**Learning Network on Capacity Development  
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**Coalition Building**for Effective Institutions

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What do we know?

The importance of building coalitions of groups working towards common goals is frequently referred to in change management literature. There is also a strong theoretical understanding of the importance of internal stakeholder buy-in to change processes, internal ownership, political commitment, and leadership. However, there is only a very limited body of literature specifically on building coalitions. Plenty of development literature refers to the need for leadership, champions of change, and constituencies for change, but not much that refers specifically to coalitions and their role in driving change. There is some literature on how these groups form and the function they play, but there is almost no discussion of how anyone, including internal actors and external consultants and donors, can support this essentially endogenous process, with the notable exception of the Developmental Leadership Programme (http://www.dlprog.org). The literature thus focuses on describing why coalitions are important, but has little practical information on how they can be built.

‘Coalition for change’ has a commonly accepted definition as “an association of groups and organizations working to resolve specific problems or to achieve specific goals that are beyond the capacity of any individual member of the coalition to resolve or achieve on their own” (Leftwich and Hogg 2007:5). Coalitions can be informal or formal, and can simply be a network with shared ideas. They can include organisations in civil society, the state and/or the private sector (DLP 2012); i.e. they can link anyone to anyone. They may be developmental and progressive, or predatory and rent-seeking (Leftwich 2010). Coalitions unite disparate and possibly even antagonistic groups and individuals under a common cause to achieve together what each could not achieve alone.

Adrian Leftwich’s body of work draws out a thesis of coalitions as central to developmental change. He bases his theory on the need to bring politics and agency back into development, arguing that most policy outcomes are the result of elite bargaining and negotiating, influenced by technical evidence (Leftwich 2010). He suggests that elite leadership is under-recognised in development, but that it plays a key part in how change happens, and that coalitions are the process through which elites manage change. His thesis is that sustained development is dependent on the extent to which leaders and elites are able to form successful coalitions. As part of the DLP, this theory has been tested on examples of developmental success and failure, and has largely shown to be a powerful and persuasive understanding of development, although the programme is still ongoing. This research programme is the only one specifically committed to understanding elites, leadership and coalitions, and presents significant evidence on the need to understand and support these processes for development.

As the development literature has no apparent work which attributes successful organisational change to the impact of coalitions, the discussion below therefore refers to the general characteristics of coalitions, rather than those formed specifically for organisational change in developing countries. Most coalitions in the development literature are characterised as ‘reform’ coalitions – groups of actors which have come together to push a reform agenda, usually but not always in areas of governance and accountability in government and public sector. The review below pieces together evidence from various public sector reform processes which have used coalitions as a driver. It is difficult to infer from the literature what role CD practitioners might play in this process, as there is little to no evidence of any processes where this has taken place. The literature therefore shows some information on how coalitions work to support reform and change, but not necessarily how to build them.

General messages from the literature point towards the need for flexible, long-term support from donors, and incremental change engineered through a gradual process of gathering public and wide-ranging support. Broad alliances drawing together disparate stakeholders are the lynchpin of successful coalitions pushing a reform agenda, and this also suggests that shifting public opinion is of key importance. This bottom-up, public-facing approach, which focuses on issues, informal networks and relationships is considered to be more effective than large-scale, top-down or quick reform. This theory is supported by some evidence from a wide range of reform and advocacy processes, including political change. This approach may be difficult for donors and external actors to support, since it necessitates changing public opinion. The literature thus shows what successful coalitions look like, but not much on how to stimulate or create these.

Two major difficulties with coalitions described here are that they are not necessarily responsive to external actors, and that they are prone to collusion and rent-seeking. There is little or no evidence on the role that external actors can play in helping coalitions form, or supporting them to do their work. Most examples of successful coalitions have been due to their strong political and citizen constituencies of support from powerful internal actors. The evidence suggests that coalitions are best formed when there is a clear demand and realisation of the need for change from internal actors. It is difficult to see where donors can support this process beyond brokering initial meetings and providing hands-off financing. There is a strong need for further research in this area. Donors may be able to finance coalitions, but the prospect of external funding can create perverse incentives for participation. As political arrangements of powerful actors, coalitions can be prone to rent-seeking and corruption. This can sometimes be prevented by keeping arrangements formal and transparent.

In terms of lessons and results, there is no consensus in the literature on the best practice of coalitions beyond the need for a clear goal (DLP 2012). DLP suggests some success factors based on its research programme: agreement on a goal, the smallest possible size, understanding of roles, wide range of actors, good mechanisms, and learning. Other key capacities for success which are suggested by the literature are leadership, which is vital to achieving change, and communications, which can play a strong role in influencing and advocating for the success of the coalition’s mandate. Leveraging pre-existing networks is also mentioned quite often as a starting point for coalition formation, both positively and negatively. Informal and cross-sectoral networks are both suggested to be conducive to successful coalitions, but hard to work with. Donors need to be more politically aware than ever before in order to engage with explicitly political institutions such as coalitions. Donors can facilitate, broker and support coalitions, or help create the pro-reform public constituencies needed to drive change, but there is limited evidence about what donors can do to support the coalition building process.

Challenges, Traps, and Debates

Cannot be Created by External Actors

Coalition-building is inherently an endogenous process, and there is very little guidance on how external actors can help create them or support them to be effective. The limited evidence available suggests that external actors are limited to helping broker first meetings, building capacity for communications and influencing, and providing financial support. Whether coalitions form or not is more dependent on whether internal actors commit to a particular issue, and the surrounding environment, than it is on matters that donors can influence.

Leftwich’s work indicates that coalitions and leadership are fundamentally results of individual agency (Leftwich 2010; Leftwich and Wheeler 2011), which cannot easily be deliberately influenced or channelled by external actors. This observation is consistent with other recent work on capacity development as an endogenous political process driven by agency and interests (Land 2010; Pycroft and Butterworth 2005), and work on the need for governance reform to be dependent on strong domestic leadership and public demand (Scott 2011). The most successful coalitions have often formed out of pre-existing personal networks, where deep relationships of trust are already established, for example coalitions formed to mobilise AIDS responses in Uganda and South Africa (Grebe 2011). Several papers reference the formation of coalitions as a response to a shock, crisis or a critical juncture (Leftwich 2010; Leftwich and Wheeler 2011). While formation of coalitions could perhaps be stimulated by donors in response to a crisis, for example after a change in government or as a result of conflict, the evidence suggests that coalitions are best formed when there is a (sudden) clear demand from internal actors and realisation of the need for change.

The literature on coalitions for change, governance reforms and leadership suggests that external actors can play only a minimal role in supporting change. Examples of successful external support for change coalitions are rare, and where externally-supported coalitions have been successful, the external support has not been the essential factor. The role that CD practitioners and donors can play in supporting coalitions is as yet poorly understood, and there is a considerable need for further research and evidence.

Rent-Seeking and Collusion

Coalitions, as political arrangements between actors incentivised by their own independent agendas, are prone to corrupt behaviours. As each party joins the coalition because of an incentive they perceive they will receive, obvious political agendas lend themselves to brokering deals and negotiating arrangements which are not necessarily conducted above-board. To some extent, coalitions can be protected from collusion by becoming formal institutions with transparent processes, which can force members to abide by law (Peiffer 2012). Informal coalitions or networks can be more prone to rent-seeking, especially those which do not have regularly scheduled and open meetings, or which are kept secret due to the sensitive topic at hand and need for closed doors to support trust building (Peiffer 2012). Some coalitions may be founded from pre-existing networks, which may lead to the persistence of pre-existing power relations and arrangements (DLP 2012). The involvement of donors and the possibility of receiving money from them also skews the integrity of coalitions. If donors are brokering a coalition and offering resources to fund its activities, this creates a perverse incentive for participating (DLP 2012). Donors need to find innovative ways to finance coalitions which do not result in rent-seeking.

The World Bank Group suggests that reform teams in the area of international economic reform have been most successful when they are *not* working in coalitions, as this insulates them from interest capture (Criscuolo and Palmade 2008). Reform teams in Botswana, Cape Verde, Malaysia, Mauritius, and Taiwan, all success stories in terms of economic growth, were relieved of administrative duties and slightly removed from party politics, allowing them to leverage expertise and maximize impact through apolitical partnerships with business and government. In this case, maintaining distance from partners prevented rent-seeking.

Lessons and Results

The DLP provides a summary of success factors for forming coalitions, based on its programme of research (DLP 2012): “These include agreement around a common goal and on the rules of the game, a coalition size as small as possible to achieve its goals, clear understanding among members of their role and interest in the coalition, and the inclusion of members who can fill different roles (e.g. leaders, connectors, gatekeepers, enablers, change champions and links to key players outside the coalition). Membership in a pre-existing network can help coalition members build trust, but it can also often be valuable to reach out to non-traditional partners. Effective coalitions also require mechanisms for dealing with distrust and inequality among members, credible and enforceable commitments, sufficient planning to anticipate strategic opportunities balanced with the flexibility to adapt to unexpected events, and learning through evaluation.”

Due to the inherently political nature and goals of coalitions, thorough political economy analysis is recommended before external practitioners engage with change processes (Leftwich and Wheeler 2010; World Bank 2008). There are many vested and explicit interests in a coalition, and a full context analysis is necessary.

Capacities for Coalition Building

Although the literature does not present strong specific evidence on what capacities are needed for coalition building, it is possible to infer from success stories some factors which have been useful.

Leadership is a decisive factor in creating coalitions, and a key competency for influencing change in general (Land 2010; Scott 2011). Leadership in the sense of being able to mobilise resources and support is a critical success factor for coalitions (Leftwich and Wheeler 2011). The World Bank (2008) present work on policy reform which underlines the importance of champions of change who are able to foster coalitions. They suggest that champions can mobilise and broaden coalitions, and particularly might be able to address opposition based on vested interests and rent-seeking. A clear example of a strong leader for change is the TAC’s advocacy campaign for AIDS treatment in South Africa. TAC’s charismatic leader, Zackie Achmat, was almost entirely responsible for generating the momentum needed to campaign on a highly sensitive issue, and his personal leadership and reaching out to other communities was essential in building their wide-ranging coalition (Grebe 2011). Peiffer (2012) highlights that creating coalitions is not about full participation, but about targeting strategic leaders who are most able to drive the reform agenda and contribute to success. Leftwich and Hogg (2007) claim that developing countries tend to have too few leaders, or have leaders whose interests are too narrow and who create predatory anti-developmental coalitions. This suggests that leadership capacity is a key competency which donors and CD practitioners could support.

The CommGAP programme at the World Bank, which concluded in 2011, promoted the use of communications in governance reform, and presents a sequence of steps to form a coalition, with the communications areas highlighted (CommGAP 2008):

* Issue Identification and Specification: overall objective of the problem is articulated and broken down for detailed analysis; policy options are defined. *Communication efforts should focus on gauging public opinion and consulting with policy experts to determine the national mood.*
* Relationship/Stakeholder Mapping: significant actors are identified, positions toward key and related issues are plotted. *Communication efforts should focus on listening to actors and key informants, including using and analyzing public opinion data to determine positions of general public as well as subgroups (use public opinion research methods, key informant interviews, and network analysis)*
* Forming Core Membership: the core of a coalition is convinced about and becomes self-aware of the benefits of change; core actors are organized, early leaders and champions are identified, and the joint agenda takes shape. *Communication efforts should focus on lobbying and persuasion of influential individuals and key targets, as well as deepening understanding of their positions and trade-offs (use lobbying and persuasion techniques)*
* Demonstrating Credibility: coalition demonstrates it is knowledgeable about relevant issues, can act effectively, and is worthy of support from stakeholders. *Communication/messages should focus on successes to date (even small ones), framed as much as possible in terms of the interests and incentives of core membership and key stakeholders; coalition should also demonstrate mastery of the issues surrounding the reform (use issue framing and media relations techniques)*
* Purposeful Expansion: a critical stage when a small organization builds a broader social and resource base while retaining coherence and effectiveness. *The target of communication efforts should shift toward addressing the interests of broader relevant issue and policy networks (use framing for collective action and networking approaches)*
* Sustainable Transformation: during which the coalition has grown and becomes polycentric, with initiatives on many fronts, drawing strength from many sources. *Communication efforts should broaden and include appeals to the general public, especially in terms of addressing social norms (use framing for collective action and media relations techniques)*.

This paper suggests that communication capacities, particularly lobbying and advocacy, are key capacities for coalitions, as illustrated by evidence from Kenya, the Philippines, Georgia and India. Masty (2008) also reviews the use of communications in coalitions in West Bengal and Orissa, and analyses how they can help build consensus and support for public sector enterprise reform. In West Bengal, coalition support was generated through a lengthy organic process of discussion and deliberation on the need for reform. When political support began to be involved, the key communications strategy was to have a charismatic and popular minister write an enormous number of personal letters to key stakeholders describing the need for reform. In Orissa, a mass media campaign was used to build general public support for reforms, mainly through newspapers, supported by more academic papers published by the government. Both cases show the sophisticated use of communications techniques to build support. These two examples also show how coalition building does not necessarily follow a fixed recipe; in one case it was driven by public discussion and eventual political buy-in, and in the other, it was driven from the top-down. In both cases, citizen support was crucial to success, but the process of forming a consensus for change can happen in any number of ways. The ability to influence and advocate for change is a key part of the success of coalitions, and a discrete capacity which can be supported by CD.

**Networks** and Actors

Coalitions can be and often are built from pre-existing networks. This can be both positive and negative. Networks are often based on common social, professional and educational backgrounds, and can clearly influence the form and focus of coalitions (Leftwich and Wheeler 2011). Some networks have arisen from shared school or university experiences (Leftwich 2010). Donors may be able to tap into existing networks to stimulate the creation of a new coalition (Peiffer 2012), which is likely to be based on trust and understanding through a prior positive relationship. Sebudubudu and Molutsi (2009) examine the political ‘grand coalition’ in Botswana, and attribute Botswana’s developmental success to the strong network of actors who attended school together and maintained personal connections, to the extent of marriages cementing relationships. Similarly, TAC’s network drew on activists who had previously been united in the fight against apartheid, who had deep personal relationships of trust and credibility (Grebe 2011). The negative side of using pre-existing networks is that they also have pre-existing power relations, and may be exclusionary to other potential partners who were not part of the network (DLP 2012).

Cross-sectoral coalitions face more obstacles to formation than homogenous social coalitions (Peiffer 2012), but wider coalitions bringing in broader viewpoints and disparate actors can spark larger change than more homogenous ones (DLP 2012; World Bank 2008). There is a general agreement in the literature that the most successful coalitions are the ones which unite the most diverse possible group of actors – this increases the potential reach and influence of the coalition. Houtzeger and Pattenden (2003) assert that poor social groups gain much greater ability to influence policy when they forge alliances, particularly with sympathetic bodies within the state.

Unsworth (2010) presents research on governance and collective action which suggests that informal networks and institutions play a greater role in enabling citizen action for public policy reform than formal mechanisms do. Strong ‘issues’ networks can have far greater reach through the civil service and government than formal participation in councils or governing boards, and can often also include links to the private sector. The paper suggests that strengthening civil society organisations will not automatically result in greater capacity to push for reform, but suggests that CD should be more strategic. Strengthening organisations and actors at the centre of the network, with good connections to state actors, is likely to have greater impact. The paper concludes that in every case in this research programme, broad-based alliances which bridged the public-private divide were critical to the success of public sector reform. This indicates that wide, perhaps informal networks, which include a range of actors but with strong leaders at the centre, are the most successful in achieving change.

Donors’ Role

Donors’ engagement with and support of coalitions for development constitutes a rather different modality of working than usual. The DLP (2012) suggests that donors’ role in supporting coalitions necessitates a nuanced understanding of the political context, and an assessment of how willing they are to engage with underlying political settlements. Coalition building is at its heart a political process, and donors may currently be unwilling or cautious about being involved. Donors’ role as suggested by the DLP may therefore be as brokers of meetings, with a flexible approach to adapting and changing strategy as the political situation changes. The literature does not provide much information on what donors can do to support the coalition building process, and what there is suggests that this is an area in which no clear best practices have formed, and possibly that donors may not even have much role to play.

As coalitions must have internal momentum, donors’ role can only be in the areas of facilitating, brokering and supporting (DLP 2012). Peiffer (2012) provides one of the only papers which includes some detail on how donors may support coalitions. Her paper looks at ‘reform’ coalitions between private business and governments, which aim to work cooperatively through institutional and policy reforms in pursuit of a specific economic reform agenda. She recommends that donors take a back seat and restrict themselves to financial support, recognising their limitations. She strongly recommends taking action only after in-depth political economy and contextual analysis, so actors have the best possible understanding of the institutional power relations at play. She also recommends that donors do not focus on achieving a fully participatory process, but instead focus on including strategic leaders in the coalition, which is more likely to result in success. Other recommendations are for donors to remain flexible, as the wider context will change what the coalition is doing; and to recognise the limits of external actors. To that end, she recommends that donors’ main role is to provide funding for facilitating meetings, and capacity building for business associations to ensure they can be effective partners. It is important to note that the author states she knows of no empirical evidence on donors’ roles in these kinds of coalitions.

Another of the few examples of how donors can support change processes is shown in Pycroft and Butterworth’s (2005) review of DFID’s adapted approach to supporting institutional reform in Nigeria (Coalitions for Change programme). They describe how traditional capacity building for good governance had failed to work in the Nigerian context, due to lack of support in the surrounding environment. As a result, working on the assumption that CD was necessary but not sufficient, DFID switched to an ‘issues-based approach’ whereby political economy analysis identifies issues of key interest to DFID which are likely to engage a critical mass of support for reform, which DFID then supports. These issues are Nigerian-led, meaning a constituency of support is already in place, and ideally are linked to the government’s poverty reduction and reform agenda. DFID’s role is to flexibly support any stakeholders, including coalitions, involved in an issue and working towards the desired outcome – focusing on the outcome rather than the organisations. This approach of supporting actors identified by issue rather than organisation or institution or formal arrangement is quite innovative.

Unsworth (2010) shows that informal networks and relationships are as important as formal mechanisms and institutions in creating change. Her paper concludes that donors should focus some attention on how to best influence the incentives and interests of actors, rather than supporting formal governance institutions. Scott (2011) also suggests that donors might be able to support the development of public pressure for reform, through supporting constituencies for change and champions of change.

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