address the most acute needs in the particular environment in collaboration with their South Sudanese colleagues. It allowed them to work on these issues with their colleagues in a more culturally sensitive and more locally owned and bottom-up manner as far as the South Sudanese were concerned.

Altogether, the vague and unspecified project design allowed – or forced – the CSSOs to genuinely take the context as the starting point of their capacity development efforts. A great number of the CSSOs developed a variety of work tasks on their own. These ranged from building ministerial archives and working with twins to develop pension schemes in the Ministry of Labour. Others established twinning arrangements with doctors, nurses and surgeons in Malakal, Jambio and Bentiu or developed work plans for ministries, thereby improving the staff's drafting skills and ability to take minutes at meetings or advise ambassadors and ministers on a variety of issues. Many CSSOs had given up the idea of working with individual twins in a classical coaching and mentoring scheme and (with the consent of their South Sudanese supervisors) had twinned with

groups or with whole departments, where they provided expertise and advices for all kinds of enquiries.

Combined with the general absence of ministerial structure and work plans, the ad hoc and bottom up-driven approach was in many ways the result of the CSSOs' weak Terms of Reference. Everything simply had to be invented from scratch. This was not what the CSSOs had expected. They had expected to work with relatively qualified twins in institutions with at least a minimum of structure in place. But instead of bowing out, most CSSOs began to identify and address needs in their immediate working contexts on their own initiative. They engaged in long-term, explorative needs assessments. One of the CSSOs described this as akin to an anthropological research project. They dined with their twins, joined them in church, and spent a lot of time 'hanging out' and observing what was actually going on in the department in which they were stationed.

The IGAD Initiative's occasional 'best practice' in terms of context-sensitive and locally owned capacity development thus appears not to be a result of a detailed project design. Instead, it developed by default out of freedom, flexibility and individual initiatives. It is our impression that voluntarism and freedom were critical factors in this process.

Voluntarism

Voluntarism is at the core of the idea of coaching and mentoring. One Ugandan diplomat emphasized to us that although Uganda's post-colonial aversion to intervention in other states was strong, the IGAD Initiative was acceptable to Uganda because it was based on coaching and mentoring. It was not a matter of intervention, but about facilitating self-help for South Sudan. In other words, Uganda viewed the IGAD Initiative not as an exercise in state hegemony but as a voluntary offer from one state to another to provide demand-driven assistance. Furthermore, they did not see it as interventionist aid delivery. In this regard it mattered a great

deal that the idea of coaching and mentoring, the central aspect of the project, presupposes the voluntary, active participation of the coachee/mentee. To be sure, coaching and mentoring depend on some sort of kinship, a receptive heart of the receiver and a gracious heart of the giver. It is a learning relationship, which presupposes voluntarism.

We often encountered such sentiments during our interviews. The IGAD Initiative's aim of supporting the South Sudanese in their own decision-making was seen in a very positive light. This was evident through the CSSOs' work in the ministries, which was generally based on individual consent-based initiatives. They had no means of forcing twins to work with them. While the Ministries allocated twins to CSSOs, this did not work in cases where the twins were unwilling to cooperate. Also, there were no pre-defined instructions or guidelines for conducting coaching and mentoring. Yet, some of the CSSOs had fairly clear conceptions of what coaching and mentoring was about. Those who came from long careers in human resource management were very articulate about the concepts. However, technical concepts mostly fell short in the South Sudanese environment, and the CSSOs needed to tailor their approach to the actual and immediate ministerial surroundings.

The CSSOs and their twins preferred the concept of 'twinning' to describe their interaction and partnerships – a slightly undefined concept, though it worked well for all parties. Twinning appears to express a more equal relationship and thus to facilitate the notion of brother- and sisterhood, which was a strong part of the IGAD Initiative's self-identity.

From the outside, the concept of 'twinning' seems fairly apolitical compared to the kind of tasks in which the 'twins' were engaged. Such tasks include; policy development at all levels, drafting legislation, restructuring ministries, building archives, developing pension schemes and participating in the process of shaping the civilian air-

space of South Sudan. Despite the involvement of CSSOs in such critical tasks, it was also clear that they acted in agreement or direct cooperation with the under-secretaries and director generals of their respective ministries. Thus, the IGAD Initiative did not appear to be attempting to steer South Sudanese opinions or decisions.

The IGAD Initiative was presented as a case of international cooperation on capacity development. The CSSOs and their twins constituted the practical interface between the IGAD states involved and South Sudan. The concept of twinning, or coaching and mentoring as is written in the project documents, functioned as a *form* of interaction, a way of organizing international relations. Furthermore, since twinning, the ultimate objective of the initiative, presupposes voluntarism on both sides of the relationship, the fundamental concept and mechanics of the IGAD Initiative seem to require personal and on-going autonomous initiatives that cannot easily be written into formulas.

To the extent that the stated aim of the IGAD Initiative is to develop civil service capacity through twinning, we may view all funding and management functions as aimed ultimately at facilitating good relationships between CSSOs and their twins. The project is about facilitating a space in which twinning can thrive and where voluntarism can flourish. In that way, the IGAD Initiative appears to be a project that promotes, and depends upon, individual creative thinking and entrepreneurship unfolding in a space of freedom. Freedom and volunteering are the foundation of the Initiative's self-understanding.

Freedom

The variety of tasks performed by the CSSOs did not come about overnight. The CSSOs arrived in their designated ministries with unclear Terms of Reference and a general lack of awareness on the South Sudanese side about their role and mandate. CSSOs used on average between three to six months

to familiarise themselves with the ministries. Some never succeeded. South Sudanese attitudes towards the newcomers were often antagonistic and in some instances almost violent. They suspected the CSSOs of taking their jobs or being spies. Slowly, however, most CSSOs succeeded in winning the trust of their South Sudanese counterparts and managed to build working relationships with their new colleagues.

Furthermore, a number of CSSOs reported that their status as 'coaches and mentors' protected them, to some degree, from certain South Sudanese officeholders who regarded them merely as an auxiliary work force. This made it possible for the CSSOs to decline orders from their supervisors to do practical work, preserved their autonomy, and allowed them to take their time to develop role definitions and to balance expectations with their South Sudanese counterparts.

As mentioned above, the vague mandate and low level of preparation led the CSSOs to initiate a broad range of activities, including many things other than one-on-one coaching and mentoring. Some CSSOs felt they were doing something very different from what they had anticipated. A good example was a Kenyan CSSO in the Ministry of Transportation who was deployed to the air control unit at Juba International Airport. When he signed up, he believed he would be coaching and mentoring South Sudanese air traffic controllers to develop their skills. When he arrived he found only two people qualified to man the air control tower. In addition to 'twinning' with existing air controllers and others he had himself recruited, the CSSO began to identify other needs and issues to be addressed and, together with UNMISS, he initiated a comprehensive training programme for South Sudanese air controllers. Together with his twins, and in agreement with the Director General of the Ministry of Transport, he also helped develop the general air control facilities of Juba International airport and the civilian airspace control for South Sudan. Many of the needs addressed,

capacities developed and projects launched were only identified by the CSSO once he was on the ground. The freedom and flexibility provided by vague Terms of Reference and an underspecified project design allowed the CSSO to work in this way.

Instead of providing coaching and mentoring for specific twins in peer-to-peer relations, the CSSOs took on all sorts of other activities in the ministries. They invented projects, structured work, wrote ministerial policies or rewrote the work of international consultants to adjust concepts and wording to South Sudanese political circumstances. They built archives and record management systems. They assisted with computer know-how. In one ministry the bulk of computers were down when one of the CSSOs arrived, but the CSSO managed to get them up and running simply by installing anti-virus software. A minor thing with great impact. CSSOs also functioned as ad hoc supervisors to ambassadors, ministers and civil servants. They proved to be versatile resource personnel. They worked together with their twins on a variety of critical ministerial issues and were available for whomever needed professional expertise and advice.

Voluntarism again emerges as a key dynamic in this process of capacity development. The CSSOs were not obliged to instigate a restructuring of their work environments in the way they did – it was not in their job description. Some did it out of a sense of obligation, some out of interest, and others because they were bored. All, however, did it voluntarily and because they had the freedom to do so. In this regard, flexibility and vagueness in the IGAD Initiative's design and in the mandate of the CSSOs allowed the dynamics of freedom and voluntarism to flourish and grow. An unspecified design and a vague mandate allowed the CSSOs the freedom to use their own expertise to do what they felt was needed and appropriate in their particular situations.

Better management and awareness could have prepared the ground better for the IGAD

Initiative's deployment of CSSOs. The question is to what extent. Notwithstanding the initial difficulties most CSSOs encountered during their deployments, the vague mandate allowed CSSOs the freedom to identify capacities and capacity needs after arrival and thus to take the context as the starting point. It is uncertain to what extent awareness-raising and a better balancing of expectations could have prepared those involved for a better coaching and mentoring milieu. There would most likely still be a lack of qualified twins, initial mistrust and hostility, a lack of office and job definitions and a lack of funds to implement activities.

By Design or By Default?

The 'explorative' practices of the IGAD Initiative stand in contrast to capacity enhancement initiatives where activities, needs, priorities and the capacities to be built have been specified in advance by "Northern" donors and programme designers, often with little in-depth knowledge about the situation in question. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that CSSOs built their particular identity with reference to their differences from international consultants, who 'come and go and never really leave anything', as one CSSO expressed it. The CSSOs employed a much greater sensitivity towards the South Sudanese context compared to short-term international consultants.

This practice note argues that the 'best practice' capacity development process of the IGAD Initiative was not a result of detailed project design and tightly managed implementation from the top down. Work tasks and the needs, priorities and capacities addressed in the IGAD initiative were often not pre-specified or part of a detailed implementation plan. Instead they grew out of underspecified Terms of Reference and vague project objectives, allowing freedom and voluntarism to flourish. In this sense the best practice capacity development happened more by default than by design. At least, in our research we did not encoun-

ter evidence of any pre-planned default dynamics. Asked directly, key staff in UNDP's management unit agreed they had not considered these. In its meetings the IGAD Initiative's Board (South Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, UNDP and the IGAD Ambassador) has primarily addressed strategy and implementation, which indicates a lack of focus on default dynamics.

In any case, the IGAD Initiative, with all its challenges and problems, emerges as a project that meets the international development agenda's calls for local ownership, nimbleness and contextualization. This raises important questions. Are vagueness and a lack of control from 'the top' necessary preconditions for locally grounded capacity development to take place? Should future capacity development programming be intentionally vaguely designed in order to give the front-line implementers the freedom and flexibility that might be necessary for success? Would the IGAD Initiative have unfolded differently if it had formally aimed at the kinds of tasks it ended up facilitating? How can vaguely designed capacity development projects be evaluated? What balance can be struck between design and default, or control and flexibility?

For the CSSOs deployed to the ministerial corridors, it would not have been possible to know in advance the many activities that they gradually embarked on. It is doubtful to what extent a preoperational needs assessment would have been able to point out the tasks that the CSSOs identified step by step through their daily interactions within the ministries. There is also the question of who should have conducted a needs assessment for up to two hundred individual deployments, how it could have been done and what kinds of resources it would have required. It took the CSSOs' specialized technical knowledge and a familiarity with the ministries to develop their work. In this connection some CSSOs suggested that the first several months of deployment in a project like this should be allocated to exploring the

new environment. It is likely that not even a thorough pre-engagement needs assessment would have been enough to match CSSOs with the local environment, even though it would undoubtedly have made the initial deployment period smoother and more comfortable for them. On the outside the IGAD Initiative may present itself as an integrated initiative, but on the ground it unfolds as a series of fairly individual projects and experiences.

With regard to the question of evaluation, a number of supervisors and CSSOs viewed the default aspect of the way the IGAD Initiative unfolded as troublesome when compared to the Initiative's formal design. Like a number of other supervisors, a supervisor in the Ministry of Petroleum and Mining found it hard to evaluate the performance of CSSOs because they could not measure it based on a clear Terms of Reference. Hence, while we found exemplary processes of capacity developments within the context of the IGAD Initiative, it remains to be seen how the impact of the project is to be systematically measured and whether this impact will prove sustainable in the long term.

Conclusion

Most capacity development or governance reform projects today promote and support liberal governance. The IGAD Initiative embodies it by working through freedom and voluntarism. These concepts constitute the key to understanding the project in the larger context of global governance. They provide the cornerstones of the project's self-identity and also offer insights to understanding the difficulties of the project and connecting it to valuable experiences in the global field of governance. The IGAD Initiative stands out as a development project and therefore grapples with issues that more 'traditional' capacity building projects do not face to the same extent: how to design, monitor and evaluate programming whose success depends on vagueness, freedom and flexibility. More systematic analysis and

theorising on this new type of programming are needed.

From a policy perspective, the distinction between design and default points to a core dilemma of international interventions: the contrast between generic approaches and the unruly heterogeneity of social and human life. If the best options for capacity development programming are 'default' processes in the context of little pre-planning, the question is whether defaults can be designed and, if they can, what the policy implications are in the context of international cooperation. From a historical perspective, default- and demand-driven development fits much better with the evolution of the family of developed states**.**

Notes

[1] For documents relating to the civilian capacity review, see www.civcapreview.org/ [Last accessed August 2013]; United Nations Security Council Resolution 2086, 21 January 2013, SC/10888. For an elaboration of the international policy agenda on capacity, resilience and development, see Haldrup and Rosén (2013).

[2] For more on this research project and our research design, see da Costa et al. (2013b).

References

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