

Capacity Nepad's next goal

Education, rooting out inadequacy and attracting skilled outsiders are first on the list of priorities

Tumi Makgetla

Development projects that never get off the ground and well-meaning agreements that come to nothing are symptoms of inadequate capacity in African countries, which the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) plans to tackle.

Since the 1950s, international and continental institutions have concerned themselves with building capacity in Africa, but critics say their models have failed to strengthen capacity in the long term.

Despite this track record, capacity building remains a key area of government focus, and analysts stress the importance of investment in education to achieve better development outcomes. Stakeholder meetings this year identified the importance of addressing capacity constraints in order to achieve Nepad's objectives.

Critical constraints exist in the areas of project conceptualisation, development and implementation, said Nepad Deputy CEO Dr Hespina Rukato. Another factor hampering capacity is poor institutional coordination. According to Rukato there are often several institutions working in the same field that fail to take advantage of each other's strengths and end up duplicating each other's activities. She said these constraints exist across government institutions, non-governmental organisations, regional economic communities and inter-governmental institutions.

Ross Herbert from the South African Institute of International Affairs said many African countries lack skills that are important for the economy, such as engineering and accounting. In some cases, good ideas for infrastructure projects such as dams have failed to get off the ground because their financial costs are not properly evaluated. The costing is not done because the necessary financial and engineering skills are not available to conduct feasibility studies. Herbert added that the lack of skills such as these may also prevent African countries from taking advantage of their natural resources.

In order to address this, African



African governments should invest heavily in secondary and tertiary education to improve technical skill levels.

Photograph: Paul Botes

governments should invest heavily in secondary and tertiary education to improve technical skill levels, he said. Such an approach may have to involve raising salaries to attract better candidates to the teaching profession. A politically difficult step to take in the field of education is for the government to remove poorly qualified teachers. He said Zimbabwe implemented this policy by replacing inadequately trained teachers with newly certified teachers.

Herbert noted that countries such as Korea and Japan imported much-needed skills to address urgent needs in the short term. For example, Japan hired a former American secretary of agriculture to design a farm support system. Improving the government's attitude and making use of existing academic institutions are also important cultural underpinnings for improved capacity building.

Historically, African governments have been hostile towards academia and averse to criticism of government policies and programmes. This attitude originates in the period from the 1960s to the early 1990s, when one-party states viewed universities with suspicion because they were often sites of protest. Herbert contrasted the continued hostility of now multi-party African governments towards academic institutions with the situation in the United States, where think tanks support and inform the political spectrum.

Omano Edigheji, a senior

researcher at the Centre for Policy Studies, echoed Herbert's emphasis on developing human capacity by investing in education.

While acknowledging that capacity constraints exist, he cautioned that the "capacity mantra" was often an expression of the "blacks cannot govern" thesis. This attitude towards African countries could lead one to explain development problems only in terms of the abilities of national governments, without taking into account other factors that impact on development, such as the role of Western governments in shaping global trade.

Edigheji said one reason for the limited state capacity for development was that the Washington Consensus encouraged African countries to shrink the state through privatisation and restructuring. He added that the existing skills base was often underutilised, pointing out that graduate unemployment was higher in Africa than on other continents.

Reversing the brain drain is one measure to improve the capacity of countries, he said. For health and education professionals, this might mean improving their working environments, for instance, upgrading hospitals and libraries.

He said Western countries had a role to play in enabling African countries to improve their economies and make it attractive for skilled workers to return to their home countries.

Nepad plans to develop a framework that different countries will

Quoted

"In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the civil service has sharply deteriorated in almost every way since the 1970s. [Botswana is one of the few exceptions.] Beginning in the 1980s, a succession of fiscal stabilisation programmes has reduced government employment in Africa to the lowest level of any developing region. Thus, although additional downsizing may be necessary in some countries, most do not need to shrink the workforce, but to overhaul the entire civil service system."

Salvatore Schiavo-Campo in "Reforming the Civil Service" in "Finance and Development" 1996

"Rather than exclusive focus on 'capacity building', focus in Africa should first and foremost be on the valorisation of existing capacities through better 'capacity utilisation' and 'retooling' of the civil service, reversing the brain drain and repairing the main institutions of training that have been starved even as donors set up new ones to produce the parochial skills required in their new projects ... Paradoxically, the continued weakening of the capacity of the state goes hand in hand with the revival of interest in economic development and growth."

Thandika Mkandawire in "Thinking about Developmental States in Africa", Cambridge Journal of Economics 2001

use to develop their capacity, said Rukato. One of the challenges of building capacity is for national governments to take ownership of capacity building efforts. "We need more demonstration of political leadership in this area," he said.

Towards this end, a workshop to develop a capacity building strategy will be hosted by Nepad between November 21 and 23. Leading academics, practitioners and other stakeholders from the continent will gather to discuss this challenge. This is the first step towards actualising the African renaissance through enhanced capacity on the continent.

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