**Learning Network on Capacity Development  
Discussion paper 2013/01**

**Change Management**for Effective Institutions

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1 February 2013

Draft for discussion

# What do we know?

The importance of strengthening institutional capacity to deliver sustainable results is widely recognised, especially in today’s climate of shrinking resources where achieving and demonstrating results, ensuring value for money, and improving efficiency are top priorities for development organisations. Institutions considered underperforming must evolve to meet these challenges, but institutional change is a difficult problem, and the best way for capacity development practitioners to support change may not always be clear.

Many theories of institutional change have been proposed. Eight factors that appear in many of these theories as contributing to successful institutional change are summarised by Fernandez and Rainey (2006):

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| Factor 1: Ensure the Need | Leaders verify the need for change and persuade staff and stakeholders that change is necessary. |
| Factor 2: Provide a Plan | New vision must be translated into a strategy with goals. Clear goals and causal thinking between initiatives and outcomes is essential. |
| Factor 3: Build Internal Support for Change and Overcome Resistance | Develop and nurture support from stakeholders, usually through participation of staff in change processes. |
| Factor 4: Ensure Top-Management  Support and Commitment | An idea champion or coalition can help maintain momentum. Strong leadership is essential. |
| Factor 5: Build External Support | Political overseers and external stakeholders must buy-in to the changes, as they can provide resources and strategic direction. |
| Factor 6: Provide Resources | Change is not cheap – sufficient organisational resources must be provided. |
| Factor 7: Institutionalize Change | Staff must incorporate new changes and behaviours into their daily routines. This should be tracked with M&E. |
| Factor 8: Pursue Comprehensive Change | Leaders must make comprehensive, systemic change in the organisational structure. |

Successful change management is dependent on good political economy (PE) analysis of the institutions involved. The issues described below highlight the importance of understanding the political and economic processes of reform, and the distribution or redistribution of power and wealth they may affect. PE analysis fosters a deeper understanding of incentives and relationships between individuals and groups, state capability and accountability, which supports more effective and feasible donor strategies (DFID 2009). Using this analysis in change management allows a nuanced analysis of an organisation, beyond its structure and management. The literature highlights the need for external change management practitioners to develop as detailed a contextual analysis as possible, to attempt to understand politics and power, which can be achieved through PE analysis tools. Within civil service reform specifically, DFID (2009) suggest PE analysis can help identify which reforms are likely to have traction and which may be completely blocked. A further example of what new insights PE analysis can bring is seen in a case study on wide-ranging public sector reforms in Nigeria. This paper identifies as success factors: buoyant macroeconomic context, strong political leadership, compensating or sidelining vocal opponents, business interests of the political elite, early quick wins to create public support, coalitions, strengthening public accountability, external support (Utomi et al 2007). These factors, and others described below, clearly tie in with the factors for success in the table above, and are clearly political in nature. PE analysis makes political processes and interests visible which may not be seen when using a more technocratic approach, which contributes to the probability of successful change. PE understanding is the key approach recommended throughout the literature on change management.

Particular challenges for change management include the difficulties of working in a specific context and the difficulty of creating change in the behavioural and cultural spheres of organisations. The literature suggests that the most successful change may be that which is iterative and incremental, allowing time and space for staff members to shift their thinking and behaviour and to develop ownership over the change process. Unfortunately, this is rarely how donors or consultants work, and it may be impossible for external actors to affect behaviours or to reach into the core of an organisation to create change from the inside out. Resistance to external influence, whether foreign or national, suggests that change management consultants have a limited capacity to effect change, and are more likely to affect superficial processes than deep behavioural ones. Change strategy also suffers implementation problems, with most enthusiasm and drive occurring at high levels and the early stage of the process. Developing country governments often have good capacity to draft plans and strategies for change, but lack the ability to take the process through to completion. This can be due to the lack of resources and capacity for implementation, but is also due to leaders’ focus on strategy rather than nuts and bolts, and fading political will over time. Corruption and patrimonialism can also be a challenge in some countries. Even where clientelism does not exist, change requires shifts in power, which elites may resist.

Lessons and results in the literature indicate that organisational culture and leadership are important to success. Internal buy-in and ownership of change processes is important, and contextual readiness within an organisation is also key to ensuring that changes are likely to ‘stick’. Several authors recommend a gradual, incremental approach to change, which enables the growth of local ownership and associated small shifts in behaviour over time without creating resentment over large-scale, externally imposed reform. An ‘interim institutions’ approach may provide an alternative way of thinking about change: instead of aiming for reform towards a previously-decided framework for an institution, building an institution which fosters a process of change might allow an organic, local development of appropriate institutions. Against this, strong leadership is identified as useful to change, especially for maintaining momentum in the implementation phase. Success stories show a combination of the factors listed in the table above, particularly a supportive political context and leadership; organisational readiness; staff motivation, compensation, commitment and appreciation.

# Challenges, Traps, and Debates

## External Influences and Ownership

The ability of external actors to influence organisational change successfully is a key problem. Local and internal ownership of the change process is essential for achieving success, but very often change or reform is initiated at the behest of donors, and uses external consultants. Creating ownership of and buy-in to a process which is externally imposed requires actors to facilitate carefully and focus on creating internal capacity in the organisation to take control of the process. Even where this is managed delicately, the perception of external imposition can remain strong and be difficult to overcome.

Matthew Andrews’ recent body of work on isomorphism (2009; 2011) suggests that organisational change is quite resistant to external influences (in this context, foreign or national consultants). The theory of isomorphism argues that organisations’ motivation for change is to gain legitimacy, not to improve effectiveness, meaning that they change in order to conform to national or international standards, tending towards a normative best practice vision of what the organisation should look like. This is particularly true in organisations heavily dependent on other organisations, such as funders – meaning that national government institutions in aid-dependent countries are highly susceptible to change in order to conform to donors’ requirements, rather than from any particular desire to improve. Although isomorphic change achieves strategic change through “coercion, mimicry and normative transfer”, Andrews suggests that external influences have a limited ability to instigate fundamental change beyond encouraging normative best practice. He frames this as a core-periphery problem and in terms of visibility. The peripheral organisational processes are more visible to external agents, and thus these are more often targeted for change than the less visible core processes (e.g. mandate, authority structure) which remain resistant to change. Change efforts by external practitioners are therefore sometimes limited to the periphery of the organisation. He tested this theory against Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability assessments in 31 African countries and found that it largely held true.

Organisational culture and the informal processes which govern people’s behaviour also create barriers to organisational change (UNDP 2006). Insider knowledge is extremely important to understand what is likely to be acceptable and amenable to change within an organisation, and a thorough PE analysis can also reveal this. UNDP suggests that most change occurs in the behavioural sphere – how people interact, complete their work, and what is expected of them – and this is the type of change least responsive to outside influence. Prescribed change by outsiders will be resisted the most, which means that the type of change proposed must be something which is already likely to be accepted in the existing organisational culture. A telling example comes from Papua New Guinea, where reforms in the health sector are provided through capacity development (Mandie-Filer et al 2004). The PNG participants are described as understanding capacity development only in terms of skills building and functional professional development, never in terms of behavioural, attitudinal or organisational development. Thus, according to UNDP, the only change that would be successful in this context would be to provide skills training; other types of change and/or training are likely to be unpopular and unsuccessful. Similarly, Wynne (2005) is critical of the World Bank’s efforts to implement MTEFs in Uganda, Ghana and Tanzania. Ghana, as discussed below, is considered an initial success followed by failure, which Wynne attributes to the World Bank’s conditionalities forcing a new programme on a country which did not have the underlying factors in place to manage it successfully. He suggests that Ghana’s underlying financial structures and systems were not mature enough to cope with the introduction of the MTEF, and the fact that it was driven by external World Bank conditionalities meant that this was the driving force, not the government’s internal readiness and willingness to adopt new systems.

Internal cultural and behavioural factors are very important in making change programmes successful. External impositions which are alien to the pre-existing organisational culture are unlikely to gain traction, but there are few examples of change programmes working specifically on behavioural issues. Cultural and behavioural shifts are possibly the hardest types of change to achieve but possibly some of the most important (Woodhill 2010). The behaviour and beliefs of staff, contributing to the overall organisational culture, play a key role in determining whether reforms will ‘stick’ or not. However, these are hard to influence successfully. Political economy analysis can help provide some insights into what governs people’s behaviour and thus develop an appropriate change strategy (DFID 2009); however, external reformers are unlikely to be able to reach into the core of an organisation to change behaviours, and may be limited to making more superficial changes on the periphery.

## **Translating Policy to Practice**

Change programmes, as with many initiatives, often suffer from an inability to translate effectively to implementation. Enthusiasm for reform is often focused at the policy and planning level and initial stages, but fails to follow through. The literature is much stronger on strategy than it is on evidence of results. Reform programmes tend to be driven by top-level management or an elite cadre, and need continuing support to ensure they are kept effective over time. Programmes can also suffer from a lack of organisational capacity to implement high-level reforms which may be too ambitious or unrealistic for the context.

Several case studies show reform initiatives which had strong support and success in the early phases, but which faltered over time and ultimately could be considered failures. Roberts and Andrews (2005) discuss the implementation of the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) in Ghana between 1998 and 2002, largely at the behest of the World Bank. The MTEF covered three years’ forward budget planning instead of the previous one year, and was intended to provide greater stability in fiscal policy and improved service delivery. Its initial stages showed promise in adhering to many of the factors for change listed above; there was a clear plan, supported by broad agreement among Ministries, financially and externally supported by the World Bank and IMF. However, the MTEF was not renewed after the first cycle, and its implementation appears not to have advanced beyond the initial rhetoric. Several reasons are given by the authors. External contextual factors include the unstable macroeconomic situation and the point in the electoral cycle and subsequent change of government. Internal factors include: lack of ownership of the reform programme; siloed working and institutional rivalries between the planning and budgeting departments; lack of organisational coherence and integration; failure to integrate reforms into all stages of the budgeting process; accountability and capacity limitations, including poor M&E. Political factors include: lack of resources and operational support; lack of strong political support; the fast pace of reform may have meant poor planning; the donor control and influence over the budget. The main reasons for failure to implement successfully identified by the authors are the fading political will over time; institutional weakness and lack of integration; and capacity limitations. The last two are areas in which capacity development can play a role in improving the ability to implement high-level plans. The other factors are quite commonly mentioned in the general literature as hampering reform abilities in other countries.

Robinson (2006) further identifies an implementation problem in Uganda in the form of maintaining political will for reforms over time. In Uganda’s authoritarian and patrimonial system, the momentum for reforms in the 1990s and 2000s relied heavily on the President’s support and drive for change. This was not problematic until the President’s attention turned to other issues, when governance reforms faltered due to the lessening of his support. In a system relying on personal power, when the need to maintain power takes precedence over the need for reform, reforms may falter without the support of key personnel.

A continuing drive for reform from top-level management is important, but underlying contextual factors may make implementation impossible even where there is support, particularly focused around lack of coherence, integration and cross-sectoral working. Taken together, these factors are identified in the literature as two of the most crucial in implementing change successfully. Although ‘poor planning’ does seem to be a challenge, there is no shortage of ability to recognise the need for change and create high-level change plans and reform agendas; translating these into practice is much less successful.

## Power and Corruption

Very often, change represents a threat to elite interests. It is important to have an awareness of the political interests at work in an organisation, through power analysis (UNDP 2006; Woodhill 2010) and political economy analysis, because these relationships affect how open the organisation is to change. Khwaja and Khan (2009) show that in Pakistan, no reform of government institutions is likely to come either from internal elites or external commercial pressures, as both parties are privately benefiting from current arrangements. If there is nothing to gain from change but a possibility of losing personal power and resources, elites are unlikely to support it. Similarly, Adler et al (2009) note that conflict is a likely result of managing change where elites are expected to give up power, and that this must be carefully managed.

Robinson (2006) describes institutional reform processes in Uganda which fall prey to issues of corruption and patrimonialism. A new tax revenue authority was made semi-autonomous precisely to insulate it from clientelism in terms of the appointment of friends and family to senior positions, and in terms of political protection enabling staff to take kickbacks. A civil service reform initiative throughout the 1990s started well but was subject to similar clientelism, meaning how the civil service expands and what it focuses on are results of personal political interests rather than following policy. Robinson offers no particular solution to these problems, but highlights that the best-intended reform efforts can fail because of an ingrained patrimonial culture, which is extremely difficult to change, and because institutions are subject to political pressures. He does suggest that part of the reason these reforms struggled in Uganda was due to low salaries of junior employees and a large pay gap between junior and senior (often friends and family) staff. Factor 6 above (resources) may therefore play a role in tackling corruption.

Corruption and patrimonialism is a particularly thorny issue to approach, as external consultants are likely to be dealing with the very elites who are involved. No readings suggest any solutions to tackling corruption beyond remaining as cognisant as possible about the power relations in the specific organisation, which PE analysis can support. These relationships are likely to be strong factors in determining how change programmes play out, and change managers must do their best to devise appropriate responses.

# Lessons and Results

Despite the challenges outlined above, there are plenty of case studies which show examples of successful change management programmes. Many cases illustrate several of the factors listed in the table, with adaptations for the specific context. Successful reform initiatives value the exploration of cultural and societal context within the organisation, adjust strategies to build on what is already in existence, promote internal ownership and leadership, and consider the possible advantages of incremental change rather than large-scale upheaval and reform.

## Success Stories

**Public service reform in Tanzania:** Morgan and Baser (2007) provide an excellent case study of the success of the long-term reform of government institutions in Tanzania, from the late 1990s to today. The reform programme aimed to improve public service delivery, using New Public Management principles. The paper reviews the reforms around the mid-point, and assesses the change management process as essentially successful, although it does not focus on the results of the actual changes, as measured through performance. Success is due to a number of factors, not all of which conform to the prevailing discourse. Primarily, it is important to note that, against current international norms, this reform programme is largely a top-down, comprehensive package, using a transplantation approach rather than an organic, incremental approach. In the case of Tanzania, this approach was successful due to the strong buy-in and support from a number of senior leaders, including Presidents and a broad swathe of civil service managers; strong donor support for the proposed reforms; and space given for the relevant government units to create and develop a key role for themselves. Tanzania does not have a strong demand-driven culture, evidenced through the lack of calls for reform from citizens, private sector, or NGOs, so a top-down approach seems rational in this context. Other success factors identified by the authors are political stability, with no ethnic fragmentation or military domination as in other African countries, and less clientelism; macro-economic stability; consistent political commitment to the reform programme even with leadership changes; the strong leadership of the government reform unit by the same person for 10 years; the use of mostly Tanzanian staff in the reform unit; no arduous reporting to donors until some years into the programme; the endogenous growth of the reform unit into a confident and energetic unit with pride in its meaningful mission. This paper shows that a number of different factors across different levels are useful for managing change. In this case, the most important were a supportive political context and strong commitment from both leaders and managers in the civil service, followed by the development of a strong unit with ownership of the reform process with committed staff who saw themselves as part of an important process. This implies that personal qualities and human resources are key to driving change, but that this needs a supportive context in which to flourish.

**Public Financial Management Reform in Uganda and Tanzania:** Wynne (2005) reviews the implementation of MTEFs in Uganda and Tanzania and concludes that they were both relatively successful. Some reasons given for the successful change strategy were that in Uganda, pay sector reform in 2001 meant pay gaps in the civil service decreased, and the number of well-qualified accountants rose dramatically, meaning the human resource capacity was in place to manage the technical side of the MTEF. Uganda introduced the MTEF on its own initiative, but this is not stated in this paper as a clear success factor. Tanzania’s MTEF was introduced by the World Bank, but the government took strong ownership of the process, giving it legitimacy within the civil service. Wynne also states that success factors for implementation of reform include ensuring that the basic building blocks are in place first (in the case of financial management, this includes issues such as budget discipline); ensuring that civil servants are adequately compensated, well-motivated and efficient; and aiming for small incremental changes rather than a large-scale programme of reform.

## Internal buy-in

It is commonly acknowledged that internal ownership and buy-in is key to creating successful change. This is discussed in more depth in the accompanying paper on Coalition Building. Here, it is only necessary to note, as discussed above, that a sense of internal ownership is vastly more likely to produce positive results than an external-only change process. The Kaizen Company (2010) highlight their process of enabling Iraqi civil servants to discuss and manage their own priorities by taking a back seat in workshops and aiming to only provide advice, training and tools. This is highlighted as a key factor in their success in supporting Iraqis to themselves conduct organisational self-assessments and benchmarking exercises to plan reforms. This capacity development programme was very clear on the need to provide advice and assistance but create momentum for change through locals’ own development of organisational priorities and own collection of organisational data and conducting of surveys. This process of capacity development has allowed the Ministries involved to significantly improve and institutionalise their information reporting, and to implement reforms for greater impact. Capacity development can therefore be used to increase internal ownership of a change process, significantly improving its chances of success.

## Leadership

It is also commonly accepted that leadership for change is of vital importance, as demonstrated in several of the case studies already discussed. Strong leaders, whether of the organisation itself or of the change process, will have a great impact on the results. Robinson (2006) shows how important leadership and strong political will were for governance reforms in Uganda. Although ultimately reliance on the President’s support to drive changes resulted in failure when his attention turned to other issues, the initial successes in Uganda were largely due to his enthusiasm and drive. This gave the reforms momentum and legitimacy.

Andrews et al. (2010) show that leaders can be individuals, organisations, or groups, and are identified as leaders more often by the function they play rather than their position of power. Leaders of change processes are likely to be multiple, rather than identifying a single person as the sole driver of change. The authors suggest that leadership is important for change because it creates and develops acceptance for change, grants authority to change and develops ability to achieve change. When these attributes come together, they show that successful change is implemented.

## Incremental Reform

Several studies suggest that a gradual, iterative approach to institutional change is preferable to large-scale reform programmes. Partly this is to do with ownership, where incremental reforms give time and space for local ownership to increase and for participants to take control of the direction of change, and where large-scale reforms are often prompted by external drivers such as donors. Partly it also means that changes are more likely to ‘stick’, as a longer timeframe allows an associated shift in societal culture, which helps create the enabling environment for change to be successful.

Andrews et al (2010) and Wynne (2005) both identify the necessity of contextual readiness for change, both within an organisation and in the sector it is situated in. Introducing a change without having basic infrastructure and capacity in place, as well as the expressed desire for change from stakeholders and the pressure to change from society, may mean the change will fail. Incremental changes may be more likely to succeed because they allow the time to gain momentum and for behavioural and societal shifts to take place in line with reforms, meaning local buy-in increases and change gains momentum of its own. A large-scale radical reform programme may alienate those it affects and create resentment. Khwaja and Khan (2009) adhere to a change theory which suggests that the most effective change is gradual, and includes creating converging societal beliefs, which help create a homogenous and positive attitude to reform.

Adler et al (2009) posit that the most effective change strategy is that of ‘interim institutions’. This is effectively the opposite of technocrat, externally-driven, large-scale reform. By creating open-ended, adaptable and perhaps informal institutions, politics is brought back into change management, and local actors are given the space to develop their own institutions. This theory focuses on change as a process, rather than the formation of a pre-designed institution conforming to international best practice and implemented by technical experts. Instead, using two examples from Indonesia and Cambodia, the authors show that interim institutions, which may not have real power, can foster the societal changes needed to edge closer to a democratic, inclusive *process*, which in turn will allow the organic development of locally appropriate institutions. The ILO helped set up a labour relations Arbitration Council in Cambodia, which mediates disputes between workers and employers when other avenues have failed. The institution rules for compensation to employees, but these awards are non-binding and generally unenforceable. The authors argue that although this institution has no real power, it has created the precedent for legal recourse, arbitrated in a transparent, democratic manner, which produces and grows the societal demand for this kind of institution. Thus further change will be able to build on this precedent organically, moving towards what donors might see as the ‘end goal’ through an inclusive and society-driven process.

This approach to change is not common, as most donors, and indeed governments, favour plans with a clear end-state or goal, and still use a technocratic approach with the help of experts. Andrews et al’s (2010) theory suggests that a key part of change is to create a ‘change space’ “to identify change, shift focus towards change demands, and embrace new forms and functions that aid progress and development” (p. 5). A long-term strategy with space for iterations built in may be more effective than an externally-driven institutional redesign. These academic theories may be difficult to put into practice, but they offer a different way of thinking about institutions and change which may be more effective.

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