COOPERATIVE VENTURE FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

CV·CB

FACTSHEET

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Researching Capacity Building in Rural Australia

# Designing, implementing and evaluating capacity building projects

A main aim of many extension projects is to build the capacity of the people involved so that there is less need to provide ongoing support. Research commissioned by the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building (CVCB) has found that building capacity has significant benefits but that many extension and education projects only deal with some of the elements of capacity building. This fact sheet summarises the key issues to address when you are designing, implementing and evaluating capacity building projects.

## DEFINITIONS

The definition of capacity building used by the CVCB is:

> *Capacity building is understood as externally or internally initiated processes designed to help individuals and groups associated with rural Australia appreciate and manage their changing circumstances, with the objective of improving the stock of human, social, financial, physical and natural capital in an ethically defensible way.*

The key elements of this definition are that:

- capacity building is a process that improves five capital stocks, i.e. human, social, financial, physical and natural capital
- the process should be conducted in an ethically defensible way.

## WHAT IS CAPITAL?

**Human capital** refers to the capability of individuals while **social capital** refers to the level to which social networks, relationships and processes within a community support individuals to exercise their capabilities. **Physical capital** refers to infrastructure; **financial capital** to goods and services produced through human effort including both physical and financial knowledge; and **natural capital** to the renewable and non-renewable resources found in nature; useful and required for human existence. Taking the definition and the different forms of capital, capacity building involves improvement in:

- business profitability and sustainability
- industry profitability and sustainability
- the ecological health of catchments
- the wellbeing of people
- the wellbeing of their communities.

Fundamental to capacity building are four central elements.

The **first** of these elements is that the outcomes of effective capacity building are improvements in all the stocks of capital, as defined by stakeholders. As well, there needs to be consistency between the outcomes and how a project is designed and implemented in achieving the outcomes.

The **second** is that a true capacity building project must include all of the members of the community of practice to which the project relates. The implications are that this will introduce different opinions, interests and world views into the community of practice, and that it will avoid those who are potentially important to have involved being left out of the process.

A **third** element is that effective capacity building creates a common agenda and a willingness to collaborate among the members of the relevant communities of practice.

And the **final** element is that for capacity building projects to be effective, there must be political and institutional commitment to their goals.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR DESIGNING CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECTS?

Based on this context, it is clear that the aim of a capacity building project is to improve capital stocks, and as a result an individual, group or community's capacity to manage their own circumstances. Extension and education projects often aim to increase one or two capital stocks. Often they concentrate on building the skills of people, i.e. human capital, so they can benefit as individuals, possibly through an improved financial position, or as a group through an improved natural resource base.

A capacity building project, however, aims to improve all capital stocks so a first step in designing the project is to identify the desired improvements in each type of capital: human, social, financial, physical and natural. As well as identifying the improvements in capital, the project should develop a process to enable these improvements to occur.

In this context, a feature of capacity building in practice, which differentiates it from other project approaches, is that it emphasises asset mapping rather than needs assessment. Needs assessment focuses on what's wrong with a community or what is missing. In contrast, asset mapping moves the focus from what is not in the community to what is, thus providing a basis on which to build capacity.

When you are designing a capacity building project, it is essential that all of the people and groups with an interest in the project be included, even if they have different views about the subject. It is important that all members of the project group, or community of practice, be brought into a project in such a way that they are able to contribute to all aspects of project management from design to implementation and evaluation. By implication, this community of practice should include a wide range of groups, institutions and individuals.

These different groups and individuals will bring different knowledge and skill sets to bear on the problem based in their different practices. A possible first step for a project is to confirm the identity of these people and their willingness to be involved with the project. It should also be recognised that there will be different motivations for different members of the project community. These will range from financial to social motivations.

The role of each group member will vary and how they are involved in the project will vary, but if they are strategically important to the outcomes of the project they must be involved in some way. Involvement should always be voluntary and on equal terms with other members of the community of practice.

As the community of practice is forming a common agenda can be developed. The agenda will clarify the aims of the project and need to be agreed to by everyone.

All projects are subject to prevailing institutional arrangements. These arrangements include relevant laws and regulations, the various government departments that monitor these laws and also the prevailing social and political norms and conventions. It is important for projects that all of these institutions are fully supportive of the project and are willing to contribute the resources required for successful outcomes.

An important difference between capacity building projects and more traditional extension and education projects is that it is not possible to predetermine outputs, which are often used as measures of success or achievement, e.g. a specific number of workshops or a particular publication. Prescribing such things before a project starts, without consultation with the community practice, is against the fundamental principles of capacity building. What is important in determining the success of a project is that it is evaluated and that the stock of capital, as defined by stakeholders, has improved. This means that it is crucial for any capacity building project to include some process or strategy for measuring the current stock of capital of all types, and the changes in capital stocks resulting from the project.

## IMPLEMENTING A CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

Once you have established the basic framework for a project and it meets the conditions described, more attention can be paid to implementing it.

An important aspect to do with implementing capacity building projects is leadership style. A facilitative leadership style is critical to the success of capacity building projects. This style of leadership has been characterised by Jeff Coutts and his research team in a project they completed for the CVCB as the group facilitation/empowerment model. It is characterised by participants increasing their own capacity in planning and decision-making and in seeking their own information, and other resources based on the current situation they are in. Resources might include technical resources such as access to a technical expert or to hardware or software, or they might be financial or physical resources.

An external facilitator might work with the group to give guidance and support but they do not become a leader who sets the agenda and process for the project and directs participants.

As the project develops the process for evaluating and monitoring the project will also develop and be used to check progress.

To find out more about the different models of extension developed by Jeff Coutts and his team, go to website http://www.couttsjr.com.au/pd/ or CVCB Factsheet no. 1, *What works and why in extension* and CVBC Factsheet no. 2, *Best practice in extension*.

## EVALUATING AND MONITORING PROJECTS

The criteria that are used to design capacity building projects can also be used to monitor and evaluate projects. So the following criteria, which are important in designing a project, also form part of the evaluation and monitoring process.

**Stakeholders.** Capacity building projects need diverse and relevant communities of practice collaborating to create a shared agenda.

- ? Have all the relevant members of the community of practice been engaged for the project?
- ? Have they all agreed to the project agenda?

**Improving capital.** A systemic approach to situation improvement, i.e. interrelated strategies that encompass all aspects of capital improvement is essential.

? Have strategies been developed to improve all forms of capital?

? How will the improvements in capital be measured and monitored, e.g. have assets been mapped?

**Learning style.** Capacity building programs must be based on stated assumptions that reflect a collaborative learning paradigm.

? Is there clear support for and evidence of a facilitative leadership style?

**Measuring improvement.** Capacity building projects should incorporate scope for continuous improvement being offered by consistency among desired outcomes, methodology, and the monitoring and evaluation strategy.

? Is the project process one that generates improvements from completed activities

? Does it monitor improvements as they occur?

? Is there a continuous evaluation process that measures these improvements?

**Access to resources.** Resources are a critical issue for capacity building projects.

? Is there provision for and access to the full range of resources needed for success?

? Are all the key institutions supporting the project and are all the financial and physical resources available when required?

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### About the project

This factsheet is based on the report, Growing the Capital of Rural Australia - the Task of Capacity Building, which was funded by the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building. Its aims were to:

- review social, economic, political and technological trends that are likely to have an impact on a future learning environment, summarise these trends and discuss how they will impact on rural learning in the next 10 to 20 years

- identify the current institutional arrangements supporting and constraining rural capacity building and learning, and possible improvements

- engage key stakeholders in dialogue about improved institutional arrangements to support rural capacity building and learning - including inter-organisational structures, inter-relationships, roles, responsibilities, and possible barriers for change in institutional arrangements and the desirability and feasibility of those changes.

Researchers were Robert Macadam, John Drinan, Neil Inall and Bruce McKenzie, from Rural Enablers.

For a copy of the final report go to http://www.rirdc.gov.au/reports/HCC/04-034.pdf

If you want to know more about the project, contact Robert Macadam, email macadamr@bigpond.net.au