

Analysing Capacity in a Ministry of Education: A Case from Nepal

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The paper outlines an approach to capacity building and elaborates upon a methodology used for a major study of institutional capacity in the Ministry of Education and Sports of Nepal. To illustrate the model, some examples are given of the types of findings that emerged from the process, and the ways that these were able to inform the Ministry's subsequent HRD plan aimed at improving the quality of basic and primary education in that country. Finally, some reflections are provided on the usefulness of the model and its generalisability to other national contexts.

Keywords: *Capacity Building, Human Resources, Institutional Analysis, Nepal*

INTRODUCTION

The need for good government has been recognized within the field of international development since the mid-1990s. Since this time donor agencies in particular have been concerned to assist developing nations improve the capacity of their public sectors to deliver “well defined and functioning institutions of governance” that can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of state-provided services (Grindle 1997, p. 4). Whether in terms of processes of policy formulation and implementation, human resource development or, for example, the monitoring and evaluation of service delivery, governments across the developing world have shown their willingness to work with external agencies to improve the quality of what they do.

The purpose of this article is to provide insight into how capacity development, and the development of good governance, has been understood in practice, in this case, in the context of Nepal. The paper describes a donor-funded project conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) in Nepal aimed at analysing institutional capacity in the education sector with the explicit aim of providing the foundation for a human resource development (HRD) plan for the sector¹. The paper introduces an approach to the concept of ‘capacity’, before moving to the main task: an elaboration of the methodology developed to investigate capacity in the MOES. To illustrate the model, some examples are given of findings that emerged from the process, and the ways that these were then able to inform the Ministry's subsequent HRD plan for the sector (HMGN 2002). Finally, some reflections are

¹ The work of the Project is reported in full in Bista, M. B., & Carney, S. (2004).

provided on the usefulness of the model and its generalisability to other national contexts.

CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

Educational reform in Nepal has been driven by a concerted effort to improve teaching and learning processes and outcomes within the primary education sector. In recent years this commitment has found form in a series of Basic and Primary Education Programmes (BPEP). The first of these (BPEP I) which ran from 1994 to 1998 had three overall aims.

- To enhance educational access amongst those groups traditionally excluded from basic and primary education.
- To improve the quality of primary education in general.
- To strengthen institutional management across the sector.

These remained key targets within BPEP II (which operated from 1999 to 2004), albeit with a sharpened focus on processes and outcomes rather than the previous concentration on technical and physical inputs. This reorientation was in no small part due to the realisation that institutions and organisations play a critical role in the overall process of educational development. Whilst the need to focus on processes became more apparent, so too did the need to embed these processes within the Ministry itself. Under BPEP I, and in order to secure World Bank backing for large-scale educational development in Nepal, a Project Implementation Unit (PIU) had been established. This organisation ran parallel to existing Ministry bodies, consisted of staff external to the Ministry and enjoyed direct access to the cabinet minister. This came to be seen as deeply problematic, and in 1996 the national Master Plan for the education sector concluded that the Ministry's own capacity had been seriously weakened by donor attempts to work around the country's existing governmental structures.

By the beginning of BPEP II in 1999, and in part as a consequence of these experiences, the Government had shifted to a *sector* approach to education. The Government and its main donors (i.e., especially those from the Nordic countries, the UK, Japan, EU and the Asian Development Bank) saw as particularly urgent the need to develop and sustain the Ministry's own capacity. To this end, the MOES commissioned a comprehensive study of the overall capacity of the sector, its staff, constituent bodies and organisational processes, with the ambition that the findings would serve as a basis for the conceptualisation and preparation of an HRD plan that could support the central goal of the MOES: to improve the quality of education in Nepal, and to do so without heavy reliance upon the professional expertise of external aid agencies. More immediately, the study was designed to be developmental: those staff interviewed or asked to complete surveys were encouraged to discuss amongst themselves their understandings of the challenges confronting the Ministry, and were provided formal opportunities to contribute to the deliberations of the consulting team via written feedback, focus group interviews and participation in internal information-sharing and debriefing meetings.

This study of institutional capacity was unique in the Nepalese context, not least because it attempted to encompass all levels of the educational bureaucracy from central administration to classroom teaching. More importantly, it was concerned not only with mapping formal organisational structures, mandates and responsibilities, but with exposing what Grindle (1997) calls "the underlying networks and processes that are socially familiar and sanctioned" (p. 16) but often ignored in donor-driven attempts to understand institutional culture. It was

hoped, therefore, that the study would make explicit those aspects of Nepalese culture and custom seen as central to the life of the Ministry - but often described by donors and local critics as impeding its performance - and which could be addressed by targeted development interventions.

PERSPECTIVES ON CAPACITY BUILDING

The literature on capacity building is diverse and growing. For Warburton (1998), two broad approaches dominate. First, capacity building is often understood as “training and other methods to help people develop the confidence and skills necessary for them to achieve their purpose” (Wilcox, 1994, p. 31). Here, technical assistance has focused on enhancing the abilities of staff in organisations to satisfy the demands of pre-determined domains such as district planning, staff appraisal, curriculum development and so forth. Such approaches have attempted to support organisational needs by identifying immediate and urgent impediments to improved performance. Whilst valuable, this approach tends to compartmentalise organisational members; providing them with much-needed technical support but often in isolation from the needs of other parts of the organisation or of the system itself. A second approach, whilst recognising the importance of developing individual skills and competences focuses instead on an understanding of capacity as interconnectivity and mutual interdependence. Here, capacity building initiatives must consider the ways in which staff in organisations operate in *context*.

Adopting this approach, Hilderbrand and Grindle (1997) for instance define capacity as “the ability to perform appropriate tasks effectively, efficiently, and sustainably” (p. 34), and operationalise this definition with a five dimensional framework that seeks to bind together the diverse factors that impact upon employee performance. These dimensions are:

- The action environment: including the rate of economic performance, the degree of political stability and legitimacy of government, and the human resources profile of the nation. Change at this level is long-term and slow, but critical because such factors relate to basic economic, social and political structures.
- The institutional context: including the rules and procedures set for government operations and bureaucrats, responsibilities assumed by the government for particular development activities, and the structures of formal and informal influence that affect the way in which the public sector functions.
- The task network: related to the organisations (public or otherwise) engaged in carrying out any task, and the degree to which they are connected, able to communicate, and to operate interdependently.
- The organisation: the building blocks of the task network. Relevant domains include the structures, processes, resources, and management styles of organisations, and the ways in which these things affect operational goals, work processes, interpersonal relations and outcomes.
- The human resources: where the focus is on how staff are educated, recruited, utilised, retained and rewarded.

A strength of this framework is that it maps *sites* or physical locations of action to which capacity building activities must be targeted, *and* reminds us that reform efforts must be conscious of the linkages between the various domains that constitute the field. HRD in the form of staff training cannot be expected to be effective if it takes place in isolation from

other dimensions of the framework. From their experience, Hilderbrand and Grindle (1997) make three key observations for successful capacity building efforts:

1. Selecting a site for capacity building action must follow from a thorough analysis of all dimensions. This must include the ‘action environment’ (i.e. the macro level of government, political processes, etc.) because this domain sets the agenda for all others and is often the most critical component in determining the effectiveness of institutions. Staff training initiatives are very much secondary, and of limited worth, if the action environment is weak.
2. Within institutions themselves, effectiveness is more often than not driven by strong organisational cultures, good management practices, and effective communication networks. Clear rules, regulations, procedures and pay scales are important, but much less so.
3. In relation to actual training programmes, staff performance is affected most significantly by opportunities for meaningful work, shared professional norms, teamwork, and promotion based on merit. Training in specific skills has less impact on staff performance than these other factors. The most effective training occurs when these other aspects are in place, or being developed simultaneously (Hilderbrand and Grindle, 1997, p. 56).

This is undoubtedly a useful foundation, but one that fails to acknowledge adequately the role of *actors* in the capacity building process (e.g., Trostle et.al., 1997). Contrary to the narrow focus of many capacity building initiatives, the number of actors in such processes can be extensive and include the following: donors and their local agents; government officials; implementing agencies; educational institutions; individual technical staff; external and national consultants; civil society and community groups. Such a perspective represents a potentially enormous field of action, making it necessary to chart the “paths of adaptation and resistance” (p. 64) that such actors take.

People in organisations engage in specific processes and tactics when selecting themes, countries, organisations, and individuals. They negotiate between competing forces and make compromises to account for and control or manipulate various tensions. (Trostle et.al., 1997, p. 64)

Trostle and his colleagues see decision-making processes as vital because they play such a critical role in “determining what is defined as capacity and whose capacity is strengthened” (Trostle et.al., 199, p. 64). An examination of tactical and strategic decisions within a field can assist the HRD analyst in highlighting different types of capacity building initiatives for different organisational components.

The implication of this discussion is that capacity building must retain a broad focus. Staff training must be a central component, but HRD initiatives should also target organisational processes and structures as well as the wider range of actors that affect the capacity and performance of institutions. As such, HRD activities aimed at supporting, if not completely reshaping, national education ministries must also consider the role(s) of the following actors:

- National political and administrative leaders.
- Staff at all levels of the bureaucracy.
- Certain functions within other line ministries.
- Local providers of educational manpower (e.g. universities, consulting firms, training agencies etc).

- NGOs and community groups.
- Civil society.
- Donor agencies and their local counterparts.

One difficulty with much of the capacity-building literature, driven as it is by Western academics and development experts, is its implicit goal of achieving modern rational organisational forms in contexts where the “behaviour of administrative staff is not governed by legal rationality, but by social pressures” (Peterson, p. 159). For many writers, HRD in developing countries will never be effective until it comes to terms with the different ways in which power, social relations and attitudes to work are constituted. Peterson (1997) suggests that we understand capacity in public bureaucracies in the South in relation to three dimensions: the political, individual, and organisational. In relation to the first, research shows quite conclusively that bureaucracies in many developing countries are often ‘compromised’ by political elites who ‘use the state for personal gain’ (Peterson, 1997, p. 157). This fundamentally undermines capacity efforts, and is enormously difficult to reform. In relation to the second dimension – individual capacity – the literature paints a dark picture of poor management, insufficient skills and limited resources. Reform efforts can certainly be effective here, but they are often compromised by an inadequate understanding of the nature of organisations in developing countries. This leads to the third dimension. According to Peterson (1997), most organisational development initiatives in developing countries – and indeed in the West for that matter - build upon “a mechanical model of organization which fit(s) the Weberian legal rational (bureaucratic hierarchy) approach where procedures prescribe behaviour” (p. 160). Such approaches negate or undervalue the importance of informal networks and relationships in which ‘competing fiefdoms’ run bureaucracies on the basis of their personal power rather than by the organisation’s agreed and explicit procedures:

Instead of being integrated through procedures, public bureaucracies are often fragmented organisations with numerous microhierarchies. The leaders of these microhierarchies either vie amongst themselves for access to senior officials or they languish in isolation. Personal leadership and interventionist administration creates and reinforces fragmented organisational structures determined by the span of control of the senior administrator. “Just in reach” organisation governs each bureaucracy as well as the subset microhierarchies that compose the bureaucracy. (Peterson, 1997, p. 160)

Such social practices, based as they are on different cultural norms, make problematic the straightforward application of structure-oriented reforms. For Peterson (1997) the answer lies less in clarifying or smoothing vertical reporting relations – one way in which organisational reformers have tended to approach change - and more in finding new forms of *informal* organisation based on work flows – usually lateral in nature - that can link more meaningfully actual work processes with the existing cultural context. Adopting a “process design” view of the structure of work in organizations (p. 161), Peterson (1997) suggests we seek out organizational forms that minimise the fragmentation of tasks, and view organisations “horizontally in terms of work flows rather than vertically in terms of reporting relationship” (p. 161). In practical terms, this requires a focus on work teams that link closely to a process, and which necessarily cut across the existing hierarchies of divisions, departments and units. An example from the field of education might be text book design where Peterson’s “one stop service” (p. 161) implies a redesign of tasks in order to bring together centrally-located staff responsible for curriculum policy, regional and district officials responsible for envisaging and implementing new curricula (most of whom refer to central ministry officials organised by educational system level and/ or national geography), subject experts, writers,

design and layout consultants (most of whom comprise the bulk of staff in the curriculum sections of national ministries) and monitoring and evaluation staff (those usually also found in central ministry locations and charged with overseeing not only curriculum matters but *all* aspects of a ministry's work). Redesign of this sort promises to bring staff of different types closer to the basic and most important aims of the organisation: the support and improvement of particular aspects of schooling. Indeed, research suggests that efficiency, accountability and motivation are all greatly affected when staff are clearly linked to discrete projects or tasks, where they are expected to collaborate horizontally, and which have a clear connection to the support of teaching and learning in schools.

Of course, such redesign – whether undertaken gradually or radically – challenges the legitimacy of existing organisational fiefdoms, and undermines the integrity of traditional bureaucratic organisational structures. For Peterson (1997), though, experiences from institutional development projects in Africa suggest that process re-design of this type connects more meaningfully to the situated reality of bureaucratic actors who favour informal and collectively-oriented organizational forms that are directed towards projects they themselves have shaped and feel some degree of ownership for. Whilst a quite different context, the strength of group alliances in Nepal (especially in terms of caste, ethnicity, gender and geo-political origin) gave some encouragement to the team planning the study of institutional capacity that a range of new organisational forms might be found that could better link centrally-provided educational services to teachers and pupils working in schools.

THE INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS (IA) MODEL FROM NEPAL

The Culture of Governance in Nepal

Our starting point in designing a method with which to assess the capacity of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) in Nepal was the nature of Nepalese public sector culture itself. Here, a number of writers have identified 'clientism', 'submission' and 'fatalism' as key characteristics of public administration. The role of religion in forming identity is a recurrent theme in the Western research on Nepal (e.g. Gellner, 2001). Many writers note that religious practices in Nepal contain the seeds of dependence, as well as forms of social organisation that, when distorted, promote privilege and exclusion at the expense of the economic, social and organisational collectivism required for development (e.g. Bista D. B., 1994). Others suggest that such behaviour has its roots in the administrative practices of the Panchayat bureaucratic and political order which operated between 1960 and 1990. In this system it was essential to have the support of a *thulo manche* (big man) in order to progress in the civil service. *Chakari* (i.e. submission, obedience, patronage, homage etc.) was thus an essential part of the complex process of relationships within organisational life (Louise Brown, 1996).

Irrespective of their origins, such practices built factionalism and conflict into Nepal's political culture and laid the roots for weak democratic and administrative processes. They are not the only norms of relevance to understanding the culture of public administration in Nepal, but they serve to highlight the extent to which Western schemes and frameworks must adapt to immensely different conditions. The prevalence of informal circles of relationships, a fundamentally different locus of obligations, as well as a strong tendency amongst public officials to work towards the maximisation of personal gains, has meant that technical

rationalist schemes to improve institutional capacity have often appeared as an inadequate solution to a poorly formulated problem.

It should be remembered that the above brief analysis relates specifically to practices that were prevalent in pre-democratic Nepal. Since the return to a tentative version of parliamentary democracy in 1990, and even during the recent interregnum, great strides have been made in improving the accountability of the civil service, and in limiting the influence of informal networks of power. However, there is much evidence to suggest that such practices remain at the core of governance processes in Nepal (e.g. Carney et. al, 2008; HDC, 1999). Whilst there are undoubtedly many civil servants working to minimise the influence of such norms, these practices nevertheless frame the way in which initiatives such as HRD plans and programmes – and the values they implicitly represent - are implemented and managed.

The Conceptual Model

Inspiration from the literature cited above, as well as from the field of teacher and school development, led to a conceptualisation of human resource development in terms of three separate but interconnected levels:

Level 1: Individually focused activities: training courses and programmes that enhance individual technical competencies throughout and across the MOES.

Level 2: Institutionally focused activities: initiatives that could strengthen the relationships between MOES functions, and in enhancing the overall environment within and across institutions within the sector.

Level 3: System-strengthening activities: initiatives that would attempt to enhance institutional governance both within and beyond the sector.

It was assumed that HRD activities at levels 1 and 2 would be dependent to a large extent on the creation of good systems of governance, which are in themselves constitutive of long-term political processes involving stakeholders at all levels within and outside the country. It was recognised that there are limits to what can be achieved by any one intervention, and that the problems facing public administration in Nepal were unlikely to be reduced significantly by either the institutional analysis project being discussed here, or the HRD Plan that was planned to follow from the exercise. Further training and institutional development opportunities in one ministry were thus viewed as necessary but not sufficient pre-requisites for deep change, and the model served as a political call to action for the Government and donors alike to think in terms of the interconnectivity of the education sector to other parts of Nepalese society.

This three-level framework served as a template for thinking about the reform of educational processes throughout the data collection phase of the Project. However, it was clear to us that the Ministry (and education sector in general) had little influence on the conduct of other parts of the Nepalese bureaucracy, administration or judiciary, all of which were subject to externally-led and initiated development interventions at the time of the study. This meant that the focus of our work was on analysing capacity at the levels 1 and 2 and, to a lesser extent, at level 3 where this concerned the strengthening of governance systems within the Ministry itself (and not across other sectors of the society as conceptualised in the

framework). Whilst our analysis remained wide-ranging, it should be noted that the Ministry itself was keen that the focus of our recommendations be on the first of these three levels - staff training programs – where quick outcomes would be seen by staff as justifying the considerable effort expended in contributing to the study, and in maintaining the momentum for tangible change that had been created by the initial remit. Whilst extensive recommendations were made for activities at level 1, the final report did nevertheless suggest a broad range of measures at all three levels.

Method

According to Sack and Saïdi (1997) the analysis of institutional capacity should consider all factors related to the ‘quality, effectiveness and efficiency of the institutional environment in which teachers and schools operate’ (Sack and Saïdi, 1997, p. 22). This is an extremely broad mandate covering the following.

- The major strategic processes within and cutting across individual institutions and organisational units.
- All operational processes within these individual units and organisations (at least as they relate to the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of the education sector).
- Sub-unit level activity such as the nature of school organisation, local management and accountability, teacher and community relations.

Our methodological approach was influenced by this general orientation, not least the ten domains they highlight as being essential to the diagnosis of capacity². By combining our focus on the three conceptual levels outlined above (i.e., individual, institutional and system), and the key domains outlined by Sack and Saïdi, we devised a research design for the study that consisted of four phases.

Phase one: Macro analysis of the MOES and its constituent bodies.

The aim here was to examine the structures, processes and communication at the system level of the Sector, but mainly in terms of the interconnections between the Ministry, its zonal and local bodies, and other Government departments and agencies. There were two main tasks.

- Mapping the institutional environment: consideration was given to the relationship of the educational sector to Government priorities and objectives, and to the interconnections (if any) between the MOES and other ministries and public bodies. Consideration was also given to the role and importance of donor bodies in shaping this environment, and the ways in which the MOES co-ordinates donor activities.
- Examining the mandate and formal statement of aims and purpose of the MOES: consideration was given to the extent to which the mandate and attributions of the MOES were sufficient to implement the educational policies of the Government. The study considered potential dysfunctionalities such as conflicting attributions between the MOES and other ministries, or where the MOES appeared to have limited influence over aspects of its work (e.g. financial delegation, recruitment numbers and procedures etc).

² These ten domains are: The environment, The mandate, Structures and functions, Procedures, rules and regulations, Planning and evaluation, Information flows, Communications and articulations, Staffing (numbers, recruitment, qualifications and training), Reward structures, and, finally, Decision-making and responsibility.

It was hoped that this first phase of the study would lead to a clarification of the roles and purposes of the MOES and the relationship of these to its existing structures and functions. Rather than probing for deficiencies, the aim was to ensure that the current structure was appropriate to the core functions of the Ministry. *Phase two: Microanalysis across the basic education field* Functions and work units relevant to the scope of the study, as well as certain key posts within these units, were identified jointly with Ministry partners. Four core domains were identified:

- Staffing and staff development.
- Information and communication.
- Planning.
- Monitoring and evaluation.

Data was then collected in relation to each of these four factors *across* the educational system. This enabled generalisations to be made in relation to, say, staff development processes, communication procedures, planning capacity etc.

Phase three: Microanalysis within the basic education field.

Having collected primarily quantitative information *across* the units and sections, the aim in Phase 3 was to undertake qualitative data collection (i.e. interviews and focus group discussions) *within* each of these units in order to build up a more accurate picture of the strengths, weaknesses and requirements for capacity building within them. Thus, the earlier quantitative data was then complemented with rich and detailed accounts from staff better able to express their views and relate their own experiences. However, rather than leading to generalisation across units, the aim here was to generate more grounded and valid generalisations *within* each core MOES activity, function, unit or section.

Phase four: process-mapping case studies.

The final activity aimed to map the processes involved in undertaking key functions *within* and *across* major MOES units. Illustrative case studies (e.g. textbook development, zone/district planning etc.), were discussed amongst development partners and presented in the final report. The aim here was to clarify and amplify good practice within the MOES, and target pressing areas for treatment in the subsequent HRD plan.

Data Collection

The central core of the data were collected by questionnaire instruments administered widely within central MOES agencies, selected regional and district units, and local schools within the Central and Western Regions of the Country. These quantitative data were complemented with extensive interviewing and group discussion across central, regional and local units. The aim of the interviews and focus groups was to assess and support the validity of the questionnaire data, as well as to gain more detailed and context-specific insights in relation to organisational practices, values and norms. Extensive analysis of relevant documentation was also carried out. For example, the MOES made available documents related to its formal procedures, the terms of reference and mandates for various functions and units, and access was granted to basic personnel information such as qualification levels, staff training and appointment histories. At the regional level, educational data related to school planning, monitoring and evaluation were examined. At the level of schools and resource centres, the study team gained access to the minutes of school management meetings, students' reports

and teacher data such as qualifications, training, attendance and teaching evaluations. These data provided a considerable background for understanding contexts as diverse as the central ministry in Kathmandu, regional and district education offices in provincial centres, local resource centres, and village schools.

RESULTS

The study reported here was by far the largest and most comprehensive investigation into the education bureaucracy – its structure, purpose and performance – ever undertaken in Nepal. The fact that it was conducted *on* the MOES with the active support of its senior staff was taken as an indication not only of the commitment of the bureaucracy to reform, but of its faith in systematic, independent research-based development. In keeping with the wish that the study report on all aspects of the system, the findings were organised along the following lines. They are presented here in very general terms, primarily in order to understand what was made possible by the methodology.

Institutional Capacity at the Central Level

The data suggested that there were a number of technical deficiencies within the MOES as well as substantial cultural barriers to institutional improvement. Whilst there were clearly many instances of good practice - for example staff in the MOES were better trained than in previous times - there appeared to be fundamental impediments to capacity building and institutional development across the sector and a great many of these appeared to emanate from the 'centre'. The study exposed very unclear structures, mandates and responsibilities. There were mismatches between organisational charts and activities actually performed. Many functions were fragmented, in part due to local work-place political interests but also as a consequence of incoherent donor engagement. The macro analysis of tasks and responsibilities highlighted confusion about roles and functions, inadequate coordination, weak linkages between and/or among sections (often within the same institutions), conflicts between sections over control of programs and resources and intentionally blurred lines of authority and responsibility.

Whilst the nature of leadership within the MOES was not examined as such, much data emerged to suggest that staffing practices were an impediment to reform. Induction within the MOES was weak and staff appraisal and transfer were described repeatedly as secretive and partial. The study provided evidence for long-held concerns that staff training and development opportunities were valued for assisting the promotion prospects of favoured staff as much as they were for enhancing operational effectiveness. The data highlighted the lack of fit between training opportunities, performance, commitment and organisational needs.

Information processes reflected and reinforced steep organisational hierarchies within the MOES and created a range of barriers to effective communication. Because of the importance of informal power networks, communication channels were vague and constantly shifting. We concluded that technology and externally devised systems and procedures (the favoured response of donor partners) would not overcome such norms.

Finally, and of fundamental importance, planning, monitoring and evaluation procedures were unclear, poorly co-ordinated and driven by central bodies at the expense of local ones. Data to inform planning and development was found to be weak, as was the capacity to utilise them. Planning, monitoring and evaluation processes were often disconnected both from project implementation and improvement and paid little regard to local ownership.

Institutional Capacity at the Regional and District Level

The data gathered from the study indicated that the Regional Education Directorates (RED) had a very limited role in recent school reform initiatives, including BPEP II. Many of the functions assigned to the RED were under-utilised due to a lack of effective authority, poor resources, inadequate expertise and a high degree of central interference. The study found a great disparity between the Government's rhetoric of decentralisation and the existence of centrally-oriented bodies engaged in what amounted to *deconcentration*. In relation to the District Education Office (DEO), the data suggested that recent decentralisation efforts had largely failed. The interview data provided graphic examples of local officials and communities who felt little ownership for the process and direction of education in the districts.

The relationship between central and local accountability and ownership was nuanced by data that uncovered what we referred to as an 'unhealthy and negative environment' in which District Education Officers were expected to operate. During the interviews, many provided graphic details of the ways in which they had been manipulated and undermined. In addition to weak leadership from the centre, DEOs, like other MOES officials engaged in district administration, were poorly prepared for their work and inadequately supported. Frequent transfer and rotation – often driven by political considerations – as well as inadequate training and development, greatly limited the capacity of districts to fulfil their educational goals.

Institutional Capacity at the Cluster and School Level

The study acknowledged the existence of 'effective' or 'successful' schools in Nepal, but tended to focus on the norm, represented by schools suffering from severe resource constraints in the areas of qualified teaching staff, materials and facilities. School leadership was also found to be weak, especially given the rhetoric that schools should take responsibility for their own development. Inadequate resources and unclear leadership also affected the system of resource centres established to model good teaching and support school and teacher development across the country. Rather than identifying resources as the key problem, the study was able to present qualitative data that identified cultural norms and values as being most in need of attention. The traditions of political centralisation, hierarchy and domination emerged as much more significant barriers to local involvement in, and ownership of, education.

The Role of Women in Educational Management

It was hardly original to highlight the persistence of gender discrimination in Nepal, yet the study was able to indicate the extent of the problem within the educational sector. Forming a small minority (5%), women were concentrated overwhelmingly in the lower levels of the central bureaucracy with little correspondence between their numbers here and their

relatively large number in teaching posts. Data confirmed that women's chances of entering into the Civil Service were fewer, as were their chances of obtaining leadership and decision-making roles. The study confirmed that men had markedly higher early advancement rates than women. The study also showed that women had fewer chances of earning higher level academic degrees, or of being selected for in-country or overseas training courses and study tours, both of which were important to promotion opportunities. Such data had not been presented previously, and its incorporation into a state-sanctioned report created an important environment in which public sector gender discrimination could be discussed legitimately.

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN CRITIQUE AND CONFESSION

From Analysis to Implementation

Since the study examined the entire institutional framework within the education sector – both vertically and horizontally – it was of interest to all stakeholders from the central level to individual schools. The findings were thus shared with policymakers, administrators, researchers, MOES personnel, donors, regional and district education authorities, and head teachers via a series of workshops at the national and regional levels. Copies of the report were distributed to all district education offices as well as to central level institutions. This process of dissemination had two goals. First, and as an ethical necessity, it aimed to pass on the findings and conclusions of the study to those that had been 'researched'. The results of this process served the additional purpose of adding to the validity of the work. Second, it was hoped that this consultative phase would help prepare a strong constituency for implementing the major proposals put forward in the study. Though there was initial resistance and apprehension towards some of the proposals (e.g., the devolution of power to districts was met with reservation by central officers), the participatory nature of the study brought these concerns to the surface and enabled much of the resistance to be challenged. Finally, donors remained key players in promoting (and funding) change in Nepal and their support was necessary. To this end, a series of individual and group presentations were made to acquaint these agencies with the recommendations of the final report.

This phase of dissemination took approximately six months and led to a strong realisation within the MOES and donor community that a programme of change was required. As a follow-up to the study, the Ministry reiterated its commitment to initiating the preparation of an HRD Plan. A team was formed to prepare the Plan, with a high level Steering Committee constituted to oversee and support its work. A year-long process resulted in a comprehensive HRD plan being delivered to the Government. This plan was informed almost exclusively by the study reported here.

Based on the skills and competencies identified in the HRD Plan, the National Centre for Educational Development in Nepal (NCED) - a central agency with the mandate for teacher training and training of education personnel – revised the bulk of its training programmes, especially those related to head teachers, supervisors, district education officers, regional education directors and educational trainers. In general, initiatives geared towards individual development (i.e., level 1 of the Framework) are being implemented. However, the recommendations for capacity building activities at the institutional level (level 2) and at the systemic level (level 3) have been embraced less fully, by both donors and the MOES itself.

Understanding Failure

The study reported here represented a major commitment on behalf of a national ministry to open up its daily world to external researchers. From the outset this suggested a preparedness to cooperate fully with the research team, to take seriously its findings, and to establish a climate conducive to deep reform. There was little doubt that the Ministry did indeed take the institutional analysis project seriously and wide-ranging access to ministry staff, locations and activities were clear evidence of this commitment. The reception of the final report, and the rapid decision to commission a comprehensive HRD plan further consolidated this sense of purpose. However, at least four major factors can be suggested to explain the resultant process of partial implementation.

First, even though senior staff in the MOES claimed to understand the need for systemic change both within and beyond the Ministry, long-standing organisational norms and traditions proved hard to dislodge. Having strived over a period of some twenty years to achieve senior positions in the institution, it should not have been surprising that high-level officers had legitimate interests in maintaining institutional stability and the informal structures that gave the Ministry meaning as a workplace. In this regard, Peterson's (1997) suggestion that we seek out and prioritize indigenous forms of knowledge, work patterns and forms of organisation proved hard to achieve in practice. Staff appointments, for example, continue to be shaped by complex processes of favouritism, obligation and the expectation of future reward. Similarly, the promotion of women and minority groups to the upper levels of the education service remains notably slow. Whilst positive changes have been observed (especially in terms of the appointment of competent staff to the core position of district education officer, and via a limited restructuring of work tasks) it should not be surprising that history, culture and context - necessary foundations for any meaningful development - are also potential barriers to change that are difficult to navigate around.

Second, whilst many ministry officials recognised the dual nature of existing organisational norms (as both building block *and* impediment) it was common for them to point towards the lack of donor commitment and coordination as more pressing problems. In relation to donor commitment, many central MOES staff felt that the ambition of the report for deep change was simply not matched by a preparedness for long-term effort by the group of donors. Here, it was felt that donors indicated great enthusiasm for exercises such as this research but less capacity to carry through its findings as a *process* that would necessarily cut across their own specific sector and region/ country agendas and which would necessarily require engagement beyond the limited tenure and mandate of individual donor staff. In relation to donor coordination, some MOES staff explained that as the project was funded directly by DANIDA other donors were free to support those elements that fitted into their own plans and to ignore those elements that were either problematic or of low priority. Additionally, there were few efforts to coordinate the study and its findings with other externally-driven projects: during our work a number of donors were undertaking similar studies into specific parts of the educational system with little or no cross-fertilisation of ideas, methodologies or findings. Our work was viewed as part of a Danish commitment to reform within the basic and primary sector which, in itself, was part of balkanised approach to supporting the education sector in Nepal.

Third, and mirroring Peterson's (1997) call for institutional solutions to be based on awareness and respect for indigenous knowledge and practice, it must be acknowledged that

the intellectual orientation of the study, and the tenor of its findings, created yet further barriers. Whilst efforts were taken to highlight ‘good practice’, the overwhelming theme of the final project report is of a dysfunctional system in deep crisis. It was perhaps always unrealistic to believe that the negative portrait provided to the Government would serve as the basis for deep and sustained action. ‘Local’ culture was taken seriously, but mainly through the lens of normative (usually Western) understandings of caste, ethnicity and gender. It was by no means clear that our Nepalese ministry partners recognised or accepted this orientation, or appreciated the implicit contempt that it embodied. In this sense, the Institutional Analysis study continued a long tradition of donor-funded work in Nepal that paid little more than lip-service to a history of real progress within the education sector, only acknowledging superficially the phenomenal achievements since the 1970s in establishing, from a small base, a modern, technically-proficient and national educational bureaucracy. More might have been done to understand how this system came into being, what sustained it, and how, within its own logic, it might have been supported. Instead, the study tended to apply understandings of educational reform gained from Western organisational development and school improvement literature to a context that was markedly different. It is an on-going challenge in Nepal, and elsewhere, to resist the urge for off-the-shelf solutions to complex and context-specific problems. The study attempted to do this but was ultimately swept up in the hubris of a donor-driven and funded mentality that prioritised imported ideas and inputs above local knowledge, understanding and commitment

Finally, the intermittent but devastating ‘people’s war’ between the security forces and the Maoist movement has had untold consequences for educational development in Nepal. Whilst the war was largely contained to the west of the country at the time of the study, the spectre of violence was national and a foundation for decision-making across the sector. Whilst this theme was not explored explicitly during the study - indeed the research team felt that the work would contribute ultimately to an eventual resolution of the conflict by improving institutional effectiveness, efficiency and sustainably in ways that would lead to an expansion of the system and an improvement in the quality of educational provision – it was felt by many senior staff that the Country was in a period of suspension awaiting an inevitable confrontation between the Government and rebels on the streets of Kathmandu. Thankfully, this vision has not materialised in the ways feared in the early years of the new millennium but it was clear that donors, ministry officials and MOES staff were not prepared, motivated or willing to commit to all of the many ambitious steps recommended in the report.

Final Remarks

The study reported here was unique in the context of Nepal, not least because it attempted to examine the education sector in a holistic and systematic way and to use this as a basis for deep change. In this paper the following results have been prioritised for presentation and discussion.

- The examination of institutional capacity built upon a conceptual model that viewed HRD as comprising three separate but interconnected levels: individually-focused skills and competences; institution-level functions and relationships; and system or sector-level issues related to overall governance both within the Ministry and in terms of the Ministry’s relation to other bodies.
- This framework led to studies of macro-level agencies and their functions and micro-level investigations of the daily life of staff across the MOES.

- The study led to an enormous range of recommendations to enhance institutional capacity at the central level of MOES itself, at the regional and district level where much educational activity is coordinated, and at the level of local resource centres and schools. In general, and at all of these three levels, interventions focused upon individual staff training and skills development. To a lesser extent the MOES has streamlined its operational functions and reformed its processes.
- The lack of comprehensive change emerging from the study has been discussed. Notwithstanding these apparent failures, the study provided a rare opportunity for teachers, district staff, bureaucrats of all sorts and women in particular to speak openly about the challenges they faced in their daily work, their ambitions and disappointments, and to contribute to the design of development interventions that attempted to take account of the social, cultural and political realities within and around the MOES. In this sense, and unlike many similar projects elsewhere, the methodology prioritised *process* over outcome.
- Whilst those concerned to improve the impact of development may question the usefulness of such processes if they fail to deliver tangible results, many of our respondents – from senior ministry officials to classroom teachers – felt that dialogue, conversation and critique were necessary starting points for meaningful development: a simple point we often forget.
- Whilst the failure of the study to lead to practical action at all three HRD levels must be taken as a substantial critique, we nevertheless suggest that the conceptual model that drove the study, the methodology employed and the types of findings that it made possible, are all outcomes from our work that can provide inspiration to others.

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