

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY-LEVEL CAPACITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS: PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF RURAL AFRICA

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Summary

- Local capacity development has been considered crucial in promoting sustainable development in rural Africa. However, the meaning and critical aspects of capacity, as well as how capacity should be measured, are often vague, despite frequent references to the term ‘capacity’ in the international development arena.
- Capacity can be divided into two categories: technical capacity and functional capacity. In the context of rural Africa, the latter is associated with the soft skills of development leaders for facilitating community-driven development in communities. While it is relatively more difficult to measure than technical capacity, functional capacity is regarded as a fundamental driver that leads to sustainable development in rural Africa. Thus, the author examined functional capacities as a main pillar of her research in Ghana and Malawi.
- Through this research, with its primary focus on rural Africa, the key indicators for functional capacities were narrowed down to three: **mutual accountability, engagement and participation**, and **ownership**.
- Capacity assessment tools were tested in 12 communities in Ghana and Malawi. In addition, a set of indicators and other practical instruments have been developed for use in other areas of rural Africa. The instruments developed include a guide for facilitators using a proposed flow of capacity assessment, a translation guide, data collection sheets, and a rubric.
- Scoring mechanisms have been clearly defined in the rubric with 0–5 scales to minimise ambiguity. Scoring patterns used include i) converting quantitative data into a score; ii) using the frequency or number that participants refer to as their response; and iii) sharing scoring scales and facilitating participants’ self-scoring, based on their perceptions.
- Capacity assessment tools have shown potential in triggering positive changes in mindsets (ways of thinking) and actions (ways of doing) for promoting sustainable development in rural communities. Positive effects observed in the process of capacity assessment include i) triggering actions for community-driven development, ii) newly aligned decision-making, iii) renewing commitment to reinforce by-laws, and iv) enlightenment.
- Some recommendations for incorporating capacity assessment into practice include i) putting more emphasis on functional capacities with long-term perspectives, and ii) promoting the application of community-level capacity assessment as a potential tool for enhancing sustainable development in rural Africa.

Background

To tackle multi-dimensional challenges as well as harness the potential of rural Africa, local capacity development deserves more attention than ever as a means of promoting sustainable development.² However, the meaning of capacity, its critical aspects, and how it should be measured are often vague, despite frequent references to the term 'capacity' in the international development arena.

While there are some tools that could be used at the organisational level, there are no frameworks or practical tools for assessing local capacity, particularly at the community level in the context of rural Africa. Most existing tools are not applicable because rural communities differ significantly from formal institutional settings (such as government offices, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or private companies) and applicable indicators thus differ. Another challenge of existing capacity assessment tools is that some of the indicators are ambiguous or overly subjective.

Furthermore, many reports of development projects label conventional technical training as 'capacity development' as if training is the only means of capacity development. This kind of narrow scope leads to descriptions of capacity development outcomes as being merely the number of training workshops, or the number of trainees, without looking into more substantial aspects.

Moreover, the capacity of local communities has a lot of potential for contributing to sustainable community-driven development; yet, this potential has not been fully optimised due to the aforementioned factors. Thus, the author decided to undertake the research titled 'Community-Level Capacity Assessment for Sustainable Development in Rural Africa' as part of her doctoral study from April 2014 to March 2017. The study included a series of field research activities in Ghana and Malawi. This paper presents key findings of the study of capacity assessment with a particular focus on practical application in rural Africa.

Key actors and dimensions of capacity

The context matters when defining key actors in capacity assessment. In most communities in rural Africa, a group of leaders is playing, intends to play, or has the potential to play a leadership role, thus facilitating collective action for sustainable development in their community. Considering their critical roles and potential, the research focused on development leaders at the community level.

Capacity can be divided into two categories: technical capacity and functional capacity. Technical capacity is associated with particular areas of expertise and practice in specific sectors or themes, ranging from agriculture to health, education, potable water, and governance, amongst others.

In contrast, functional capacities are the soft skills of development leaders for facilitating community-driven development in communities. While it is relatively more difficult

to measure than technical capacity, functional capacity is regarded as a fundamental driver that leads to sustainable development in rural Africa. This assessment examined functional capacities as a main pillar of this research.

Through an extensive literature review and a series of national and local-level dialogues with stakeholders in Ghana and Malawi, aspects of functional capacity have been explored, discussed, and narrowed down to specific dimensions that can be applied in rural Africa. Key dimensions of the functional capacity examined include **mutual accountability**, as a foundational aspect of development that forges trust and ensures transparency; **engagement and participation**, as an engine for accelerating proactive and inclusive development processes; and **ownership**, as a way of promoting long-term community-driven development.³

Developing assessment tools and scoring mechanisms for measuring functional capacity

While it is considered difficult to measure functional capacities, the author developed a capacity assessment framework and tools through the following steps.

First, the context, key actors, and key dimensions were clarified prior to the capacity assessment as touched on earlier.

Subsequently, specific indicators, a set of instruments, and scoring mechanisms were developed. These were used,

validated, and finalised through a series of field research activities in six communities in the Wa West District in the Upper West Region of Ghana and six communities in the Mulanje District in the Southern Region of Malawi, totaling twelve communities. The following sections elaborate specific indicators, instruments, and scoring mechanisms adopted for capacity assessment.

Specific indicators of functional capacity

For each dimension of functional capacity, specific indicators were developed. Table 1 shows the key indicators

used for measuring functional capacity in rural communities in Africa.

Table 1. Key indicators for measuring functional capacity

Key Dimensions	Key Indicators
Mutual accountability	Existence of development leaders
	Frequency of development leaders' meetings
	Frequency of community's plenary meetings
	Minutes of meetings
	Information flow from development leaders to community members
	Shared visions in development priorities
Engagement and participation	Level of participation in the community's plenary meetings
	Level of participation in communal labour
	Engagement of external actors in development processes
Ownership	Self-help efforts
	Recognition and use of the community's assets for development

A set of instruments

Through the validation processes, a set of instruments was developed. Key instruments include a guide for facilitators, data collection sheets, a translation guide, and a rubric.

The guide presents a proposed flow to be used by facilitators who carry out capacity assessment.

Data collection sheets help facilitators to record responses during Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and analyse the results of capacity assessment. FGDs were facilitated with separate groups of men, women, and development leaders. Observations and individual interviews were also undertaken to cross check with the results obtained through the FGDs.

A translation guide was developed because certain English terms that development practitioners often use and consider relatively simple may not be easily translated into local languages.

Since the majority of rural communities in Africa use their respective local languages, it was considered

critical to examine, translate, and have a common understanding of terminology among facilitators before undertaking a capacity assessment exercise. A total of 14 selected keywords – such as ‘capacity’, ‘development’, ‘development leaders’, ‘community’, and ‘ownership’ – were translated into three common local languages in the Wa West District of Ghana (Waale, Dagaare, and Brifor) and the national language of Malawi, Chichewa, which is the most commonly used language in the Mulanje District, with the inclusion of a simple definition of each keyword.

A rubric is an explicit set of criteria for assessing a particular type of work or performance objectively and for providing more detail than a single grade or mark.⁴ Rubrics are commonly used, particularly in the education sector, for grading a wide variety of student assignments and tasks.⁵ This method was used as a capacity assessment instrument for defining a scale for each indicator. This helped minimise variations in scores derived from ambiguous definitions of scales and subjective judgments by facilitators.

Scoring mechanisms

For measuring the level of functional capacity in this assessment framework, scores were computed on a 0–5 scale (0=no existence; 1=very low; 2=relatively low; 3=moderate/occasional; 4=relatively high; 5=very high) for each indicator. In the scoring mechanisms, three main patterns of scoring were adopted and the rubric was finalised.

The first scoring pattern converts quantitative data into a score on the scale. For instance, facilitators ask participants how often the community holds community plenary meetings; they record the actual frequency on the data collection sheet during FGDs, and use the 0–5 scores that were defined in the rubric at the analysis stage.

Table 2. Example of scoring pattern 1: Frequency of community plenary meetings

0	1	2	3	4	5
No meeting	Less than once per half-year	At least once every half-year	Once per quarter	Twice per quarter	More than once per month

The second scoring pattern uses the frequency or number that participants refer to as their response. For instance, facilitators ask a focus group to discuss and enumerate the types of assets that they use for development activities in their community. Assets can be

any type (e.g. natural, social/human, cultural/religious, or physical) as long as the community recognises and uses them for promoting their development. Facilitators record all types of assets, and use the number of assets as a score.

Table 3. Example of scoring pattern 2: Frequency/number and corresponding scores

0	1	2	3	4	5
None (0)	Once (1)	Twice (2)	Three times (3)	Four times (4)	Five times or more (5≤)

The third scoring pattern shares scoring scales, and facilitates participants' self-scoring, based on their perceptions. For example, facilitators share the scoring scale of the

level of participation in community plenary meetings, and let participants discuss and determine the level of participation by giving a score of their own.

Table 4. Example of scoring pattern 3: Level of participation in community plenary meetings

Score	Definition	Guidepost
0	No participation	Nobody participates
1	Very low	Only a small number of people participate ≈ Less than 20%
2	Relatively low	≈ Approximately 20–39%
3	Half of them participate	≈ Approximately 40–59%
4	Relatively high	≈ Approximately 60–79%
5	Very high	Almost all participate ≈ More than 80%

While most communities do not count and record the number of participants in community plenary meetings, they remember the level or proportion of participants against the population of each community. Thus, this method makes community-level capacity assessment simple and feasible.

By establishing clear definitions of all indicators and these kinds of scoring mechanisms, ambiguousness can be minimised when undertaking capacity assessment.

Like any other type of FGDs, facilitators need to observe discussions and group dynamics and prevent a few individuals dominating the discussions so that they can obtain an insight into how a group thinks about capacity issues, the range of opinions and ideas, and the consistencies or variations that exist in the community.

Key outcomes and potential of capacity assessment

The research affirms that the capacities identified are valid perspectives with which to assess capacity at the community level in Ghana and Malawi. Moreover, the research examined 12 communities which include both those which have received support from external development agencies and those which have never worked with such projects.

It found that external projects enhanced technical capacities to a certain extent, but had a limited contribution to functional capacities, particularly in mutual accountability and ownership. The research also revealed that the sustainability of development outcomes was highly influenced by the functional capacities of development leaders in the communities.

Aside from the research findings, capacity assessment tools have shown potential in terms of triggering positive changes in mindsets (ways of thinking) and actions (ways of doing) for promoting sustainable development in rural communities. Such changes were observed during feedback sessions during the follow-up visits to both Ghana and Malawi, after the data-analysis stage. The objectives of the visits included i) sharing preliminary findings and providing feedback to community members, ii) validating findings by community members, and iii) collecting additional data where necessary.

For instance, a capacity assessment in a certain community in Ghana revealed that their community had not organised any self-help or communal labour for decades.

However, after the capacity assessment in 2015, a community member started discussions with other community members and initiated communal labour for the construction of a school building. Some children in this community had missed out on the opportunity for formal education and received complementary basic education through support from an NGO, but these children were studying under a mango tree in their community due to the lack of facilities. However, thanks to the first communal labour project initiated by some community members, the children started studying in a school building after completion of the construction work in 2017.

In another community, at the end of the feedback session, an elderly woman stated: 'I have been enlightened a lot about our community; now our strengths and areas for improvements are clear. We will put our efforts into practice.' Her statement, as well as other cases, shows that capacity assessment serves as an opportunity for reflective learning about the potential of each community.

Positive effects observed in the process of capacity assessment include i) triggering actions for community-driven development, ii) newly aligned decision-making, iii) renewing commitment to reinforce by-laws, and iv) enlightenment.

Such effects shall contribute to bringing about a positive change in mindsets and actions, enhancing capacity development, and leading to community-driven development.

Key recommendations

Based on this research, the author has concluded that community-level capacity assessment can contribute to capacity development and sustainable development. When capacity assessment is put into practice, it is recommended that policymakers and development practitioners, as well as

development leaders at the community level, reflect on the following points: i) put more emphasis on functional capacities with long-term perspectives, and ii) promote the application of community-level capacity assessment as a potential tool for enhancing sustainable development in rural Africa.

Recommendation 1: Put more emphasis on functional capacities with long-term perspectives

Although it has contributed to short- and medium-term development outcomes and technical capacities, development aid has made limited contributions to the enhancement of functional capacities. It is essential to place more emphasis on functional capacities in any capacity development effort at the community level. This research revealed that functional capacities are potential drivers of sustainable community-driven development in rural Africa. Functional capacities that have been identified as essential include mutual accountability (e.g. meeting

mechanisms, information sharing mechanisms); engagement and participation (e.g. the level of participation in a community's plenary meetings, communal labour, the engagement of external actors in development processes); and ownership (self-help efforts, the recognition and use of the community's assets for development). To optimise such community potential, the communities should forge an inclusive and diverse institutional development leader platform and determine proper succession plans after their terms end.

Recommendation 2: Promote the application of community-level capacity assessment as a potential tool for sustainable development in rural Africa

It is highly recommended that community-level capacity assessment be applied as a potential tool for promoting sustainable development in rural communities in Africa. This study observed the potential of capacity assessment for facilitating reflective learning and bringing about positive changes in mindsets and actions, which could potentially impact the sustainability of development outcomes.

Furthermore, community-level capacity assessment can be facilitated not only by external researchers or development partners, but also by local stakeholders, including community members themselves. The processes of simplifying capacity assessment tools, defining scoring mechanisms, and developing translation guides in several local languages in Ghana and Malawi can be applied in other parts of Africa.

Conclusion

Community-level capacity assessment, with an increased focus on functional capacity, may be a vital first step for each community towards enhancing the sustainability of development outcomes in rural Africa. This study has revealed that capacity assessment can contribute to

reflective learning about strengths, areas for improvement, and the potential of each community in rural Africa. This kind of initiative and method may also be relevant to other regions of the globe.

Endnotes

- ¹ This briefing paper is based on the doctoral thesis of the author. Kusakari Y (2017) *Community-Level Capacity Assessment for Sustainable Development in Rural Africa*. PhD thesis. Tokyo: University of Tokyo.
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- ⁵ Stevens DD and Levi AJ (2013) *Introduction to Rubrics: An Assessment Tool to Save Grading Time, Convey Effective Feedback, and Promote Student Learning*. Sterling: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

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