Countries that are emerging from conflict face many challenges, but lack of capacity is at the forefront. Unless it is addressed, fragility is likely to persist. Paradoxically, intense pressure for "quick wins" and results-on-the-ground, especially in post-conflict situations, often pushes the capacity development agenda to the margin.

Capacity gaps can undermine early progress in reconstruction, as local administrators lack the knowledge, skills and experience to sustain or replicate successful outcomes. And although some fragile and post-conflict countries receive huge and unforeseen aid inflows, these can dry up quickly if the government is unable to absorb them and demonstrate progress. In some cases, a vicious cycle can take hold: governments cannot secure aid because they haven’t the capacity to use it, and they haven’t the capacity because they don’t have the resources to develop it.

Local authorities in most fragile states face urgent demands for food, water, housing, health care and schools. Their legitimacy, and even survival, depends on meeting at least some of them. In practice, this means that reconstruction, service delivery and capacity building must be undertaken all at once, albeit with strategic focus to deliver targeted results in key areas.
A Liberian experience

LAST APRIL, Liberia’s Finance Minister Augustine Ngafau outlined the stark realities facing decision-makers in a post-conflict situation. Speaking at a World Bank seminar devoted to capacity-building in fragile settings, he said that when Liberia’s years of civil conflict finally ended in late 2003, the government faced a situation in which three-quarters of the country’s educational facilities were completely destroyed, and most of the country’s roads in disrepair. Meanwhile, a massive and sustained brain drain meant the country was left with “very few doctors, teachers, and hardly any engineers.” He added that Liberia, a country rich in minerals, has only five geologists.

This compelling sketch summarizes the challenge facing states like these: how to manage reconstruction, while simultaneously delivering basic public services, and building capacity, inside and outside government, almost from scratch. In addressing it, Minister Ngafau emphasized the need for donor partners “to understand the whole operating environment, including its social and political dimensions,” and to make capacity building of central importance in the national development strategy.

This testimony, while describing a single country, has elements in common with others that are similarly fragile, whether the fragility is due to recent conflict or to chronic conditions, or both. One of these is that, in almost all such states, there is an urgent need to build the basic capacity of key state as well as non-state institutions to themselves design, implement and monitor high priority policies and programs, rather than relying on imported technical assistance. The key, Minister Ngafau said, “is transferring capacity from externals—expatriates—to staff in our public service.” He added, however, that this capacity transfer must reach senior leaders, not only the lower and middle ranks of the public service; leaders need capacity building too, he said, to motivate those who rely on them for guidance and direction.

These observations echo a recommendation in a recent study by the World Bank’s Independent Evaluation Group, Engaging with Fragile States: “If foreign experts are brought in to provide technical assistance, it must be ensured that this will not compromise the long-term development of local capacity.” This point was reiterated at the same seminar by James Musoni, Finance Minister of Rwanda, a country often cited for its impressive progress in overcoming fragility and conflict. Capacity development, Musoni said, should be an integral part of a country’s poverty reduction strategy.

Key implications for capacity building in fragile settings

WE NEED TO APPROACH CAPACITY BUILDING in fragile and post-conflict settings, at least in the short run, very differently from other settings. An overarching objective is to foster and focus leadership capacity and multi-stakeholder coalitions to achieve tangible results in the short run, while rebuilding longer-terms institutional capacity. Specifically, five key priorities can be identified: (i) focusing leadership capacity-building to achieve rapid results; (ii) choosing strategic entry points and forging multi-stakeholder coalition building around these; (iii) rebuilding professional associations; (iv) building local institutions for sustainable capacity building; and (v) integrating crucial aspects of cohesion and inclusion in leadership capacity and coalition building at different levels.

Achieve rapid results

CAPACITY BUILDING in post-conflict and fragile states presents three unique challenges, at least in the short run: everything is a priority, existing capacity is weak, and visible results must be achieved quickly. Building capacity in these states is like living through history in a hurry: long-term capacities and institutions are needed, but there is only a short time in which to deliver results. So in such settings, this capacity building is not about traditional training or education alone which will take years to deliver results, but it is about on-the-job engagement, in which we draw out and inspire and energize latent capacity to achieve rapid results in targeted areas.

To meet these challenges, capacity building efforts must define goals and results that matter and that people will strive to reach. Since capacity is limited all around, emphasis should be placed on forging coalitions to leverage scarce capacity in state and non-state sectors, as people working together can expand capacity. The leaders must also inspire pride and confidence, spreading a “can do” attitude, while also setting goals that are achievable in view of the constraints.

Accordingly, WBI has facilitated workshops for homogeneous and diverse groups in several African countries to help them define agendas for change, identify priorities, and draft implementation plans that are securely grounded in local realities. Workshops for cabinet ministers have employed a “rapid results” methodology to build capacity. In Burundi, for example, this approach resulted in improvements in government performance: 250,000 textbooks were distributed to the country’s primary schools in 60 days, an exercise which, hitherto, had taken the entire year. Another workshop led to the adoption of a plan that resulted in a 600-percent increase in visits by pregnant women to health centers for HIV/AIDS tests. This approach can be applied in the public sector, in community settings, or where public-private partnerships are being developed.

Strategically select a few entry points

IN VIEW OF LIMITED CAPACITIES, it is important to strategically select a few feasible and visible entry points. Two such areas are: (i) governance of resources use, including extractive industries, budget management and procurement; and (ii) delivery of basic services.

Extractive industries are a case in point. For countries endowed with oil and other high-value natural resources, these resources are often at the root of the conflict. This implies a need to foster multi-stakeholder capacity-building
of both state and non-state actors (including civil society, private sector, parliamentarians and media), to build credibility, trust and transparency throughout the value chain. The goal is to build capacity to transform the resource into a source of income and livelihood for society as a whole, rather than simply a rent appropriated by a small group. Similarly, in view of limited financial and implementation capacities of public, private and civil society institutions, multi-stakeholder partnerships for improving service delivery, including creative public-private partnerships, are needed.

Rebuild professionalism and coalitions

REBUILDING PROFESSIONAL CAPACITIES after conflict should begin with public administration and the civil service. Over the long term, however, professional standards and practices can be restored, or strengthened by professional associations such as those of accountants, auditors, lawyers, and engineers.

It is the profession that helps to set standards, establish and regulate the ethics from within. But professions are hard to develop and take lots of time, especially if countries take international best practice professions as a basis. In this context it is better to develop professionalization “tracks” for post conflict countries that give enough legitimacy to the idea of a “profession” but that have realistic entry standards, perhaps with a set path to converge with international standards in the future. The idea of creating a Liberian Association of Accountants with loose affiliation with the international association is an example, where a Liberia-specific training and access exam were developed.

Build local training institutes and capacity for South-South exchanges

INSTITUTIONS DEVOTED TO CAPACITY-BUILDING should also be established and supported. Ultimately, this is the only sustainable approach, as the demand for public administrators is ongoing. Training institutes have been developed with donor support in numerous countries, but many of these have fallen into disuse.

WBI’s emerging program for fragile states has developed curricula in areas such as rapid results, monitoring and evaluation, budget management, and procurement. Following its recently-developed renewal strategy, WBI will focus on building the capacity of local institutes by sharing experience and developing plans with them to train trainers and broker relationships with other learning institutions.

In addition to building the capacity of training institutes, it is important to facilitate just-in-time practitioner-to-practitioner exchanges for pragmatic sharing of “how-to” experiences that have worked in other challenging settings. Many countries struggling with fragility look to one another for information and best practice. South-south knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning often yield relevant and effective capacity-building outcomes. The Global Development Learning Network (GDLN) can provide a powerful network of knowledge and learning platforms connecting fragile states through video technology, and can thereby facilitate just-in-time exchanges, wholesale learning and help overcome challenges posed by distance and access in fragile settings. To this end, a
network of GDLN facilities in fragile settings will prove very useful for capacity building.

Foster leadership, national identity and cohesion

The final challenge—at once crucial and difficult—is to support leaders in their efforts to rebuild a new social compact and trust between the state and citizens, and between different factions and ethnicities that risk reigniting conflict. The underlying breakdown of trust, ethnic fragmentation and narrow identification, and resulting patronage systems are the main challenges of post-conflict reconstruction. In this context, it will be important to support leaders by integrating cohesion and inclusion in capacity and coalition-building initiatives, for instance, through “win-win” common cause projects in rapid results workshops, inspirational cases of rebuilding cohesion and inclusion in other fragile settings, and helping institute positive mechanisms such as awards and recognition. These features can be integrated in leadership capacity building initiatives at different levels of government—cabinet workshops in central government, line ministries, local governments—and also in empowering agents of change that can be important forces for cohesion and inclusion, such as women and youth leaders. In fragile states, these “softer” aspects of changing attitudes and behaviors, and fostering consensus and cohesion are at least as important as more technical aspects of skill building.

While the task of capacity building in fragile states is formidable, strategic and targeted program can start to build leadership capacity, multi-stakeholder coalitions, and trust in focused areas, and thereby generate rapid results that lead to feasible and sustainable pathways out of conflict.

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