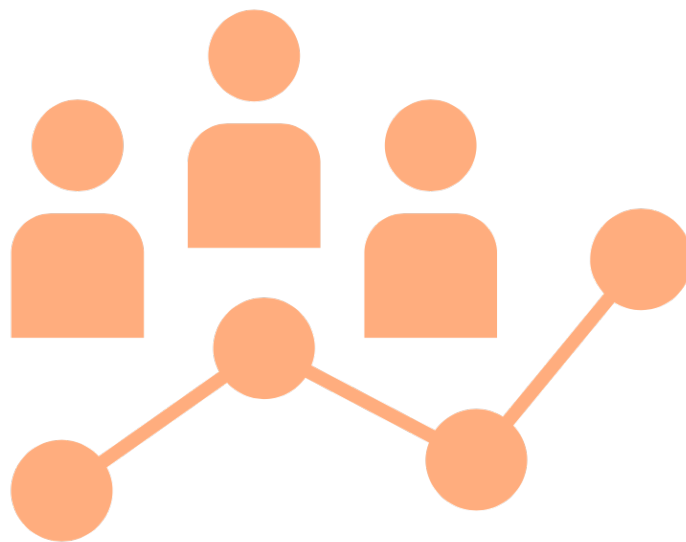


CAPACITY STRENGTHENING FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

The global development sector has tended to treat CBOs as lacking in capacity and risky because it has framed success according to funders' and international non-governmental organizations' perspectives and approaches. On the other hand, if success is defined as deep and lasting systemic change at the grassroots level, and effectiveness is seen as the capacity to engage and mobilize communities and local stakeholders towards systemic change, the critical and strategic role of CBOs becomes clear.

Community-driven systems change recognizes the inherent capacities, skills, and expertise held by community-based organizations (CBOs) and community stakeholders in building and nurturing relationships and collaborations with communities and other stakeholders, identifying issues, analyzing systems and root causes, and effecting long-term systemic change.

What are the implications for how funders think about and strengthen CBOs' capacities?



1. APPRECIATE, LEARN FROM, AND BUILD ON CBOS' STRENGTHS AND CAPACITIES

Many CBOs have developed and cultivate important strengths and capacities that enable them to connect with, engage, understand, and respond to their communities, as well as understand and influence important stakeholders and systems. They can also be quite experienced and skilled in implementing multi-faceted approaches that recognize the holistic, interlinked, and complex realities faced by people in their communities. Recognizing and building on this means –

- Seeing CBOs as trustworthy, experienced, and skilled, not as lacking and risky;
- Not assuming CBOs are blank slates when we provide any capacity support, but rather recognizing and building on their existing knowledge and capacities;
- Hearing and valuing CBOs' insights on their own capacity strengths, gaps, and priorities, and ways in which to address those gaps;
- Appreciating and building on the ways in which CBOs can teach and mentor other CBOs as well as other civil society and government institutions and stakeholders in different skill sets and practices; and
- Learning from CBOs – recognizing that just as funders can provide support to CBOs in strengthening their capacity, CBOs also teach funders and strengthen funders' capacities in many ways; this two-way process should be recognized, appreciated, and even invested in.

2. FACILITATE DIALOGUE AND REFLECTION WITH CBOS, AND CO-CREATE CAPACITY STRENGTHENING PLANS

Capacity support that is provided to or facilitated for CBOs must be developed in response to CBOs' identified needs and priorities, and with CBOs' involvement and participation.

Funders can support CBOs to engage in participatory dialogue and reflection, in safe spaces (perhaps without the funder present), on their existing capacities and where they see gaps – and what their priorities are. It is important that the identification of needs and priorities come from CBOs themselves, who have the greatest insight into their context, the role they play and seek to play, and where their capacity can be further strengthened. It can be particularly helpful to encourage this process after CBOs have engaged in systems mapping and community action planning, as CBOs are already thinking about the different parts of the system in their community, the ways in which the system functions, the stakeholders and the existing or desired connections among them, the role the CBO can play as a catalyst in influencing stakeholders and effecting systemic change, the specific actions that they want to work on, and how their current capacities strengthen or limit their ability to do so effectively. Another advantage for encouraging this dialogue and reflection after project work has begun is that CBOs may feel more secure in the funding partnership and may feel more comfortable being honest about gaps and struggles.

As strengths, needs, connections, and priorities are identified, funders can work with CBOs to co-create capacity-strengthening goals and plans, and together determine objectives and strategies for specific

capacity strengthening processes. Planning for capacity strengthening should recognize and take advantage of multiple forms of mentorship. For example, a particular capacity strengthening process may involve working with a local stakeholder, another one may involve peer-to-peer mentorship among CBOs, and yet another one may involve bringing in an external consultant. Where an external consultant is necessary, CBOs should be consulted on the desired qualifications as well as any recommended consultants. Emphasis should be given to identifying consultants who value and respect CBOs and communities, and appreciate their wealth of knowledge and skill that can be complemented and built upon. This is described further below.

It is also important to plan for adequate time and resourcing to allow for longer-term, contextualized, and complete capacity strengthening processes, including for example, a mutual scoping process, an initial workshop, individualized coaching and support over a few months, and a final phase of consolidation, reflection and extension of learning. This is in contrast to the most traditional capacity building approach of one-size-fits-all, one-off, trainings. Feedback loops should also be included throughout the capacity strengthening process, to ensure that the consultant or coach has a sense of the CBO's evolving capacity, and the CBO is able to give feedback on what is working well and what isn't. This allows for adaptation and course-correction along the way.

While many areas of capacity are important, some gaps may be important to address earlier on in the initiative – for example, a systems approach to change, understanding government and civil society initiatives, participatory planning and implementation, budget development and financial management, etc. Discuss with CBOs the different areas of capacity strengthening that are important to address over the course of the initiative, and which should be addressed sooner rather than later.

3. SUPPORT MULTIPLE FORMS OF MENTORSHIP, LEARNING, AND PEER SUPPORT FOR CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Capacity strengthening happens in many ways – through group discussion, peer-to-peer sharing and exchanges, individual research and development, and externally facilitated workshops. Funders who appreciate the different places from which capacity support can come can work with CBOs to draw upon those different sources to meet different capacity strengthening goals and needs.

Multiple forms of mentorship, learning, and peer support can include –

- A local CBO that is experienced and skilled in a particular area (e.g., financial management, parenting skills, advocacy and lobbying) who can provide training, mentorship, or coaching to other CBOs;
- A CBO who identifies a need for capacity support in board development may identify their own independent consultant and a set of development activities for their board members to engage in;
- A group of CBOs may determine that they are all struggling with computer skills, and wish to come together with an external trainer who can teach them basic computer skills;
- CBOs as a group may identify a stronger local organization who can serve as a leader and mentor in multiple areas of capacity support;
- Staff at a few CBOs may request the funder to provide support from an external consultant in a particular area such as budget development or tool development for data collection;
- Etc.

When external consultants are brought in, all efforts should be made to ensure that they understand the context, are appreciative and respectful of CBOs, and are responsive to CBOs' needs, strengths, and priorities. External consultants (individuals or organizations) providing technical support to CBOs should –

- Understand the local context (preferably the consultant should be from the local context, but if it is someone from outside, they should take the time to understand the local context and/or partner with a local consultant for context familiarization and skills transfer);
- Take time to consult with the CBOs, get to know them, and hear from them about their needs and priorities;
- Take a participatory, appreciative, strengths-based approach that builds on existing capacities, experiences, and expertise rather than a deficit approach that assumes a lack in CBOs;
- Be able to integrate or adapt the technical knowledge and skills that they bring (e.g., “global” knowledge, specific technical skills) with local knowledge, values, and realities; and
- Develop and carry out a capacity strengthening process that is responsive to CBOs' identified needs, strengths, and priorities. Different CBOs may have different strengths and gaps, and thus capacity strengthening may look different for each of them. Tailored one-to-one coaching and mentorship may be an effective strategy for customized support to CBOs.

Regular informal and formal mechanisms of feedback are important in order to hear from CBO representatives on the effectiveness, relevance, and appropriateness of different capacity strengthening processes. It is helpful to capture feedback ‘mid-stream’ when longer-term capacity strengthening processes are ongoing, in order to adjust and course correct as needed.

It is also critical to reflect with CBOs on their internalization and application of learnings and skills. When we remember that systemic change takes time – including organizational change, we recognize the important progress made even with small shifts.

We hope these guidelines and questions have supported your thinking and planning around capacity strengthening to support community-driven systems change. Please feel free to contact us at learning@firelightfoundation.org to discuss further.