Participatory institutional assessment for enhanced service delivery[1]

by

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Introduction

In its assessment of the impacts of its policies and operational tools and practices on capacity building in Africa, the World Bank (1996) attributed the weaknesses in the continent's public and private sector institutions to ineffective management techniques, inefficient procedures and practices, and poor communication systems. In the case of the public sector, such weaknesses were seen as being reinforced by the dearth of professionals with vital skills, sub-optimal allocation of resources and poor logistic support.

First, it is true that insufficient incentive systems, weak administrative structures and delivery mechanisms, and poor leadership in its broad sense account for much of the problems in public institutions. In many countries, bad governance and political interference have eroded public service independence, accountability and overall professionalism, and left in their wake low motivation, commitment and productivity.

But, second, it is also true that most of the initiatives for responding to the foregoing challenges of capacity building and institutional development have emanated from external support agencies, including the World Bank, and have been frequently led by them. Gaps in institutional performance are often identified by external agencies in a broad capacity assessment, with the strategies for addressing capacity problems also prescribed and driven by such agencies.

Further, external support to institutional and policy improvements is usually made available within the framework of *packaged* projects. With the proliferation of poorly coordinated projects in virtually all sectors, policy overload and institutional distortions easily result. Fortunately, cognizant of the difficulties with supporting institutional development within their own long-term framework, external agencies are increasingly seeking coherent entry opportunities pointed to in each country's long-term development strategy.

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To bring a meaningful long-term perspective to national strategy formulation with respect to capacity building, institutions in developing countries, including those for water services, need to first assume ownership of the prevailing institutional environment and take responsibility for the inherent challenges. The institutional assessment case study presented in this paper – involving the Rural Water Supply Branch (RWSB) of the Government of Swaziland -- goes that full distance. By quantifying their own levels of performance and identifying their relative strengths and weaknesses, the units in the Branch (as well as the Branch as a whole) simply call for interventions that would complement the commitment already shown in starting out on the capacity building pathway.

Institutional and Policy Setting

The RWSB, through a total of nine units (five central sections and four regional depots), is mandated to oversee the design, construction and maintenance of rural water supply schemes in Swaziland. Whilst the agency assumed that responsibility on an *ad hoc* basis since the inception of serious sector business in the mid-1970s, official authorization to supervise and coordinate all sector activities only emerged in 1995. At that point, however, the planning and implementation of rural water supply was undertaken in an uncoordinated fashion by several organizations, each with its own priorities and approaches. External support institutions were not different (Busari et al., 1996), with their interests and agendas divergent at times.

Within the foregoing context, the RWSB easily recognized the urgent need to take full responsibility for proactive, coherent and effective sector development and management: identifying development agents, pinpointing goals, formulating plans, establishing priorities and spearheading policy reforms.

Consequent upon an introspective assessment of its own track record, the Branch has indeed dedicated itself to joining hands with principal role players as full and equal partners in the sector development process. Constructive partnership is evidenced, *inter alia*, by the joint formulation of sector policy guidelines in 1998, especially those for design and construction, community organization and participation, and linkage of water supply, sanitation and hygiene education.

With a national policy keyed largely to the attainment of universal coverage by the year 2020, success in policy implementation hinges on the hope that political commitment would be obtained, translating into increased government funding and the motivation of households to contribute their quota (Busari, 2000). More specifically, government needs to facilitate the enabling political climate for development agents to operationalize appropriate cost-sharing, cost-recovery and financing mechanisms for equity and sustainability.

Participatory Institutional Assessment

Efforts to diagnose institutional problems as a first step in the formulation of improvement interventions are common to many sectors and countries. But the self-driven and participatory assessment by the RWSB to generate forward-looking lessons for its future water supply programmes and assure accountability is unique for the following reasons:

- staff members themselves initiated the assessment and mapped out the entire exercise;

- staff members identified the issues and indicators to be addressed, planned the retreat for addressing them, and gathered the information necessary for informed discussions and performance rating;

- staff discussed the issues in self-lead unit-based teams and proceeded to present their findings and indicator ratings in plenary, freely challenging the findings of one another; and

- the facilitator was challenged to keep the process on track, even if occasionally chaotic: assisting with filling in gaps in information and data, capturing the core proceedings in a balanced manner, and isolating prominent institutional weaknesses and how they inform the strategy for capacity building.

The assessment process incorporated six performance categories – sets of related skills, procedures and capabilities defining particular institutional performance areas (USAID, 1988). The categories, for which the degree of successful unit performance was rated on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high) using the indicators summarized in Table 1, are as follows:

- Top Leadership;
- Management and Administrative Systems;
- Technical Capability;
- Community Orientation;
- Organizational Culture; and
- External Relations.

Tables 1 and 2 show that, irrespective of whether they are located at the headquarters or at the district level in the four administrative regions of the country, institutional units consider themselves as having varying degrees of skills and practices in each of the performance categories (RWSB, 1996).

However, arriving at what appear to be simple rankings was not an easy task, with the journey bedevilled by:

- the initial difficulty of enlisting the participation of an appropriate number of district level staff members, active stakeholders who interface frequently with served communities and receive their views on service delivery;

- the sustained sceptical attitude of lower-level officers, as to whether it was safe to freely critique the role and performance of senior staff and headquarters-based units;

- the embarrassment and discomfort which accompanied the expression of frank opinions and concerns about the performance of one another; and

- the extra but critical effort by the facilitator not to push up his own views in discussions, with the understanding that every officer and unit would certainly note other participants' perspective of their performance and overall point of view, even whilst, expectedly, everyone did not agree to everything.

Table 1:   Performance Rating by Regional Units (Low 1 to High 10)

Performance Category and Indicators	Hhohho Region	Lubombo Region	Manzini Region	Shiselweni Region
TOP LEADERSHIP (averaged for: sense of mission, role-modelling, operational knowledge, technical guidance, hardwork, competence, listening capacity, personal integrity and decision-making.)	6.7	6.7	7.3	4.8
MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS (averaged for: understanding of mission and responsibilities, work planning, goal setting and appropriateness, regularity of follow-through, functionality of administrative systems, and transparency and accountability.)	6.4	4.9	6.2	5.0
TECHNICAL CAPABILITY (averaged for: soundness of technical decisions, timeliness and economy of completion, quality control, adequacy of skilled staff, interest in learning and information sharing.)	5.5	6.2	5.2	4.7
COMMUNITY ORIENTATION (averaged for: promotion of the Branch's positive image, commitment and responsiveness to communities, effectiveness of interaction and interfacing, community participation.)	6.4	6.0	6.6	4.9
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE (averaged for: team spirit and team work, pride	5.6	5.4	5.2	5.2

in work, informal communication and programme awareness, and value placed on assets.)				
EXTERNAL RELATIONS (averaged for: government and public support, leadership in civil society activities, and knowledge/ relevance of government policies and procedures.)	5.8	5.0	5.3	5.0

Table 2: Performance Rating by Headquarters Units (Low 1 to High 10)

Performance Category	Engineering Design	Finance and Accounts	Public Health	Planning and Construction	Community Liaison
TOP LEADERSHIP	7.9	6.5	9.0	9.0	6.6
MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS	8.4	7.1	7.4	8.9	7.2
TECHNICAL CAPABILITY	9.3	5.8	8.5	8.5	5.8
COMMUNITY ORIENTATION	8.0	6.6	5.1	9.0	10.0
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE	8.4	5.6	4.8	8.8	10.0
EXTERNAL RELATIONS	7.8	7.5	7.5	8.8	10.0

Notwithstanding these challenges and the rethinking associated with them in the course of the exercise, both the assessment process and its outcomes have been useful and instructive. In general, the category ranking ranges from 4.7 to a widely disputed 10, although clouding indicator ratings as low as 2.0 in some cases. Apart from an anticipated criticism and low ranking of external factors (central ministries and departments and the wider government policies and procedures), the most interesting and lowest rating is presented in the case of organizational culture.

There was consensus that poor internal awareness (and performance) of some of the Branch's projects was being sustained by the related factors of poor informal communication and low inter-unit programme support. First, informal personal contacts were considered a powerful tool for directly dealing with the largely traditional community structures vital to sustainable water system management. But then, the use of that tool where it matters most calls for the

devolution of certain decision-making powers to district level. Second, constituting specific task forces across headquarters and regional units was believed to be an effective input coordination mechanism for fostering an inclusive commitment to the success of every project and programme, and for engineering team spirit over the long term.

Conclusions

Even in the new millennium, the identification of workable models of social service provision, including community water supply, continues to be hindered by the *project framework* within which most development agencies operate. The few attempts to focus on *institutions* have been largely externally-propelled, with such capacity assessment of water supply institutions frequently pointing to broad gaps, including government under-funding and capacity over-stretch, inappropriate incentive systems, and inadequate administrative structures and delivery mechanisms.

To foster a greater and deeper understanding of archetypal *broad* institutional gaps, the policy and institutional setting at the Rural Water Supply Branch in Swaziland has been examined from a participatory, introspective perspective. Using performance categories that range from technical capability and top leadership to organizational culture and community orientation, each of the Branch's units, including those at the district level, quantified its own level of performance and practices and suggested strategies for attaining higher levels. Whilst certain service delivery obstacles – such as poor informal communication, low inter-unit project input and non-supportive external policies -- were considered as common to the entire institution, staff were able to clearly identify the strengths and weaknesses of other units, providing an effective springboard for programmed and holistic capacity building.

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