

Empowering Development Research in West Africa

Lessons on a systems-based approach to Organizational Capacity Building

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Empowering development research organizations in West Africa: lessons on a systems-based approach to Organizational Capacity Building

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Abstract

This article examines an organizational capacity building (OCB) project implemented by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in West Africa. Building the capacity of Southern organizations is a ubiquitous objective among international development agencies, yet there is little consensus among both academics and practitioners regarding how best to achieve it effectively. Through qualitative analysis we examine how IDRC's intervention, which focuses on improving resource mobilization capacity, has influenced overall change in participating organizations. We also examine how the project's influence evolved as it adopted a more systems-based approach. It is argued that adopting a systems-based approach can be an effective way to address the real-life complexities that make OCB an inherently difficult and unpredictable enterprise. This article contributes to current capacity building discourse by providing ground-level observations and practical insights on how international development donors can effectively approach OCB for Southern-based organizations.*

*Although this project was supported by the IDRC through an IDRC Research Award, the conclusions and findings belong solely to the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of IDRC.

Keywords: Capacity building; capacity development; organizational development; resource mobilizations; systems; complexity; West Africa; Senegal; Burkina Faso; international development; complex adaptive systems

Introduction

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian public corporation that supports development research organizations based in the Global South. A central aspect of IDRC's support is to provide capacity building assistance so that supported organizations are better able to address local economic and social development issues. As part of the IDRC's commitment to capacity building it initiated a low-cost, short-term capacity building project to improve its grantees' ability to mobilize resources and to become financially independent and stable. The project, called Capacity Building in Resource Mobilization (CBRM), was implemented between 2004 and 2010 in all IDRC granting regions and involved 370 grantee organizations and networks and the direct participation of 570 individuals. This article presents the results of a research project analyzing the experiences of six organizations that participated in CBRM in West Africa. The research project aims to articulate how, if at all, CBRM was able to influence change in participating organization and to synthesize lessons on a systems-based approach to capacity building and organizational development (OD).

According to Ubels et.al. (2010, p.1) capacity building is considered “one of the defining ideas within contemporary international development” and most development agencies claim it to be a key aspect of their support. Unfortunately, the concept of capacity building is fraught with conceptual and operational problems and is subject to many of the same critiques of inefficacy leveled at development aid in general. Despite the emphasis on capacity building and the vast amount of resources invested in it by donors (at least US\$25 billion—a quarter of the aid system's resources—are allocated annually for technical assistance), there is very little evidence that it has affected meaningful change (Ubels et.al., 2010, p.1).

Recently, there has been some convergence in thinking regarding the applicability of systems-thinking and complexity science to the practice of organizational capacity building (OCB) (Ramalingam, 2008; Ramalingam and Jones, 2008; Jones, 2011; Richter, 2010; Baser and Morgan, 2008; Kaplan, 1999; Ubles et.al. 2010). Approaching OCB in a systemic way involves acknowledging that different capacities are interdependent so that successfully developing one kind of capacity depends on developing several others. A systemic approach also accounts for dynamic and unpredictable internal and external influences (Potter and Brough, 2004; Cornforth and Mordaunt, 2011). Rather than addressing capacity in a bottom-up manner by identifying and filling gaps in knowledge, systemic OCB attempts to look at organizations holistically to address system-wide weaknesses. There is a growing body of case studies, models and tools that approach capacity building in a systemic manner, nevertheless, the applicability of systems-thinking and complexity science to problems of development and capacity building remain largely at the meta-theoretical level with plenty of room for learning from practical, on the ground experiences (Jones, 2011; Richter, 2010).

While systems-thinking provides a way for practitioners to account for complexity, it is moving from the level of theory to practice that presents a number of problems. One overarching issue is in operationalizing a systems-approach in an effective way. If capacity building is context-dependent, unpredictable and dependent on changes throughout an organization it is difficult to imagine a donor or granting agency developing a cost-effective intervention that can be scaled and implemented across multiple recipients in different regions.

Based on the experiences of six West African research organizations that participated in CBRM, it is argued that there are indeed ways to approach OCB in a systemic way that is also cost-effective and replicable. The experience of participating organizations also supports the

applicability of a systems-based approach as an effective way to address the real-life complexities that make OCB an inherently difficult and unpredictable enterprise. The CBRM project evolved from an instrumentalist to a more systems-based intervention. It is this shift and the experiences of organizations that participated in the project over time that allow us to glean important lessons on how a systems-based capacity building intervention can be effectively implemented to induce significant change in Southern-based development research organizations. In the case of CBRM, an ostensible focus on resource mobilization (RM) capacity was an entry point for affecting broader organizational change. This article contributes to current capacity building discourse by providing ground-level observations and practical insights on how international development donors can effectively approach OCB.

The following section briefly reviews the burgeoning literature on systems theory and complexity science as they apply to international development. Following a description of the research methodology we present findings on implementation of CBRM and the experiences of the participating organizations. The final sections discuss the implications of the findings for systemic OCB.

Literature review

Capacity building in international development – non-consensus and inefficacy

According to Morgan (2006, p. 4), “the subject of capacity, as a body of knowledge subject, has a weak intellectual standing in the wider development world. It comes with no accepted and tested body of theory that people can use with any confidence.” The concept of capacity building (CB) reflects many different disciplines, values and ideologies and can serve as a “catch-all” term for practitioners with varying goals and aspirations (Duggan, 2009; Taylor and Clarke,

2008; Ubels et. al., 2010; Cairns et al. 2005). This non-consensus on what, exactly, CB is and how to go about achieving it is central to its inefficacy. For example, different ideas about the agency of individuals or organizations, whether capacity building is inherently an endogenous process or amenable to external intervention, the most effective and achievable means and ends of capacity programming, and how to measure results are some of the vital issues in which there has been little clarity or general understanding (Duggan, 2009; Morgan, 2006; Ubels et.al., 2010).

On the implementation side, the main criticism of capacity building interventions is that they too often use technocratic approaches that are linear and based on inappropriate assumptions. In other words, the building of capacity is done by identifying ‘gaps’ or ‘deficits’ in technical knowledge and then closing these gaps through specific technical assistance and training (Baser and Morgan, 2008). This ‘instrumentalist’ approach is usually an externally-driven process that addresses gaps in capacity according to a ‘blueprint’ derived from the practitioner’s understanding of how such gaps should be progressively filled. Such interventions generally do not account for the specific contexts in which the recipient is embedded or the complex, non-linear relationships between various dimensions of capacity (Ramalingam, 2008; Ramalingam and Jones, 2008).

In effect, capacity building programming tends to focus on “low-hanging fruit” – lower-level capacities that are easier to identify *ex ante* as deficient, but which are unlikely to lead to any overall sustainable changes in an organization (Jones, 2011, p.6; Ubels et.al, 2010). These lower-level capacities are also easier to measure as outcomes after the intervention using predefined log frame evaluations. While such evaluations may satisfy or legitimize the spending

of donors, they often miss the actual effects of the intervention, especially if those effects are unexpected (Bakewell and Garbutt, 2005).

An emerging field of CB

Despite the nebulous and ill-defined character of CB, Ubles et.al. (2010) argues that there is an emerging field of practice based on the experiences of several CB practitioners. While different approaches use different conceptual frames and categorizations, in general the emerging field recognizes that different capacities are interdependent and that affecting change in one requires a change in many others. For example, improving an organization's capacity to mobilize resources – the objective of CBRM – requires not only an improvement in the ability of staff to write effective funding proposals, but also on the organization's overall efficacy, transparency, technical expertise and leadership as well as the existence of a politically and socially permissive environment.

As noted in Ubles et.al. (2010), two influential CB frameworks are that of Kaplan (1999) of the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), and Baser and Morgan (2008) of European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM). Both frameworks are based on extensive practical experience and are generally popular among CB practitioners working with NGO's in the development sector (Ubles et.al, 2010). While both use different terminology and concepts, they both recognize 'capacity' as an uncertain, emergent and dynamic property that depends on a combination of multiple elements and inputs (Fowler and Ubels, 2010, p. 12-13).

The most important influence of these frameworks is that they allow for CB practitioners to actively account for the ambiguous and mercurial nature of capacity and to recognize the

futility of trying to produce a guaranteed outcome from a planned, sequential intervention (Ibid., 16). They actively emphasize the importance of both ‘known’ and ‘tangible’ aspects of CB as well as the ‘unknown’ or ‘intangible’ aspects that are likely to have as important a bearing on the outcome of an intervention (Kaplan, 1999).

Systems, complexity and organizational capacity building (OCB)

The evolution of thought in the emerging field of practice in CB reflects ideas from systems-theory and complexity science, especially as applied to the field of organizational development. According to Richter (2010), there is significant overlap in the evolution of thought in the fields of organizational development (OD) and CB in that both are about facilitating change in complex systems. Systems theorists working in the 1990’s such as Senge (1990), Checkland and Scholes (1990) and Lorenz (1993) have all influenced the shift towards a more holistic and less linear way of thinking about organizations. For both OD and CB, this shift has meant moving away from ‘designing’ transformation towards “unblocking a system’s natural inclination to adaptation and change” (Richter, 2010 p.108).

Organizations are examples of complex systems. They are distinct entities with unique internal rules, privileges and cultures, but are highly influenced by their external political and social environments (Kaplan, 1999; Lusthaus, 2001). From a systems perspective “an organization is a form of greater complexity than any one of its parts” and is best understood by looking at the whole rather than its components (Kaplan, 1999, p.20). Organizations are also seen as analogous to living organisms “which are capable of thinking, learning, and actively adapting to contextual shifts” (Richter 2010, p.108).

This view of organizations is encapsulated in a body of management literature called complex adaptive systems (CAS) (Lorenz, 1993; Prigogine, 1980; Wheatley, 1992; Gunderson and Holling, 2002). According to Watson (2010), “this ‘school’ of thought sees capacity as being associated with multiple causes, solutions and effects, some of them unintended.” Additionally, the interaction of stakeholders is significant, not necessarily controllable and often unpredictable (Ibid., p. 240). In other words, organizations “have a dynamic that is only partly open to explicit human direction” (Baser and Morgan, 2008, p. 16).

In a review of the systems theory and complexity literature and its applicability to the field of international development, Ramalingam et al (2008) highlights several key concepts that apply to complex systems. First, systems are characterised by interconnected and interdependent elements and dimensions. Second, interactions, relationships and positive and negative feedback loops between the elements are important aspects of change in the system (Rihani, 2002; Baser and Morgan, 2008). Third, relationships between dimensions are frequently nonlinear and open to outside influences (Holling, 2001). Fourth, the behaviour of systems emerges, often unpredictably, from the interaction of the elements (Ramalingam et al, 2008). Fifth, small differences in the initial state of a system can lead to massive differences later in time (Ibid.). And finally, systems-thinking has epistemological value in that it is a way of understanding real-world problems (Axelrod, 1997; Morowitz, 2004).

Research Methodology

The objective of this research project was to analyze the effects of the CBRM project on supported development research organizations in the West Africa and to glean any lessons on systems-based approach to OCB their experiences might provide. The research questions for this project are:

- What changes have occurred within organizations that have participated in CBRM?
- How has CBRM influenced such changes?
- What lessons on a systems-based approach to OCB can be synthesized?

This project involved qualitative analyses of six organizations that participated in CBRM during its first phase in West Africa. To determine organizational changes over time, organizational assessments were conducted based on the ‘Organizational Assessment Framework’ developed by Lusthaus et.al. (2002). This framework “posits that *organizational performance* is a function of its *enabling environment, capacity* and *organizational motivation*” and suggests specific indicators that can be used to measure each of these components (Ibid, p. xi). The framework takes a systemic view of organizations and suggests indicators for a broad range of organizational characteristics. The suggested indicators were used to develop interview guides for 26 semi-structured interviews with directors and employees of the organizations, regional employees of IDRC and regional RM trainers familiar with the West African context and the participating organizations themselves. In addition to the interviews, both field visits and document analysis were conducted. Documents analysed included organizational pamphlets, strategic plans, and technical reports; and documents pertaining to CBRM workshops and modalities from the region including reports by trainers, IDRC employees and participating organizations. All transcribed interviews and documents were coded using a coding framework and definitions derived from Lausthaus *et.al.* (2002) and NVIVO 8 analysis software.

This project is a comparative case study of six organizations (Lausthaus, 2002, p.141). Selection criteria required that organizations had 1) participated in at least two modalities (i.e. two workshops; or one workshop and received a mini-grant); 2) participated in their first

modalities at least 3 years ago (i.e. 2007); and 3) had directors and employees available for interview during the scheduled field visits. Three of the organizations that were selected were based in Senegal and three were based Burkina Faso. The six IDRC grantees examined for this study cover a broad spectrum in terms of their relative success in mobilizing resources; their strength, size and level of collaboration or networking; their relative level of organizational development; and the research sector in which they work. The common feature of each organization is that they are based in West Africa, operate primarily in French, work on development-related issues, depend largely on donors to remain active and have existed for at least 18 years at the time of data collection.

Inductive and deductive techniques

The research involves both inductive and deductive techniques. Based on the experiences of the six cases we inductively produce a conceptual framework demonstrating how CBRM can influence change in organizations. According to Robinson (2002), a conceptual framework is the diagrammatic expression of theory about what is going, what is happening and why. Conceptual frameworks also encompass concepts, assumptions, expectations and beliefs that inform the theory (Maxwell, 1996). Accordingly, the conceptual framework presented here is an attempt to encapsulate 1) the logic and assumptions of IDRC regarding how CBRM induces organizational change in grantees; and 2) how West African grantees have actually experienced the CBRM intervention. Using the conceptual framework as a starting point, we then deduce practical lessons on a systems-based approach to OCB.

Methodological constraints and confidentiality

A major constraint for this research was the lack of baseline data, which made assessing organizational change – and linking any such changes to CBRM – difficult. Interviewees were directly asked to give their opinions on what changes had occurred since their participation in CBRM modalities and whether they believed the intervention had a direct influence. Any suggestion of a link was cross-verified with responses from other interviewees external and internal to the organization. Whenever possible, lower-level employees with significant tenure in the organization were sought to verify the responses of directors and others. To prevent threats to validity and to maintain ethical standards confidentiality agreements were signed by interviewees and the author. The agreement assured that grantees' refusal to participate in the study or criticism of CBRM would not positively or negatively affect their relationship with IDRC. As per the agreement names of participants and organizations remain anonymous.

The six participating organizations in this research project were:

1. **Organization 1** is an agricultural research, capacity building, coordination and advocacy organization based in Dakar, Senegal. It was founded over twenty years ago as a means of communication and coordination among agronomic research directors from French-speaking West African countries.
2. **Organization 2** is an NGO specializing in research, development, technical support and training in environmental planning, waste management and agriculture in urban settings. It was established over twenty years ago in Dakar, Senegal, and has since established an office in Burkina Faso.

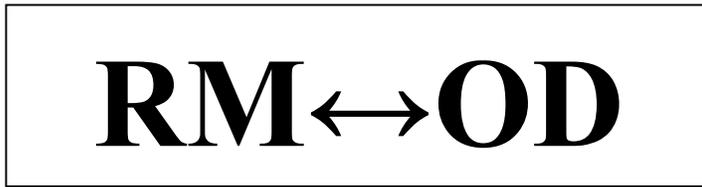
3. **Organization 3** is an NGO based in Dakar, Senegal and was created in over twenty years ago by a group of educators and health professionals to spread information on sexual health, the environment and HIV/AIDS to youth in schools across the country.
4. **Organization 4** is a health research and advocacy association that partners with the Ministry of Health in Burkina Faso. Founded in 1991 and based in Ouagadougou, the organization also tries to coordinate with other health research organizations across the country and is currently attempting to network across the region and internationally. It is a small organization with strong, dedicated leadership and staff that is mostly voluntary.
5. **Organization 5** is a health research organization that operates in a remote village in Burkina Faso and, like Organization 4, is associated with the Ministry of Health, but is not a government agency and depends on donor support. It began operations in the early 1990s, and its programming includes biomedical, clinical, health systems and environmental research as well as capacity building and training.
6. **Organization 6** is based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and partners with institutions of higher learning and research in economics in 18 different Francophone countries in Africa. Its objective is to promote quality instruction in economics among Francophone universities and aims to produce high-quality and internationally-recognized Master's and Doctoral degree holders by aggregating the teaching resources and capabilities of different learning institutions. The organization was founded in 1992.

CBRM Background – from instrumental to systemic thinking

From the perspective of IDRC, OCB takes on both practical and ethical components. Since most grants are time-bound it is practical for recipient organizations to prepare for the end of donor support and an ethical obligation for donors to avoid creating dependency among their grantees. CBRM, which was designed to “provide targeted, timely and relevant resource mobilization capacity building assistance,” contributes to IDRC’s mission of strengthening local organizations by helping grantees become more financially stable and independent (IDRC, PBDD, 2009). For IDRC the project can be seen as part of a principled and productive exit strategy upon the completion of a particular phase of donor support.

According to CBRM-related documents one can see a gradual progression in emphasis from instrumental inputs focussing on tools and techniques for RM to a broader vision of RM that seeks to influence organizational change (see table I). In other words, the project adopted a more systemic character as IDRC began to think of RM more holistically. The idea that RM can act as an entry point for broader organizational change was implicit in CBRM’s original design, however, it only adopted a more systemic view in practice in the latter half of its implementation. In the latter years of CBRM there was an ostensible focus on RM in order to begin a process of more holistic change within grantee organizations. Practical experience showed that this more holistic and strategic vision better reflected the reality of how organizations experienced sustainable change, and the implementation of the project reflected this insight. The theory underpinning CBRM is that improving an organization’s RM ability requires broader OD, which in turn allows for stronger RM. It is a positive feedback loop that is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: The general theory of RM as an entry point for OD.



Although CBRM had developed a general systems approach to OCB, the mechanism by which the intervention led to change had not been specified. This research attempts to do this for both its ‘instrumental’ and ‘systemic’ phases of implementation as they occurred within the Francophone West African context (figure 2).

Table I. Emphasis on technical inputs of the CBRM pilot workshop (2004) compared to broader OD objectives of a later workshop (2009)

Workshop, 2004 – report excerpts

The main objective of this workshop is to assist partner institutions IDRC Research to acquire a thorough knowledge of methods, tools and techniques for expanding research funding and strengthen their capacities in planning and implementing their resource expansion activities.

The specific objectives are:

- Demystifying the expansion of resources in the context of development research
- Expose participants to the components and techniques for developing a good strategy for expansion of resources and the implementation thereof
- Exchange of practical experiences expansion of resources and lessons learned related.

WARO 2009 – report excerpts

The overall project goal is to provide an opportunity for training in organizational development with emphasis on the functions of grant management, resource mobilization.

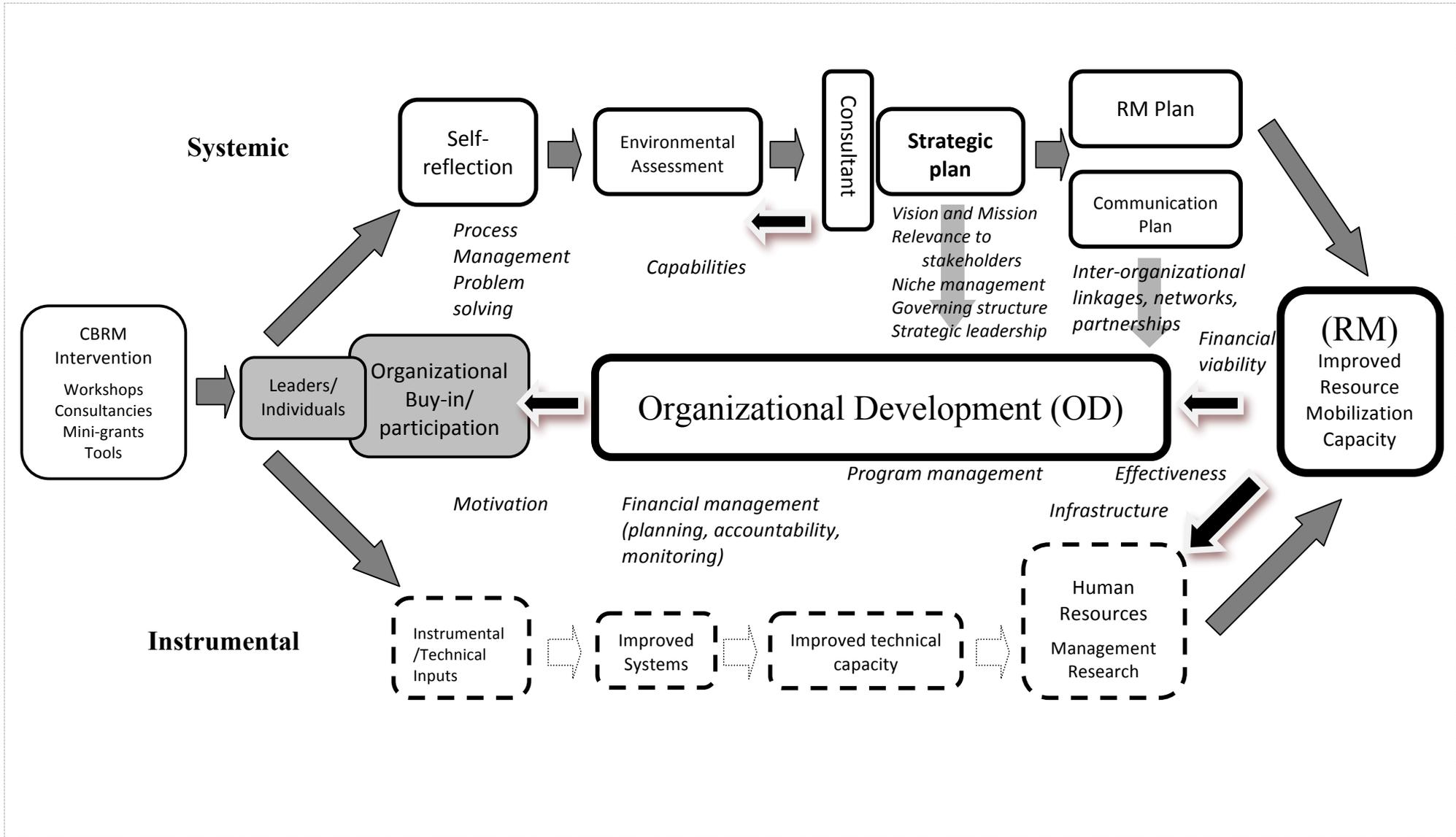
source: IDRC, DPD (2004a); IDRC, DPD (2004b); IDRC, DPD (2009) (note: excerpts translated from French to English)

Conceptual framework – How CBRM affects organizational change in West Africa

Figure 2 expands and refines on the feedback loop to better articulate how CBRM has contributed to organizational change in West Africa. In figure 2 OD is represented by the box in the middle of the framework while RM is in the box to the right with black arrows indicating the feedback pathway. Other salient features of figure 2 include the CBRM intervention (box on the extreme left), grey block arrows indicating the direction of influence, and a distinction between the instrumental (dash-lined boxes at the bottom) and systemic (solid-lined boxes at the top) inputs of CBRM. Organizational assessment indicators from Lusthaus et.al. (2002) that are influenced by various parts of the framework are listed in the middle spaces of figure 2 in italics.

It is important to note that figure 2 is not meant to be a causal model where arrows indicate a definitive link between the CBRM intervention and specific outcomes. Rather, the framework is a graphic representation of how CBRM may contribute to organizational change. The pathway between the intervention and the outcomes (improved RM and OD) is in reality non-linear, passing through multiple complex systems and represents how grantees in Senegal and Burkina Faso have described the influence of CBRM. Though many directors acknowledged direct links between changes within their organizations and participating in CBRM modalities, it is impossible to claim a direct causal link or posit a precise mechanism. In other words, rather than *attributing* organizational changes to CBRM, figure 2 indicates the project's *contribution* to change processes based on a comparative analysis of recipients who had both positive and negative experiences.

Figure 2. Modified conceptual framework based on data from interviews and document analysis



The West African context – language, the lack of management and technical skills, and culture

Since organizations are open systems, the context within which they operate has a great enabling or disabling effect on organizational change. According to Lusthaus et.al. (2002, p.12), an organization's "environment is the key factor in determining the level of available resources and ease with which an organization can carry out its activities." While donor funding remains precarious for research organizations throughout the Global South, interviewees clearly expressed their concern that organizations in Francophone West Africa are at an even greater disadvantage. Three factors in particular were regularly mentioned as significant challenges: language, the lack of management and technical skills and culture.

With regard to language, there is a perceived disadvantage for research organizations that operate mainly in French. Francophone organizations are often compelled to produce research and interact with donors and stakeholders in English. Most respondents expressed a perceived disadvantage when competing with English-speaking organizations for limited resources. According to the head of RM for Organization 4, "most donors are Anglophone and they privilege Anglophone countries. This is a great barrier – we have to fight extra hard because we are not privileged."

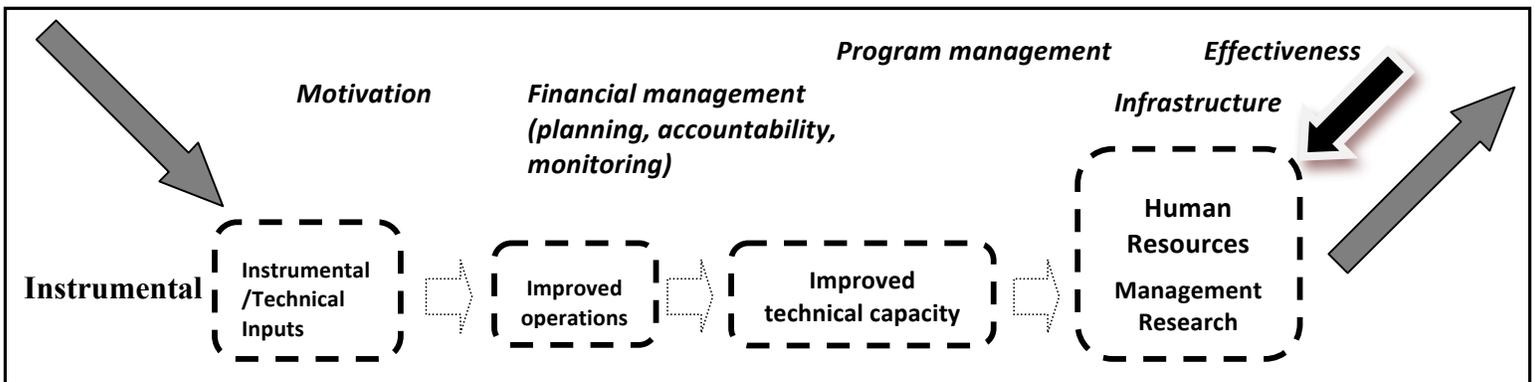
Another challenge is the region's lack of human resources with adequate management and technical skills. Because of this lack of expertise there is a perception that West African research organizations do not have adequate management systems in place to operate efficiently. A regional IDRC employee estimates that 70 to 80 percent of organizations in the region do not have an internal structure or systems to be able to properly manage their resources. All directors interviewed expressed a desire to have personnel with the technical capacity to improve systems and work directly on their organization's RM efforts.

Finally, culture is an important issue. Many RM consultants, donors and employees of grantee organizations expressed how local norms of leadership and inter-personal interaction may have negative effects on RM. It was noted that organizational leaders in the region tended to control information and be singularly responsible for the direction and decision-making of an organization often at the expense efficient processes and transparent financial management.

CBRM’s instrumental affects

The dash-lined boxes at the bottom of figure 2 (highlighted in figure 3) represent the technical or instrumental aspect of CBRM and the hypothetical effects they may have on OD. As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to ascertain whether instrumental inputs can convincingly lead to significant changes within complex systems, especially when such inputs are given in a workshop lasting only a few days or through short-term mini-grants. While it was acknowledged by interviewees that there was a need among grantees to learn about specific RM tools and concepts, the uncertainty of its overall transformative effect is represented by the dotted arrows between the dash-lined boxes in figure 3. Specific instrumentalist inputs of CBRM workshops included techniques to map potential donors; expanding the definition of ‘resources’ to include ‘human’, ‘technical’ and ‘financial’ resources; and financial monitoring.

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework – instrumental affects.

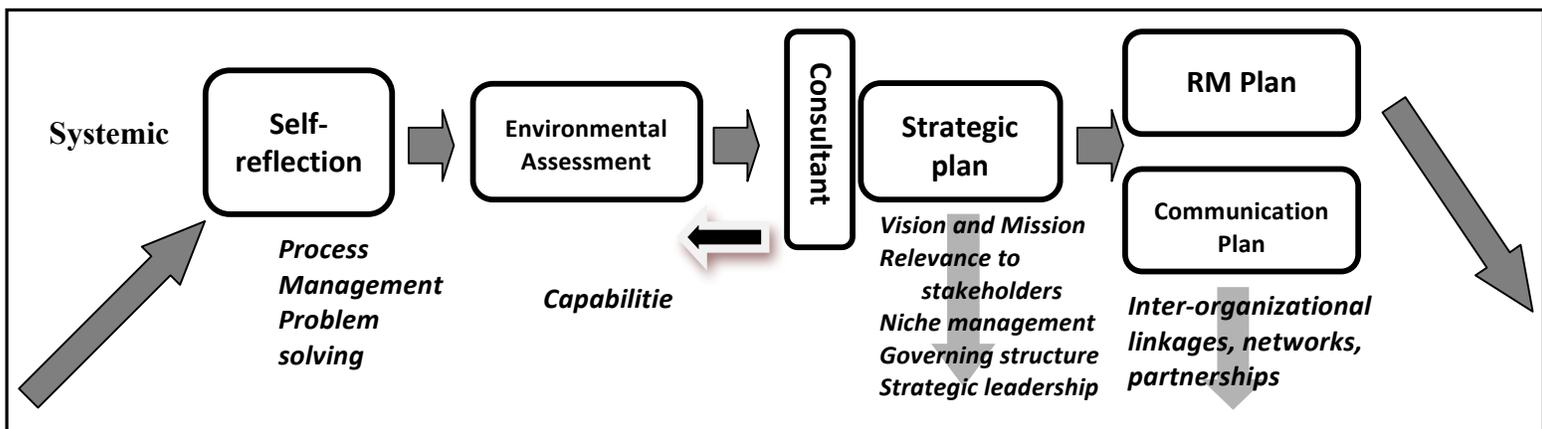


CBRM's systemic affects – self-reflection and the development of a strategic plan

The systemic side of figure 2 (see figure 4) depicts the process by which the CBRM intervention can lead to improved RM and OD through the development of a strategic plan. CBRM documentation consistently emphasizes strategic planning as the primary means of inducing organizational change; and, indeed, all CBRM modalities in West Africa (workshops, consultancies, mini-grants and RM tools) prioritized strategic planning (Hay, 2009; IDRC, PBDD, 2009; Bassey, 2009).

The assumption that strategic-planning is a key element to improving RM and OD was supported by interviews with grantees. Organizations 1 and 5 developed exceptionally strong strategic plans with initial support from CBRM that, according to their respective directors and employees, led directly to more sustainable RM and OD. Organizations 3 and 6 also demonstrated strong strategic planning in terms of developing clear organizational goals and objectives that were well-known within their organizations. Comparing these organizations with Organizations 2 and 4, which had relatively ineffective and non-existent strategic plans, respectively, offers some lessons on how strategic planning has influenced OD, and how CBRM can better catalyze this process.

Figure 4. Conceptual Framework – systemic effects.



The organizational effects of self-reflection and strategic planning

Grantees that experienced profound organizational change and improved RM had strategic plans that were actionable and could convey the organization's value to stakeholders. An effective strategic plan is a tool that can be used to define an organization's purpose, communicate that purpose and serve as a tactical guide when dealing with the various contingencies of a particular environment (Graf, Hemmasi and Strong, 1996; Kaplan and Norton, 1996). According to an IDRC employee, most grantees in the region did not have a strategic plan, and if they did it often amounted to nothing more than a glorified "wish-list" with little practical use in guiding the organization (personal communication).

As depicted in figure 4, the development of an effective strategic plan is the result of an extensive process of self-reflection. Self-reflection includes looking both internally at decision-making and problem-solving processes within the organization and externally at the opportunities and obstacles that exist in the surrounding environment (i.e. an environmental assessment). This process can affect OD by allowing organizations to identify their strengths and weaknesses and assess their capabilities to overcome various environmental obstacles. Most significantly, self-reflection allows organizations to solidify their vision and mission, stoke strategic thinking among leaders and establish a strong niche. Having a strong niche, in turn, is vital for an organization to assert its relevance among stakeholders and donors (Beaton, 1994; Cohen, 1993).

The process of self-reflection and strategic planning also provides an opportunity for organizational leadership to undergo the valuable exercise of putting abstract concepts and ideas to paper and to clarify the logistics, contradictions and potential of those ideas (IDRC employee, personal communication). Developing a strategic plan inherently creates consensus on how

organizational leaders and employees conceive of their organization's purpose and objectives (Mintzberg and Quinn, 1995; Vecchio, 1995). Self-reflection can also serve to provide a foundation from which a board of governors can provide coherent strategic direction for the organization.

For some organizations, strategic planning induced changes in governing and operational structure. Strategic planning by Organization 5, for example, resulted in the creation of several new research areas and seeking of personnel with the appropriate expertise to lead programming. Strategic planning allowed Organization 1 to improve its efficiency and transparency by creating positions for an 'internal auditor', 'procurement officer', and 'director of programs.' Organization 1's process of self-reflection also led to the creation of units for 'planning', 'monitoring and evaluation', and even 'change management' – all of which were the direct outcomes of seeking ways to improve RM (Director-Organization 1, personal communication).

Effective self-reflection is a long-term process that often involves stakeholders

Interviews and observations indicate that successful strategic planning for improved RM and OD is a long-term process that involves significant investment in time and resources, and the involvement of stakeholders. Both Organizations 1 and 5 spent significant amounts of time undergoing a process of self-reflection in order to develop an effective strategic plan. In both cases, the process took several years and involved a number of external stakeholders who worked with the organizations to define an appropriate niche and ensure that their objectives and programming were relevant to local development priorities as well as to donors.

Organization 1, with the help of several bilateral and multilateral donors, convened seven workshops involving multiple stakeholders to debate and clarify its mission, vision, objectives

and operations for the following ten years. In striving to become the focal organization of a large network of national agricultural researchers from several countries in West and Central Africa, Organization 1 needed to gain legitimacy and acceptance from government ministries, international donors, regional economic and agricultural communities and the agro-scientific community and therefore involved individuals from all of these sectors in its strategic planning process. Over 9000 man-hours were committed to the process by stakeholders and the results were indeed transformative. Organization 1 went from being what was described as floundering and unnecessary, to what is now an accepted leader in promoting the agriculture sector in the region (Director of Administration and Finance, Organization 1, personal communication; IDRC employee, personal communication).

Establishing a niche was also seen as a vital imperative for Organization 5. As one of several independent health research organization associated with the Ministry of Health in Burkina Faso, it needed to distinguish itself from its counterparts in order to justify its relative autonomy from the Ministry and to ensure its relevance to donors. With health research and advancing science as its *raison d'être*, Organization 5 relied heavily on the input of an international scientific advisory board to ensure that their programming was relevant to the current state of research. Over the course of almost two years, the preliminary strategic plan was shared with stakeholders for further feedback and suggestions.

Both Organizations 1 and 5 were able to parlay the initial support from the CBRM project into a longer-term process of self-reflection, resulting in very strong strategic plans that lead directly to more sustainable RM from diversified sources. After their respective processes, both organizations knew exactly what aspects of their programs and administration required more resources and where, for the most part, these resources were coming from.

Successful strategic planning requires large investment in time and resources

Being able to commit significant amounts of time to self-reflection and collaboration to develop a strategic plan is a luxury that most research organizations in West Africa cannot afford. Organization 4, for example, was not able to complete its process of strategic planning because it could not commit the necessary resources. Unlike Organizations 1, which managed to attract major support from donors, and Organization 5, which had necessary core funding (i.e. funding for administrative purposes not attached to programming or research) from a European-based university, Organization 4 did not have expendable resources at its disposal.

Organization 4's major obstacle was that it was almost completely run by volunteers. Though Organization 4's volunteers were dedicated, most had to juggle organizational responsibilities with the obligations of their regular employment. For example, Organization 4's Director of Research and RM also worked in the government's Health Ministry with relevant duties occupying most of her working hours. It was mainly in the evenings that she had time to work on funding proposals and administrative tasks related to the Organization 4's work (personal communication).

Despite this significant time and resource deficiency, it should be noted that Organization 4 had convened two CBRM-supported workshops to develop a preliminary strategic plan. This plan led to some significant changes including the hiring of a paid Director; the defining of a vision, mission and objectives; the streamlining of programming; and, as a result of all of this, the acquisition of several new donors (Director-Organization 4, personal communication). According to the Director and the Director of Research, without such changes the Organization would have ceased to exist (personal communication). Nevertheless, both also recognized that further work developing an operational budget and RM plan was needed. Unfortunately, in order

to attend previous workshops and spend time on strategic planning volunteers had to take vacations from their paid employment – a situation that is preventing further necessary strategic planning from occurring (Director or Research, personal communication).

Successful organizations did not overly depend on external consultants or trainers

The experience of the organizations also highlights the limits of using external consultants. Throughout the first phase of CBRM RM and OD consultants were hired by IDRC to help organizations develop their strategic plans. By helping organizations with their strategic planning RM consultants encouraged self-reflection, as depicted in figure 4 (see black feedback arrows). While external consultants can play an important role in initializing and providing feedback for strategic planning, observations and interviews revealed that the benefits of using an external consultant is limited. Organizations that had the greatest success in developing strategic plans took ownership of the process and did not rely heavily on external consultants beyond the initial phases.

Prior to participation in CBRM, Organization 4 utilized a Canadian consultant to help them develop a preliminary strategic plan over the course of a five-day workshop, however, according to their Director of RM, when the consultant departed the process stagnated. Although the preliminary plan had lead to some positive changes, the consultancy was described as a “bad experience”, not because the consultant was negligent, but because much of what was gained early on in the process was lost as time passed (personal communication). Other organizations that were more successful in their strategic planning managed to internalize the process by convening their own workshops and using internal teams to carry the strategic plan through to completion.

The former Director of an IDRC-supported organization that has undergone significant improvement in RM described the hiring of “internal consultants” – i.e. paying existing employees to work full time on the strategic plan – as the key to their transformation (personal communication). Not overly relying on external consultants was deemed important by interviewees for several reasons. First, there was a recognized lack of consistency of skill among external consultants – some were recognized as very helpful, while others were not. Interviewees consistently described how external consultants, whether they were native to West Africa or not, could not fully understand the environment in which the organization is embedded or the internal dynamics of the organization itself. This inherently limits the extent to which consultants can guide the strategic planning process.

Additionally, much of what determines the efficacy of a consultant comes from the expectations of the organizations being served. According to one IDRC employee, many organizations did not know what they are asking for “when they say they want a strategic plan, and most of the consultants we refer them to, they don’t know either” (personal communication). The very act of using ‘internal consultants’ engages organizational members who have a better grasp of the organization’s purpose, the obstacles to achieving objectives, and who have a vested interest in how their organization evolves. Using ‘internal consultants’ can also help promote organizational buy-in for the RM↔OD process.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that external consultants can have an important facilitating role in the strategic planning process. According to an experienced local RM consultant from the region, an external consultant can help organizations overcome internal cultural barriers by providing a forum for discussion about issues that would otherwise be difficult to broach (personal communication). A successful consultancy depends on

organizational members taking the lead in the process and on realistic expectations for the consultant's influence. Consultants, in other words, are most effective if they are seen as facilitators that ask high-level questions, provoke the process of self-reflection and provide feedback for a developing strategic plan (Regional RM Consultant, personal communication).

The value of networking and creating linkages as a way to overcome the environment

As such, a natural outgrowth of a strong strategic plan is an RM plan, in which an organization delineates how they will get the resources necessary to support their defined objectives, and a communication plan that shows what strategies an organization will use to engage with stakeholders and potential partners. In other words, the RM and communication plans are the actionable parts of a strategic plan (and not necessarily separate documents). As depicted in figure 4, one of the ways an RM and communication plan can influence OD is to promote organizational linkages, networks and partnerships. Every organization expressed a desire to create such linkages as a means of addressing some specific weaknesses. In the case of Organizations 1, 3 and 6, which are central nodes of larger networks, creating and strengthening such linkages is central to their objectives and helps them create legitimacy.

For Organization 4, creating linkages to other organizations, particularly in other regions of Africa, was seen as a potentially powerful means of overcoming local environmental obstacles (Former Director-Organization 4, personal communication). For example, linking their research and programming to that of organizations in other regions is a way to overcome the perceived bias of donors against Francophone West Africa by working together on proposal writing and other RM activities. Having a working relationship with organizations in other regions can also help West African organizations define their niche and can be a means of overcoming the

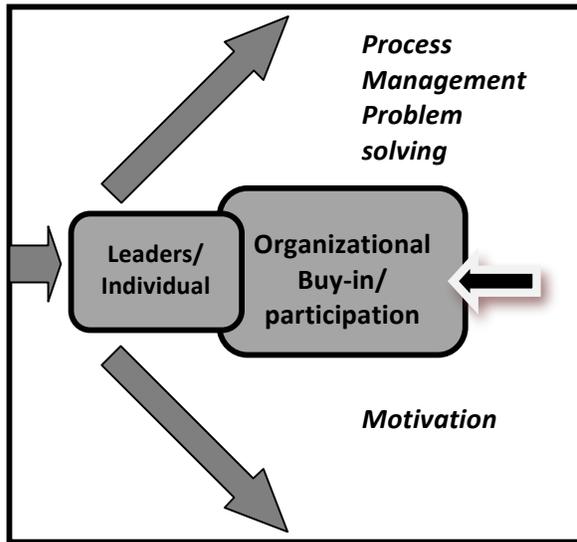
language obstacle. In the case of Organization 1, their desire to expand operations across Central and West Africa forced them to be able to operate seamlessly in English, French and Portuguese; and operating in these three languages has in turn served to open the door to attracting more donors.

The leadership gateway and organizational buy-in

Although the focus of CBRM is organizational change, the entry point for the intervention is individuals within organizations, especially those in leadership positions. As stated in *CBRM by Design* (IDRC PBDD, 2009) “CBRM seeks to work with the leaders of the organization (e.g. Executive Director) since they are best positioned to encourage and facilitate change.” It is assumed, therefore, that knowledge and behavioural change is transferable from individuals to organizations. Accordingly, CBRM modalities are targeted towards individuals and leaders who, as depicted in figure 5, act as the gateway to downstream effects.

The way this transfer occurs, however, is not well understood and, indeed, the assumption does not always hold as many individuals that receive the intervention do not affect their organizations. Interviews and observations in West Africa suggest certain characteristics of leaders and of organizations that best facilitate improvement in RM and OD. Specifically, among the organizations in this study, strong leadership combined with participatory or decentralized decision-making allowed for organizational buy-in, financial stability and organizational change.

Figure 5. Conceptual Framework – the leadership gateway.



The culture and paradox of strong leadership

To state that strong organizations have strong leaders is unsurprising, yet the importance of strong leadership in inducing organizational change cannot be understated (Dia and Eggink, 2011). Almost all interviewees recognized the vital role of leadership in influencing RM and OD. As stated succinctly by an employee of Organization 1, “for every change you need champions.” Indeed, every organization that did experience significant change had one or several individuals in leadership positions that embraced the ideas conveyed in CBRM and found ways to implement them. By contrast, organizations that did not experience significant change had leaders that, for one reason or another, could not implement the concepts. The leadership of Organization 4, as mentioned above, embraced the ideas of CBRM but did not have the time or resources to act upon them. For Organization 6, the influence of CBRM was reduced because of a consistent turnover of Executive Directors—it had at least 4 different Directors over a period of 6 years, including an interim Director for approximately two of those years.

Within the cultural context of West Africa, where organizations tend to be tightly controlled by their leaders, inducing RM and OD inevitably requires profound changes that often have to be implemented top-down. Often, Directors are themselves responsible for RM and employees have little to no idea of the source or condition of their organization's financial sustainability. As is the case elsewhere, development research organizations in West Africa tend to come out of the personal vision of a single or small group of individuals (IDRC employee; RM trainer, personal communication; Collingwood, 2010). In many cases, organizations can maintain a certain level of operability and sustainability based solely on the hard work, charisma and personal connections of its leadership. According to a regional IDRC employee, the efficacy of many West African research organizations is a direct reflection not of their organizational systems but of the strength of their leaders.

This presents two significant problems. First, improving an organization's transparency, creating learning and collaborative environments, and improving its communication and information sharing is often possible only if leaders are willing to relinquish some control which, according to a regional IDRC employee, "is something that's not natural" for many to do. Regional RM trainers, IDRC employees and many organization members acknowledged that West African leadership is often characterized by micro-managing, monopolizing the decision-making process and safeguarding important information to maintain control.

Second, the fact that the success of West African organizations depend so highly on a single or small group of leaders is inherently an unsustainable situation no matter the organization's previous financial sustainability or efficiency. According to an IDRC employee, "the few [organizations in the region] that perform, they do perform not because they have a

good system but because they have good leader. Once the leader is gone, well, everything collapses.”

While strong leadership is necessary for the CBRM intervention to take hold, any changes that remain too dependent on strong leadership are inherently unsustainable. This paradox was especially significant for Organization 1 whose leader was central in enacting changes to transform it into a very strong and financially stable organization. Organization 1’s Executive Director, whose non-renewable mandate is set to expire in 2011, expressed his deep concern for the ability of his successor to continue the process of transformation and organizational strengthening he initiated.

The importance of organizational buy-in

Although strong leadership is necessary to improve an organization’s RM and OD, for these improvements to be sustainable there must be organizational buy-in. Among the organizations that experienced significant change after the CBRM intervention, the ones that were less susceptible to the instability of personalized leadership had mechanisms that allowed for organizational buy-in and a diffusion of ownership regarding RM. Specifically, organizations that had more decentralized or participatory decision-making processes had less personalized leadership and seemed much less likely to regress if their leaders were to leave. This concept is depicted in figure 4, where the RM↔OD feedback mechanism (black arrows) must pass through the ‘organizational buy-in/participation’ box for the process to become sustainable and self-propelling.

For an organization’s members to buy-in to change there must be a mechanism for organizational learning (Senge, 1990). Organizations 3 and 5 had such mechanisms in place

which allowed for the transfer of CBRM lessons from individuals that attended workshops to others within the organization. In the case of these two organizations, such learning mechanisms reinforced existing notions among employees that RM was not solely the responsibility of their Director, but an important responsibility for everyone in the organization. For Organization 3, this mechanism involved internally conducted workshops for organizational members. Organization 5 had an existing participatory management structure that placed the decisions and processes of change in the hands of members through weekly meetings with programming heads and monthly meetings with the entire senior staff. In other words, the decision to pursue change and strategic planning was not solely the responsibility of its Director.

Discussion: The applicability of a systems-based approach to OCB

It is increasingly being recognized that complexity in international development can no longer be ignored and that interventions need to account for uncertainty and unpredictability. The development sector, after all, deals with the “most complex and ill-defined questions facing humankind” (Ellerman 2005, p.160). Southern research organizations, as with all organizations, are embroiled in the messy realities of their internal and external social, political and cultural environment; a context where change is emergent and not amenable to detailed planning (Lusthaus et.al 2001.). The major problem for practitioners is to determine how best to approach CB in a way that avoids the pitfalls of low-level, linear thinking and adequately addresses capacity as a dynamic, unpredictable and emergent property. Approaching CB systemically may offer some solutions.

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental tension in designing a systems-based intervention that is both generalizable across different organizations and context specific. On one hand, it

would be cost prohibitive for a donor to create individualized OCB programs for each grantee. On the other hand, a more standard intervention applied to many organizations in different contexts would reflect the ‘blueprint’ model of CB that has already been shown to be ineffective. While systems theory offers a potential solution for practitioners, it is moving from theory to practice that presents a formidable challenge. By articulating the implementation of CBRM and analyzing the varied experiences of participating organizations, this study provides practical lessons on how to approach OCB systemically in a way that is both cost-efficient and replicable across contexts.

Small intervention, large changes: Resource mobilization and strategic planning as entry points for organizational change

First, the CBRM model suggests that a holistic view of organizations and their interdependent capacities need not prevent an intervention from having a specific entry point. CBRM ostensibly focussed on RM – a focus borne out of the need for an ethical exit strategy for donors – which in practice was addressed by inducing comprehensive strategic planning as the main mechanism for change. RM became an entry point for overall organizational development and strategic planning became the means for systemic self-reflection and environmental assessment. The remarkable changes that occurred in Organization 1 stemmed from participation in CBRM which, by all accounts, is a very small intervention in terms of its time, resource and scope. Using RM and strategic planning as the specific entry points gave CBRM a measure of simplicity and flexibility that is potentially generalizable across many organizations and contexts.

That a small intervention like CBRM could potentially spark large changes accords with complex adaptive systems (CAS) thinking as applied to CB. According to Baser and Morgan (2008, p.17):

CAS thinking comes with a different view of cause and effect. It does not support the idea of predictable results chains. It sees outcomes in terms of possibilities and probabilities. Cause and effect are usually seen as separated in place and time. Participants must accept that they function at the edge of uncertainty. Unintended outcomes continually emerge. Small interventions can have huge effects, and visa versa.

Given the messy realities and unpredictability of most development contexts, larger-scale and more comprehensively planned interventions are likely to be useless. In William Easterly's (2006) criticism of development aid he also advocates for smaller interventions and more realistic view of the potential effects of any intervention. While using smaller interventions may seem counter-intuitive for practitioners desiring to make large changes in organizations, Baser and Morgan (2008, p.115) cite many cases where "smaller, more manageable interventions had a better chance of success in the short term, and could even lead to bigger capacity gains in the medium and long term."

Humility and intentionality

The second and third practical lessons of CBRM logically follow the first – a systems-based approach to OCB impels a more *humble* and *intentional* intervention. According to an

IDRC employee involved in the one of the last West African workshops in 2009, it was understood that expecting CBRM participants to improve their systems from the technical knowledge gained over a weekend seminar was unrealistic. Rather, the objective of the workshop was simply to make individuals from grantee organizations aware of the concepts of organizational development. The best outcome of the intervention would be in ‘planting the seeds’ for future change. While the framing of the interventions become broader and more holistic, the expectations for outcomes became more humble. Nevertheless, as with any OCB intervention, systemic or otherwise, the aspiration remained the achievement of meaningful transformation. Where CBRM worked it was able to plant the seeds of change; where organizational change did not occur the long-term process of self-reflection did not take hold.

The evolution of CBRM to a more systemic intervention also revealed the importance of intentionality. As mentioned above in the ‘CBRM background’ section, even though the project was more ‘instrumentalist’ in nature in the early phase of implementation the underlying intention was to affect systemic changes. Systemic changes in participating organizations were more readily achieved as practical experience was gained, expectations were humbled and there was an emphasis on self-reflection through strategic planning. Thinking systemically allows an OCB practitioner to be open to uncertainty and complexity. In other words, systemic thinking, as with complexity science, becomes an effective epistemological tool in the face of unpredictable outcomes and constantly changing dynamics (Ramalingam, 2008).

According to Fowler and Ubles (2010, p.22) an OCB practitioner needs to be conscious about their frameworks and assumptions. Thinking systemically allows the practitioner to expect the unexpected, be adaptable and be open to OCB as an iterative process, adjusting to the curves

and bumps of the road as they come (Potter and Brough, 2004; Cornforth and Mordaunt, 2011; Jones, 2011).

Overcoming costs by creating ownership and engaging leadership

The final lesson is vital in terms of cost-efficiency and creating systemic changes. In order for CBRM to affect change, ownership of the change process must be in the hands of the organization itself. CBRM was shown to be a low-cost and potentially very effective project that catalyzed organizational change by encouraging self-reflection and strategic planning. Successful strategic planning, however, required more than what was offered by CBRM and organizations that were able to benefit most found ways to continue investing in the process beyond the intervention. The true cost of organizational transformation is often underestimated, and many organizations simply run out of energy or money before all the stages of the change initiative are completed (Richter, 2010, p.105).

One of the most consistent criticisms that interviewees had of the CBRM program was that it lacked long-term support or follow-up. The Founding Director of Organization 4 had among the harshest criticisms of CBRM saying that the project did not have any positive effect on his organization's ability to become more sustainable because of the lack support after workshops were completed. Adding a twist to a commonly used analogy in capacity building, he noted that while CBRM taught his organization how to fish, the effort was wasted without also giving them a fishing line. The line, in this case, is to expose participants to funding opportunities, donors and potential collaborators in order continue the process of change and strategic planning. Where CBRM worked best, however, was where the participating organizations found ways to accomplish this independently of IDRC. As mentioned, two factors

are vital for creating ownership. First, leadership must be fully engaged and believe in the process; second, the organization must be able to participate and have a large role.

The way in which CBRM engaged leadership and stoked organizational buy-in is likely the least generalizable and most context-specific aspect of the intervention as implemented in West Africa. Research organizations based in other regions will have their own leadership culture and organizational learning characteristics and it is important for OCB practitioners to learn how to induce ownership in these places. Approaching OCB systemically allows such learning to take place and, ultimately, empowers Southern organizations to undertake the process of change in their own way and for their own purposes.

Conclusion

It is important to outline some caveats regarding the validity and generalizability of our findings. This project was based exclusively on the work of IDRC in West Africa and offers three practical lessons on approaching OCB systemically: the viability of a specific entry point, the benefits of humility and intentionality, and the need to create ownership of the change process. It would be prudent to see if these lessons hold in other developing regions, and to see what new lessons emerge through inter-regional comparisons.

On the theoretical side, this project attempts to analyze an OCB intervention through the lens of systems-thinking and complexity science, focusing somewhat loosely on complex adaptive systems (CAS). Placing the scholarly discussion of a CB intervention within this realm is a response to practitioners increasingly looking towards complexity and systems as a way to understand what makes an intervention work and how to make them more effective (Richter, 2010). Nevertheless, there is an ongoing debate regarding whether the collection of disparate

ideas that constitute the field of complexity science, which initially emerged to describe various physical and biological phenomena, can actually be useful to social, political or economic phenomena (Ramalingam, 2008).

Undoubtedly, many aspects of systems-thinking and complexity science do not apply to the practice of CB. However, as suggested by Ramalingam (2008, p.x), complexity science can potentially offer a set of “useful fictions” – or theories – to help make sense of reality. Our findings suggest that adopting a systems-based approach can indeed be an effective way to address the real-life complexities that make OCB an inherently difficult and unpredictable enterprise. Thinking systemically can highlight non-linear influences, allow practitioners to expect the unexpected, and increase the efficacy and efficiency of CB interventions. To understand the full value of this approach, however, further research should be conducted to narrow down which aspects of systems-thinking and complexity science apply to the practice of CB, which aspects do not, and whether the approach improves outcomes over the long-term.

CB remains ill-defined yet is central to development efforts worldwide. Further exploration of systemic approaches to CB could help consolidate the field of practice and lead to a more effective and efficient use of development resources by international agencies.

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