

Practitioners' Perspectives on Capacity Building in Health Program Partnerships: A Case Study

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Background: Global health and development agencies are increasingly integrating capacity building into their strategies for creating sustainable health systems. Many of their implementing partners are US-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and are given the task of building capacity with local partners. A deeper understanding of the issues faced by public health practitioners will assist funders, program designers, and implementing partners plan for capacity-building activities in new health programs and interventions.

Objective: The overall goal of this research project is to study one large NGO to identify opportunities, challenges, and barriers to incorporating capacity building into their partnerships with external organizations located in low-resource settings.

Methods: Thirty-four staff, public health practitioners, and managers from one mid-sized global health NGO underwent in-depth qualitative interviews during a project focused on improving the strategic value of partnerships. Participants were asked to describe the types of capacity building they engaged in, the methods they used to integrate capacity building into their partnerships, the barriers to capacity building they encountered, and perceived benefits to capacity building within their organization.

Results: Analysis of interviews revealed five types of capacity building, each with varying degrees of integration into regular program and partnership activities: organizational, technical, market and manufacturing, policy, and collaborative. The main barriers to capacity building were 1) time frames and funding mechanisms that do not allow the flexibility needed to build capacity, and 2) the difficulty of measuring capacity-building outcomes. The benefits include increased

sustainability of projects and programs, increased ability to reach underserved populations, and stronger health systems. Capacity building was frequently seen as necessary; however, there was tension between taking time to build capacity and saving lives immediately.

Conclusion: While capacity building is becoming an undercurrent in many policies, the support needed to implement capacity building to achieve its full benefits requires more planning, accountability, identification of adequate measurement, and resources than currently are being applied.

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