



## Revisiting capacity development

Capacity development is essential for research. In order to develop a country's research capacity effectively, we need to prioritise in terms of how and who, will be using the research. Without a concerted effort to focus on the priority problems in health research capacity, people would be trained, organisations built, and institutions strengthened with no clear end goal. Countries should look at where capacity is most required, and strengthen these areas first. For instance, where are the country's trained researchers largely employed? Are they in universities, government ministries, NGOs or private industry? The answer may well change as the country's situation evolves, as the research environment develops and the sources of research expertise multiply.

This learning brief focuses on lessons learned from an agricultural research and development viewpoint, but can be applied to any sector. It also highlights new capacities which have been found to be both innovative and crucial to any country wishing to address their research priorities effectively. Research efforts of the agricultural sector address the problems of the same poor, malnourished and deprived populations that the health research and development community are addressing. These research efforts are also often funded by the same donors. Yet despite these parallels, the two groups seem to resist the opportunity to learn from one another and share common experiences.

The author has participated in both the agricultural and health research sectors, and highlights some lessons learned which might be useful for stakeholders in the health research and development field.

### Lessons Learned

It is easier to build than to utilise and maintain capacity. Strong research organisations do not necessarily remain strong. There are peaks and troughs in any organisation's lifespan, making capacity development a never-ending task. Even established researchers need to hone their skills periodically so that they can keep pace with new recruits to the scientific community. When senior researchers are confident about their professional status, mentoring, nurturing and role modeling occur more naturally, and are an invaluable contribution to the development of young scientists.

Research capacity building efforts often revolve around 'outstanding' individuals as institutional development takes time. In such instances, the individual is synonymous with the institution, with the result that developments around the individual directly influence the institution. Hence, at some point, the institutional focus will take over.

Evaluating research capacity on the basis of the number of Master's and PhD degrees can be very misleading, as these outputs do not always translate into research productivity. Some postgraduates take on administrative positions following graduation, others use the degree as a springboard to a promotion, and others join consulting firms on a contractual basis. Still others simply earn a degree for the prestige associated with the title. In other words, there is no guarantee that a PhD will be used for research.

Even where research capacity is limited, there is a thriving consultancy business funded by international development organisations. This

often leads to a conflict of interest, and concerns around ethical issues related to ownership of data, reports and technologies. The consulting industry thrives because salaries of scientists are rarely competitive, and consultancies become an avenue for additional income generation.

In national research and development programmes, resources allocated to operational expenses are limited. Budgets are often unevenly distributed in favour of personnel services. This means that many staff members have to be kept busy, while resources available for research are limited. This leads to a situation where the project leader is 'many research assistants removed' from the research project and where the more junior researchers are assigned to do field work.

There is a weak link between research and its utilisation. Often a system to facilitate the link between research and its utilisation does not exist and the research ends with a research report - not even a publication.

Research and development programs also suffer from the inability to define and implement research priorities despite the limited resources available. A sense of equity or sharing of research funds among colleagues tends to prevail, hence resources are spread thinly and unproductively. It is not unusual to find research programs which are no more than a long 'wish-list' that gets passed down from one year to the next.

Other problems include an underdeveloped culture of evaluation, peer review is perfunctory, and impact assessments are rare. Scientists who do not publish do not perish. They not only survive, but they move up the ladder administratively with more perks and power. Earnings from consultancies surpass the value of whatever promotions might be gained from several publications.

Although the science community's battle cry is lack of funds - investing more and more

money, in light of the above mentioned weaknesses in the research system may not necessarily lead to enhanced research productivity. Much more than money is required.

## New capacities

There is a need to remain exposed to the reality - and therefore, to do field-based research. Only this exposure can assist in defining the real problems, in deciding on priorities, and in developing a multidisciplinary (more holistic) approach.

The researcher should also be more involved in the implementation of research results and should develop the capacities for this. Capacities to network inter-institutionally or intra-institutionally form another important need. Networking is often obstructed by professional rivalries among 'equals', and more than patience and perseverance might be needed to soften the 'boundaries'. To be able to develop partnerships and to do participatory research, ethical considerations must govern the research process.

## Reference

Castillo, GT (2000) Revisiting capacity development in agricultural R&D. Paper prepared for the UPWARD Conference on Capacity Development for Participatory Research held at the China Agricultural University, Beijing, China, 19-22 September 2000.

### For further information, please contact:

Dr Gelia T. Castillo

c/o International Rice Research Institute  
DAPO Box 7777

Metro Manila  
Philippines

Fax: +63 2 892 0354

Email: M.LAGO@CGIAR.ORG

These learning briefs are published by the Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED). To receive a free copy of the Handbook, and any forthcoming learning briefs, please contact:

**COHRED**, 11 Rue de Cornavin, 1201 Geneva, Switzerland

• **Phone:** +41 22 591 8900 • **Fax:** +41 22 591 8910

• **Email:** cohred@cohred.ch • **Website:** <http://www.cohred.ch>