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# THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF POST-CONFLICT CAPACITY BUILDING: PRACTICABLE LESSONS FROM EAST TIMOR

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## Abstract

*'Capacity building' has become a ubiquitous term in the international peacebuilding community. While the need for capacity building in post-conflict contexts is widely accepted, discussions rarely venture into what it is in practical and operational terms, and how it ought to be done. This article<sup>1</sup> examines a major capacity building project in East Timor, focusing on capacity building as it occurs day to day and on the ground. Following a brief overview of the concept of capacity building, it identifies a number of key challenges that arise in initiatives in which internationals work directly with local actors to build their capacity. It then offers a set of concrete proposals, targeted at capacity builders and their managing institutions, for improved practice.*

## Introduction

In the past few years, the term 'capacity building', alternately 'capacity development', has become a favourite catchphrase of the international peacebuilding community. The literature, ranging from academic research and publications by bilateral donors to reports by the United Nations (UN) and its specialised agencies, is rife with references to the importance of capacity building (UNDP 2004; Ball *et al* 2003:284-288; World Bank 2005; Boesen 2004). In fact, the need for capacity building is so frequently invoked that it has almost become devoid of meaning; the banality of the term now seems to bury its actual importance.

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there is a genuine need to build individual, institutional and state capacity in fragile and post-conflict societies. But if we were to heed these exhortations, we would discover a dearth of understanding of the process of capacity building as it actually unfolds day to day and on the ground. There is a need to draw concrete lessons from past experiences;

yet critical analysis and sound policy have generally lagged behind rhetoric and practice in this area, often with consequences for the goals of 'local ownership' and 'sustainability'.

This article examines the case of an ongoing capacity development initiative led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in East Timor, where dozens of international 'advisors' are involved in a multi-year effort to mentor and train their Timorese

‘counterparts’ in the national government. It should be pointed out that this is a study of a very specific type of capacity building – that focused primarily on building individual capacity in an effort to build up an institution – and in the specific context of post-conflict East Timor. However, we believe that the lessons from this case are relevant to any situation in which international actors are engaged in strengthening the capacity of local partners so they can perform their tasks independently and competently.

Part I reviews the existing discussion on capacity building, exploring why it is important, what lessons have already been learned, and how it is linked to the broader goals of sustainable post-conflict peacebuilding and reconstruction. Part II provides an overview of the UNDP capacity development project, as well as a brief analysis of the key challenges that arose in the actual capacity building process. Part III outlines concrete, transferable lessons learned from the case of East Timor.

Part II and III are both based on the researchers’ direct involvement in a UNDP capacity building project in East Timor in mid-2003, working in the unit charged with overseeing the project (the Capacity Development Unit within UNDP East Timor). This provided opportunities for full engagement in the project and an opportunity to observe the capacity building process not only from the viewpoint of advisors and counterparts, but also that of the coordination body. A qualitative study of the project was also undertaken, where 46 ‘international advisors’ and 19 Timorese civil servant ‘counterparts’, as UNDP referred to them, were interviewed.<sup>2</sup> This article draws on findings of that study, embedded in the larger literature on capacity building.

## Capacity Building: An Overview

### *Capacity building as a goal*

Capacity building is often asserted as an integral and inherent part of all international interventions in peacebuilding and development (Fukuda-Parr 2002). If the end goal of such interventions is to set the country on a path to durable peace, stability and development, capacity building is a requisite intermediate objective toward that goal: it is aimed at equipping and enabling the state to fulfil its own functions effectively and fairly and with oversight by its citizens. It is intimately linked to another prevailing peacebuilding objective of ‘local ownership’, which, in the words of the former World Bank President, James Wolfensohn, is the principle that national actors and institutions ‘must be in the driver’s seat and set the course’ (Bretton Woods 2004). Successful capacity building in weak or post-conflict states in theory enables national actors and institutions to have primary and predominant influence over their national agendas, policies and strategies and move away from reliance on the international presence.<sup>3</sup> The Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (DAC/OECD) stated nearly 10 years ago in its report, *Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, that sustainable development ‘must be locally owned’ and that donors should ‘respect and encourage strong local commitment, participation, capacity development and ownership’ (DAC/OECD 1996).

Literature and discourse echoing this point have since proliferated with rapidity and force within the international community. For example, the UN Millennium Declaration states that member states will resolve ‘to strengthen the capacity of all our countries to implement the principles and practices of democracy and respect for human rights, including minority rights’. While not among the eight Millennium Development Goals, capacity building is recognised as indispensable for the achievement of the MDGs (IMF 2002).

## *Dissecting the catchphrase*

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learned' from the plethora of capacity building projects across the developing world are extremely limited. Furthermore, the long-term impact of these projects remains far from clear, though we do know, for example, that after 10 years of state building led by the international administration in Bosnia Herzegovina, political and policy making authority continues to lie in the hands of internationals (Chandler 2005:308). Whether

such an outcome is due to failures to build national capacity, or failures to hand over critical responsibilities even though capacity has been bolstered, is difficult to determine. UNDP's 'Capacity Development' initiative does include valuable analysis of country experiences and pointed recommendations to the donor community, particularly as they relate to the attainment of the MDGs (UNDP Capacity Development website). However, its studies rarely focus on the specific needs and challenges of post-conflict settings that involve significant international presence in the countries in question. Though useful, the studies also tend to be more macro-focused, with recommendations aimed at donors and recipient governments broadly, rather than at the individuals actually involved in managing or implementing those efforts.

Stephen Browne's edited volume (2002), offers sweeping breadth in examining capacity development at the individual and institutional levels, as well as policy and leadership in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Egypt, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Philippines and Uganda. Yet, rather than using its multi-level analyses of diverse country environments to triangulate findings that are directly applicable to capacity development at the individual level, the study is mired in contextual analysis, largely at the national level. To be more useful, such studies must go beyond the elaboration of broad descriptions and the use of popular buzzwords ('transparency', 'sustainability' and 'ownership' are examples) to the individual level so as to define what activities precisely are working and offer insights that can be successfully applied to other cases.

Such a study sits in marked contrast to that of Morrison (2001), whose 528-page work focuses almost wholly on applied, 'actionable' approaches to improving capacity development at the individual level. Morrison's work draws heavily on the large body of literature related to learning theory, which is under-utilised in the capacity development field. By linking actionable theoretical models to post-conflict contexts, Morrison provides capacity builders in the field with more tools for use in the teaching and learning process, the heart of capacity development. Morrison's work therefore represents an important attempt at bridging the hitherto separate worlds of capacity development and learning theory.

UNDP has not yet fully embraced the benefits that an approach to capacity development which is married with learning theory or other individual-level approaches to capacity development might offer. According to its 'generic definition', capacity building is 'the process by which individuals, organisations and societies develop abilities to perform functions, solve problems and set and achieve goals' (UNDP 2002:1-2). It identifies three dimensions of capacity building – the individual, institutional and societal. It also highlights

at least 10 kinds of national capacity attached to every goal, namely the capacity to: 1) set objectives; 2) develop strategies; 3) draw up action plans; 4) develop and implement appropriate policies; 5) develop regulatory and legal frameworks; 6) build and manage partnerships; 7) foster an enabling environment for civil society; 8) mobilise and manage resources; 9) implement action plans; and 10) monitor progress (UNDP 2002:4, 6).

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initiated, self-monitored process. Neither does the definition describe the links, if any, between individual, institutional and societal dimensions of capacity building, leaving one to wonder whether building the capacity of individuals necessarily translates into institutional capacity building, or whether strengthening a society, however that is done, also strengthens the individuals within it. In

addition, given the 10 different kinds of general capacities needed to achieve a goal, we are still left with the question of how capacity building occurs.

This article attempts to provide some answers to the *how* of individual capacity building where international actors train, mentor and work with their local partners. It is therefore primarily an exploration of the human dimension of capacity building partnerships, a dimension that may at first appear too narrow to matter to the building of durable state institutions. However, this article argues that this relational aspect is a key determinant to success in capacity building and, more broadly, in post-conflict peacebuilding.

## The Case of East Timor: The '200 Posts' Project

### *Background*

Building a strong civil administration in East Timor has been one of the most difficult aspects of the country's reconstruction process. During the 25 years of Indonesian occupation the majority of technical and management positions in the government, especially at the top echelons, were filled by Indonesian officials, thereby severely curtailing the development of Timorese skills in the areas of governance and public administration. The mass exodus of Indonesian civil servants prior to and immediately following the territory-wide violence and destruction of late 1999 left an enormous personnel vacuum in all areas of the civil service. This was compounded by the colossal tasks in store for the government: on the eve of independence in 2002 East Timor was the poorest country in Asia, with 40 percent of the population living on less than 55 cents a day and almost 50% percent of them illiterate (UNDP 2002). Political independence meant little for the actual exercise of administrative authority, as the UN Security Council recognised that the country would continue to require substantial international military, police and civil service support post-independence (Gunn with Huang 2004:51, 150).

In 2001, UNDP consultations with the government confirmed the need for major international assistance in the delivery of key government functions. In October that year a UNDP-led 'skills audit' identified about 100 'stability' positions in the government and ministries, ambiguously defined as positions that are 'vital to the viability of government, political stability and basic service provision'. In addition, the audit identified roughly 200 'development' posts needed to address poverty reduction and economic and human

development. While a major difference in the funding mechanisms set these two sets of positions apart – ‘stability’ posts were financed through assessed contributions while ‘development’ posts were funded by voluntary contributions – in reality the distinctions between them were never entirely clear to any of the stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>

The UNDP capacity building project for the 200 development posts came to be called the ‘Support to the Development Posts for the Government of East Timor’, or more commonly the ‘200 Posts’ project. This is the project in which the authors directly participated and which informs this article. It had the following objective:

To strengthen the capacity of the Government of East Timor by providing 228 mentors and advisors to key government departments in support of their efforts to promote sustainable development and poverty eradication (UNDP 2003:3).

As stated in the project document, ‘capacity development under the project required the international advisors to provide training and mentoring to East Timorese counterparts and to transfer knowledge to enable counterparts to better perform their jobs’ (UNDP 2003:7). While not explicitly stated, it was also known to all parties involved that in addition to

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Nevertheless, by mid-2003 around 70 international advisors were on board in a number of government ministries, including Finance, Education and Justice, as well as in the President’s and Prime

Minister’s offices, working on issues ranging from gender equality, tertiary education and property dispute settlement to media, information technology and public finances. Their job descriptions were developed jointly by UNDP and the host ministries. The job performance of advisors and their counterparts was monitored by UNDP and host ministries respectively through regular performance evaluations, though in fact these evaluations indicated nothing more than how much time was devoted to what kinds of tasks and were of little use in monitoring the building of capacity.

### *The challenges of capacity building*

What follows are four key challenges that arose in the 200 Posts capacity building project. Among the many successes, challenges and experiences narrated, we identify those points that were highlighted repeatedly in interviews of both advisors and counterparts. As expected, many of these issues are not unique to East Timor, but have surfaced in other peacebuilding efforts elsewhere, as the selected literature cited in the notes confirm.

#### **Partnerships are often characterised by unbalanced power relationships**

‘Capacity building’ is usually referred to in highly technical terms, with extensive ‘skills audits’ and monitoring and evaluation of ‘skills transfers’, for instance. While progress and outcomes may be measured through quantifiable benchmarks, in practice capacity building involves two or more parties working in partnership toward a particular goal; it therefore encompasses a critical yet more amorphous dimension based on the dynamics of human relationships.



In post-conflict contexts, these relationships confront particular challenges that arise from the very nature of international interventions in peacebuilding. A report on building effective partnerships between internal and external actors put it this way:

...external actors have vastly greater political and economic power, and are much better organised and resourced than internal actors. And there is an evident asymmetry in capacities for knowledge creation and in technical and methodological expertise. This structural inequality is reinforced by local dependence on external funding, and leads to an unbalanced relationship and different levels of confidence and assertiveness (WSP/IPA 2004:3).

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between themselves and their partners. Even the jargon used – not only UNDP’s ‘advisor’ and ‘counterpart’, but also more broadly in development discourse such as ‘donor’ and ‘recipient’ – reflect the hierarchy and inequality on which these asymmetric partnerships are premised (Fukuda-Parr et al 2002:11; Ribeiro 2002).

In the most successful partnerships, advisors made evident attempts to mitigate or overcome these imbalances, in particular by demonstrating understanding and appreciation of the country’s specific cultural and historical circumstances (a topic that will be examined in its own right below). For example, while a number of advisors described or complained of what they perceived as ‘lack of motivation’ and ‘lack of responsibility’ on the part of their counterparts, other advisors pointed out some factors that may influence the ostensible ‘work ethic’ of many national counterparts: the enormous salary discrepancies between national staff and international advisors and the effects on the morale of the former; the heavy amount of household responsibilities national staff bore; their inability or reluctance to pay for transportation if work needed to be done at the offices on weekends; the education system and work culture during the Indonesian occupation, described by some as impediments to self-motivation and creativity; and even deficient food and nutrition in a few cases. One is also led to wonder whether the advisor had taken over the responsibilities of the counterparts, leaving the latter with little work to do. On the other hand, motivational problems on the part of advisors were reported as well. One counterpart stated, ‘Advisors sit and use the Internet, send e-mail to family...and when they finish their contracts, they go.’

Allowing such power disparities to run their course carries serious repercussions. First, the success of peacebuilding may be compromised. According to one advisor, any direct or indirect attempt to impose certain values or opinions on his national counterpart was met with ‘frowning and resistance’. In addition, any dominance on the part of internationals, even if for provisioning purposes, prolongs dependence on the international presence and delays national actors’ ability to fully exercise the powers conferred on them. The involvement of national actors in decision making may be perceived as no more than a time-consuming procedural formality if their inputs are not ultimately valued.

**Internationals’ incentives are often skewed by the contradictory logic of capacity building, which is exacerbated by unrealistic expectations of donors**

Definitions of capacity building, no matter how specific, deflect attention from a central contradiction inherent in international efforts to strengthen national capacities. This

contradiction has to do with individual incentives and external pressures, and has implications for the sustainability of capacity building initiatives.

The simplified logic is as follows: some international advisors will perceive that the better the job they do – that is, the more capacity they build in their counterparts – the sooner they lose their jobs as advisors as their assistance becomes no longer needed. For them the incentive is thus to ‘take their time’ and prolong the national staff’s dependency on the international staff to the extent possible or ‘acceptable’. Other advisors will be fully cognisant of the fact that their main responsibility is to build their counterparts’ capacity as rapidly and effectively as possible. However, advisors and counterparts face major pressure from bilateral donors, UN agencies and financial institutions both to produce high quality material and meet constant deadlines (World Bank 2003:1; Lopes 2002:137-138). In the face of such pressure, it often becomes easier for advisors to put a lower priority on on-the-job mentoring of their counterparts, which necessarily requires more time. In either of these scenarios, the result is that the international advisor in effect takes over the job while the national counterpart spends much of his day sitting idly by. In the end, meeting immediate demands is chosen over sustainable capacity building while a cycle leading to further external dependency is reinforced (Ellerman 2002:43-45).

This basic contradiction between the stated end and the chosen means played itself out visibly in the 200 Posts Project. One remark by a civil servant counterpart is illustrative: ‘When (my advisor) was here, I learned nothing.’ Another stated, ‘International advisors must give us more training. Until now they’ve given us very little. It’s not because they’re too busy or don’t have time. It’s because they want to keep their jobs longer.’ Advisors, on the other hand, stressed their heavy workloads: ‘There’s a lot of pressure,’ said one. ‘It’s a major issue when it comes to capacity building. I could talk *ad infinitum* about how important it is to talk to the Timorese, to be patient, but on the other side of the ledger are donors who want to see results quickly. And we’re totally dependent on their goodwill.’ Whether such instances are derived from internal incentives or external pressures, they undermine efforts to build national capacities. One advisor admitted: ‘I have...taken too much of a leading role, or overstepped my role as an advisor. Now I am trying to draw back and let (my counterpart) do the work.’ It is important to keep this underlying tension in mind as we move forward in this study, as it may inform many of the other problems encountered and may reflect deeper contradictions in internationally led peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions more generally (Chesterman 2004:126-145).

### Capacity building is a highly cultural endeavour

Building or strengthening state institutions typically involves the need to impart and instil certain principles that form the basis for an open, democratic, transparent and accountable government. While donors assert that such principles should not be compromised, they

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may have been altogether absent from the way the government and society functioned previously. State building and its subset, individual capacity building, therefore may entail the need to alter public attitudes, mindsets and work routines so that they come to reflect these new sets of principles.

In order to do so, however, international staff must first understand the existing attitudes, mindsets and routines, and demonstrate respect for and sensitivity to local contexts. As one advisor noted, advisors can ‘tell their counterparts, “This is how it is done in Africa, in Cambodia”, but what is more relevant to ask is, “Does this apply to East Timor?”’ Furthermore, in order for any attempts at reform

to be sustainable, changes must derive from the convictions of the national actors themselves of what is needed for their own country.

International staff, regardless of their level of knowledge of the local culture and people, must therefore be cautioned against making hasty judgments, as one of the lessons identified below discusses in more detail. In this sense, the ability to communicate openly and effectively with one another is an enormous boon to enhancing mutual understanding. In many cases, knowledge of the local language will be an invaluable asset. As an advisor stated, 'You can't build capacity if you can't translate the concepts well into the local language'. A counterpart also made a valid point in noting that '(national) staff try hard to learn English, but advisors don't try to learn Tetum or Bahasa (Indonesia)'. While the practicality of learning English versus Tetum must be realistically acknowledged, this quote does highlight the tensions arising from behavioural, cultural and linguistic factors that may frustrate attempts to build solid working relationships.

At the same time, local informants remind us that the recognition of cultural differences should serve as the starting point for a successful relationship, not as a ready-made explanation for failure. All elements that are part and parcel of demonstrating cultural sensitivity, such as patience, understanding, communication and persistence, require conscious efforts by both parties. Avruch (2001) and Abu-Nimer (2001) each provide additional perspectives on the importance of cultural, ethnic, and religious differences in the peacebuilding process.

#### **Capacity building involves the need to affirm the goal of 'ownership'**

While individual capacity building is an important goal, in the context of post-conflict peacebuilding it is but an intermediate objective in the theory of change. Efforts are made to build local capacity certainly so that individuals can better perform their jobs, but also

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This function of capacity building as a necessary step in the progression toward 'local ownership' carries significant implications for capacity builders. It means that beyond the transfer of skills and knowledge, capacity

building should focus on the steady handover of responsibilities – whether acquired through *de jure* or *de facto* exercise of executive authority – so as to ensure that the capacities built are actually used toward the achievement of the ultimate objective. The term 'ownership' therefore is used here to refer to the very concrete act of local actors taking on the opportunities, tasks and responsibilities that belong to them, rather than a mere aspiration which much of the recent literature presumes is necessarily linked to peacebuilding. For greater clarity, 'ownership' can even be broken down into distinct senses in which the concept has been used in post-conflict contexts – such as participation, accountability, control and sovereignty – which enables peacebuilding missions to develop tools to operationalise an otherwise obscure concept (Chesterman 2006).

The challenge is to strike a balance between upholding or insisting on certain principles and standards, and allowing space for learning-by-doing, from which ownership and self-confidence are gradually attained (Lopes 2002:141). In practice, it would involve encouraging national counterparts to identify their own needs or problems and to address



them according to their own agendas and timelines, and respecting their opinions and decisions even if they do not align perfectly with those of international advisors or donors. At the same time, it will involve careful consideration of which principles can and cannot be compromised. Corruption, for instance, would likely be identified as unacceptable, while delaying the delivery of a report may in the final analysis be of minimal consequence. As one advisor stated, 'Now she is making more decisions on her own, though she might come back and say, "I've made the wrong decision." But that's all part of the process.' Another advisor rightly warned, however, that learning-by-doing 'only works when you have processes and a method for reflection, coupled with established trust and boundaries in the relationship' – that is, if it is done strategically and with purpose, with review by both parties of what worked and what did not.

## Lessons from East Timor

Having outlined the major challenges, contradictions and trade-offs involved in capacity building, this section extracts several interrelated lessons identified in the experience of East Timor's civil service. The first few are targeted at international actors involved directly in carrying out capacity building activities, while the latter few are relevant for both capacity builders and the international institution overseeing the capacity building process.

**Build relationships and foster trust:** In almost all of the 65 interviews conducted, the advisor or counterpart interviewees discussed at length the importance of building and maintaining a positive working relationship with his or her partner. One advisor stated: 'The first thing is to develop a sense of partnership and a working relationship; getting to know the people and where they're coming from, trying to unpack them... You work on creating a shared sense of what you're working for.' Many interviewees pointed out that this requires investment of time and effort in getting to know one's partner as a person rather than as 'objects', demonstrating openness and flexibility and listening to one another. Many also described capacity building as 'confidence-building', revealing the fact that the process is not merely about the transfer of knowledge and skills, but also involves mental or attitudinal changes that are harder to catalyse without the existence of viable partnerships.

**Ensure a mutual learning process:** This follows directly from the first lesson: solid, balanced partnerships by nature make capacity building a mutual process of learning. In successful partnerships both parties capitalised on the recognition that there was something they could learn from the other. Government counterparts were the storehouses of knowledge of the local culture, history, language, and environment. An advisor stated, 'It's a hard thing to say

who's teaching who. I don't think it's correct to say it's a one-way relationship. I still have to learn from (my counterpart) about many issues.' Another asserted that 'the most important thing is to build trust and... mutual confidence. This is done through mutual respect, acknowledging the counterpart's cultural beliefs... This is

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important because the counterpart can't accept you otherwise.' While power relationships will always be asymmetric at a macro level, it is possible to forge more balanced relationships based on mutual input and learning at the individual level. This implies that the participation of national actors should be seen as a vital and practical part of sensible decision making, rather than an option that is dependent on the amount of time and effort international actors wilfully choose to put into the process.

**Exercise cultural sensitivity:** Given that capacity building is not a mechanistic procedure but involves important relational and cultural aspects, this lesson should be the easiest to agree with. Cultural sensitivity on the part of international actors also greatly influences the degree of acceptance of – or resistance to – their presence and their overall peacebuilding endeavour. For advisors who arrive with a certain set of expectations – derived from experiences in other countries, for instance – it also requires the need to adjust such expectations to reality. As an advisor stated, international staff should not be ‘judgmental without asking why’. Another put it this way: ‘I think most advisors fail to take into account that although they may be experts in their field, the Timorese are experts on Timor.’ Such remarks reveal the delicate process of capacity building, in which international actors may encounter significant resistance if efforts are not made to demonstrate understanding of existing contexts. Advisors are experts in the field who have been hired to transfer skills and knowledge. Astute judgment, then, is needed to determine where to draw the line between assertiveness and deference.

While this study is primarily aimed at capacity builders, it should not neglect to point out that the need for cultural sensitivity also applies to local actors, though in a slightly different

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sense. While advisors need to adjust expectations to reality, counterparts need to take on learning with an open mind, accepting that aspects of the status quo do need to be changed in order to build viable democratic institutions. This point is particularly salient in the context of the colonial legacy left by the Portuguese and Indonesian rule in East Timor, which has had an impact on the country’s institutional

mores, as described above. An active recognition by both parties in capacity building of the historical conditions that have helped shape the present context is an important part of moving beyond this legacy.

**Earn respect by demonstrating experience and expertise:** Are international staff received with euphoric welcome or measured scepticism? Advisors and counterparts alike consistently stressed the need for international staff to demonstrate their competence and convince their national counterparts that they had something to offer. One advisor stated, ‘I think there is a lot of suspicion of foreign experts coming here.’ ‘You must show your skill,’ another said. ‘The more skills you show, the more interested (counterparts) will be.’ Counterparts confirmed these statements, noting that qualified advisors should be flexible and demonstrate skills, knowledge and experience. One counterpart stated, ‘We expect that advisors know the work. Even though we have skills and knowledge, we need their advice as an expert to do (the job) better.’ In short, trust and respect needs to be earned in order to overcome any misgivings or wariness over the international presence at that very individual level.

**The ‘ideal’ advisor? Find a balance in qualifications:** The complexity of the capacity building process should by now be clear. What, then, are the qualifications of an ideal advisor? Is it the candidate with the most technical expertise? The one who speaks the relevant languages? Or the one who has experience teaching or mentoring? The one who is from the region and is familiar with the culture? Or is it the most collegial and approachable team player?

Obviously when hiring, it is critical for the managing organisation to find some balance between all of these characteristics. However, interviewees repeatedly emphasised the

importance of knowledge of the language and culture and the ability to build positive partnerships. One advisor said, 'You need enablers and facilitators, not just technical bods. You need to feel you can give advice in broad ways.' Another stated, 'If you have a (potential advisor) with five years' experience who is patient and another with 20 years of experience...the guy with five years' experience [is] who they should take.' A counterpart noted, 'If possible, find an advisor ...who is helpful and familiar with the languages.' Striking a balance between all of these qualifications is certainly a challenge, but those responsible for hiring should be aware that some of the most desirable qualifications, including teaching ability and strong communication, particularly listening skills, may not be found on the *curriculum vitae*.

**Create a joint work plan and review it regularly:** At the outset advisors and counterparts should jointly assess the latter's skills and abilities and agree on a set of specific goals to fill the gaps in capacity. Observable benchmarks should be identified so that progress can be tracked on a regular basis. The work plan should also be periodically reviewed so as to ensure that it is realistic and achievable and follows a timeline with a foreseeable end. Such a shared plan should reduce advisors' incentives to perform the work themselves. The managing institution should keep advisors and counterparts accountable for meeting the objectives and timeframes set out in the work plan.

The ability of counterparts and advisors to adhere to the work plan, however, in part depends on the amount of pressure placed on them to deliver specific outcomes. As discussed, under heavy external pressure advisors find it extremely difficult to refrain from taking over the job themselves, which can in turn have the effect not only of stunting institutional performance, but also of leading to great personal frustration on the part of both parties. This highlights the important task of the coordinating agency in charge of hiring advisors of helping to 'create space' for advisors by emphasising to donors the centrality of the training aspect of advisors' jobs, so as to allow advisors sufficient time to fulfil their teaching roles.

Furthermore, while setting targets and benchmarks for capacity building is advisable, advisors should note that doing so might itself become part of capacity building. Planning and reviewing progress may even be perceived as another 'foreign model' imposed from above, as has been observed in post-conflict police reform (Peake & Brown 2005). There is a need for a great deal of cautiousness, patience and communication to ensure that there is understanding and agreement on why a work plan is a beneficial tool for progress.

**Aim for sustainability:** Said one advisor, 'There is no point in becoming an advisor if you leave and the unit collapses.' Promoting sustainability must be a guiding principle for the work of advisors. Systems, processes, attitudes and behaviour must be instilled in the individuals and institutions so that institutional memory endures beyond the life

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of the advisor's contract. For both the international organisation and the national government, it is important to keep in mind that the role of an advisor is first and foremost to render his/her counterpart independent as soon as possible. Such a function obviously has some curious disincentives, as discussed. However, it is also important that donors place more

sensible demands and expectations and be sensitive to the repercussions of the pressure they exert on national and international partners. Sustainability, then, goes hand in hand with modest and realistic expectations in the short term.

## Concluding Remarks

The interviews that inform this article were conducted in 2003. What has transpired since, and how successful was the 200 Posts capacity building initiative?

UNDP East Timor, the primary implementing organisation, has introduced major changes to the project starting in the latter half of 2003. It concluded the 200 Posts project and replaced it with the 'Institutional Capacity Development Support Programme' which, according to its programme document, reflects an 'evolution from individual capacity development to institutional capacity development' (UNDP 2005:8). In addition to conducting a comprehensive review of the existing capacity gaps and identifying additional posts, the new programme has introduced new mentoring modalities so that in the bulk of mentoring partnerships one advisor is responsible for many counterparts as opposed to the one-to-one modality of the 200 Posts. The programme document also emphasises increased focus on local ownership and improving coordination between the government, the implementing organisation and donors.

Thus, while it is too early to assess whether the 200 Posts project was successful in achieving the goal of 'strengthening the Government of East Timor', it appears, at least on paper, that important lessons have indeed been learned through that project, particularly in terms of modalities and mechanisms used. At the same time, this article has argued that the more subtle yet critical improvements in the partnerships between national and international actors, rather than major overhauls of capacity building methodologies, may have a greater impact on success.

The 200 Posts project saw a number of partnerships forged which were based on trust, respect, patience and mutual learning, and in which counterparts' skills and capabilities developed remarkably. At the individual level there were numerous reported stories of progress. However, the sustainability question comes to mind in assessing the project's

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**What is certain is that without embedding processes designed to ensure that individuals' skills collectively strengthen institutions of the state, individual capacity building risks being nothing more than what it is: capacity building for individuals.**

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success at the institutional level. While the stated goal was to strengthen the government, the project failed clearly to delineate how individual capacity building was envisioned to lead to the strengthening of government institutions. Whether this was a reason for the project's shift of emphasis from individual to institutional capacity building is unclear. What is certain is that without embedding processes

designed to ensure that individuals' skills collectively strengthen institutions of the state, individual capacity building risks being nothing more than what it is: capacity building for individuals. If a counterpart were to leave the government for a higher paying job, capacity building would have been a wasted investment for institutional strengthening – a cost that neither a post-conflict government nor donors can afford to bear.

The implications of this study for capacity building policy and practice are twofold. First and foremost, all parties involved, including international advisors, national counterparts and the coordinating agency, need to acknowledge that the quality of the partnership between the advisor and counterpart plays a pre-eminent role in determining the level of success in capacity building. Conscious efforts therefore need to be made to strengthen those factors that improve any human relationships, such as strong communication, patience and mutual respect, in particular given the asymmetries of the power dynamics

between national and international actors in the peacebuilding context. If this is a hackneyed statement, experience has shown that it is difficult to put into practice. This conclusion is certainly relevant for advisors and counterparts, but it also points to the need for the coordinating body to provide guidance and institutional support as advisors and counterparts seek to teach and learn while they work under pressure to meet multiple

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demands. Second, there is a need to delineate more clearly how capacity building endeavours, whether at the individual or the institutional level, lead to intermediate changes that culminate in the stated goal of a stronger state. The lofty end needs to be matched by a more rigorous means.

The building up of an *institution* requires interaction between national and international actors at the *individual* level, regardless of the modality of capacity

building used. It is hoped that the practical lessons offered here would be taken to heart by 'on-the-ground' capacity builders in future peacebuilding missions, and that, beyond acknowledging the recommendations, they would make strides toward their implementation and build on them with any new lessons learned.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Further findings are detailed in the UNDP report, 'Best Practices and Lessons Learned in the Capacity Development Process: A Case Study of the Support to the Development Posts Project, East Timor', UNDP May 2004. All quotes from advisors and counterparts cited in this article are taken from that report. While an equivalent number of interviews of government officials and their international advisors would constitute a more ideal sample, the former faced the demands of their own institutions within the government and therefore had limited ability to respond to interview requests. The number of interviews of government officials was further constrained by the availability of translators to be present at interviews. The research project had to surmount other methodological issues, such as the introduction of personal bias and subjective judgment by interviewers, a constant concern in qualitative research. To guard against these problems, a standardised question format was developed and used, while flexibility was maintained to allow interviews to 'flow' in a bounded manner when insights became particularly revealing. Noting these limitations, the authors believe that the knowledge gained in the course of the study sufficiently outweighs the research constraints. Further research in capacity building efforts in other post-conflict contexts would serve to corroborate the findings outlined here.

<sup>3</sup> It must be acknowledged that the goal of 'ownership' is not without its own complications. See Chesterman 2006.

<sup>4</sup> For further details, evolution and technical analysis of the '200 Posts' project, see Nakamura 2004. For early documents conceptualising the project and analysing its development, see UNDP 2003.



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