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Capacity Strengthening in Environmental and Natural Resource Policy: Lessons from Malawi

22873

Findings

A challenge that often faces developing countries is the formulation and implementation of appropriate policies to improve the welfare of their populations. Given the continued degradation of natural resources and associated decline in the sustainability of their use, making appropriate environmental and natural resource (ENR) policy decisions remains most important among various policies implemented in these countries (Heath and Binswanger, 1996). Efforts to design and implement sound policies in the ENR sectors are thwarted by the lack of adequate capacity in government and non-governmental agencies. However, there have been considerable efforts in the past three decades to improve the policy analysis capacity in developing countries through various approaches to training.

While having enough capacity to conduct policy analysis does not guarantee formulation and the implementation of well-designed policies, it is generally considered a prerequisite for policy dialogue in decision-making agencies and research institutions in developing countries. This article argues that there is a need for rethinking methods of training in ENR policy

analysis and their appropriateness in meeting the changing needs of policy decision-making.

This article is based on a case study of ENR capacity strengthening efforts in Malawi between 1994–1999. The Bunda College of Agriculture, Malawi and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) jointly implemented an Agricultural Policy Analysis Training sub-project as a part of the agriculture service project of the Malawi Ministry of Agriculture, funded by the World Bank. The overall objective of the sub-project was to strengthen the capacity of the Malawian policy analysts in the food, agricultural, and natural resource sectors. It reports on the process and the lessons learned from the experiences and insights gained in developing institutional and human capacity through graduate programs and short-term training courses in ENR policy analysis. The lessons from the Malawi exercise show that the elements of a successful capacity strengthening effort include assessing the needs for capacity strengthening, designing and implementing courses that match the capacity needs and institutionalizing these courses within local institution for sustainability.

Relevance of ENR policy analysis training for policy reforms

Given the increasing complexity of policy reforms and the interrelated nature of the influence of policies designed in one sector on other sectors of the economy, there is an urgent need for rethinking the current approaches to policy analysis training. For example, there is increased recognition of the linkages between policies affecting poverty and their effect on natural resources (Duraiappah, 1998); between policies that affect natural resources and their effect on human nutrition (Kumar and Hotchkiss, 1988); and between the sectoral price policies and the sustainability of natural resources (Pagiola, 1995). To analyze and to evaluate their impact and modify the paths of policy adjustment, it is important to review the contents and conceptual frameworks used in policy analysis training. This is essential when the major objective of policy analysis training programs is to develop the capacity of in-country policy analysts in a wide range of techniques, which can be used both to inform policy debate and improve negotiation with international development and donor agencies.

The long-term training programs in ENR policy analysis and research, while strengthening the analytical skills based on theory, provide little opportunity to apply these skills in solving actual policy problems (Shabman, 1984). This is also true for any applied field that requires analysis and research in solving policy problems (Cairncross, 1986; Hansen, 1991; Woolf, 1992). The participants in the masters and doctoral programs,

who conduct research on such policy issues for their dissertation or thesis research, are exceptions.

The short-term training courses in ENR policy analysis (two to six weeks) are generally oriented towards solving applied policy problems with less emphasis on the theoretical basis for policy analysis techniques. While short-term training courses introduce policy issues through case studies and group discussions, the time limitation in conducting these courses does not allow for a detailed treatment of analytical techniques and their appropriate use in the applied analysis of policy issues. In spite of this, short-term courses continue to be the major form of group-based capacity-strengthening activity for policy analysis. There is a need to investigate alternative approaches to capacity development for policy analysis. Complementary to short-term courses, work-based learning through long-term technical assistance, and transfer of policy analysis skills through specific research studies are gaining importance (Kanbur, 1995). In addition, on-the-job training is a practical approach to strengthening capacity in policy analysis (Weber et al, 1988; Ndulu, 1997).

Some immediate needs for strengthening ENR policy analysis capacity in developing countries are:

- skills for outlining conceptual frameworks (Juma, 1994);
- understanding the importance of reliable data;
- developing the capacity to ask the pertinent questions for the policy environment of the country;
- need for ENR policies to be consistent with economic and political environment of the country;

- the need to decentralize policy analysis; and
- policy analysis related to environmental pollution, resource degradation and sustainability, as they are affected by economic policy reforms (Markandya, 1995).

Constraints and challenges in improving ENR capacity strengthening programs

Besides the diverse course contents of the long- and short-term training courses, which do not provide a comprehensive treatment of both the theoretical principles and their applications to solve real-world policy problems, there are other constraints that make the contents of the ENR policy trainings offered currently less relevant for developing countries. These other constraints are:

- the gap between theory and practice;
- the nature and the organizational structure of the institution;
- constantly changing policy environment;
- a low demand for policy information by the decision-makers in developing country governments from in-country researchers;
- donor agencies and external institutions conducting policy analysis for their own programming and resource allocation purposes as well as preferring external policy researchers rather than local talent;
- the analysis of policies in developing countries being done with inadequate databases and with little understanding of natural resource issues and problems.

- the lack of clear objectives of training programs which makes the evaluation of their impact difficult (Zoungrana and Temu, 1996).
- the mismatch between the needed capacity and the capacity generated through training which reduces the efficiency of capacity-strengthening effort.
- the knowledge acquired by the participants not being fully utilized in their regular jobs; and
- donor agencies having reduced funding for training activities (Braun et al, 1993).

Lessons and recommendations

Bridging the gap between the theory and practice of policy analysis should be the prime objective of the policy-analysis training programs. In order to achieve this objective, it is important to review the roles and modalities of the training of policy analysts in the formulation, analysis, and implementation of ENR policies to reach the development objectives. It is essential to share the experiences of training institutions in capacity-strengthening efforts in the area of ENR policy analysis and to learn from trainers about their attempts to design and implement various training programs. Periodic discussions of pedagogical approaches, constraints and challenges in conducting training courses will help in establishing similar training programs in other regions of the world. There is an urgent need to develop a methodological framework for evaluating the training programs in ENR policy analysis. It is also important to understand the institutional, resource and human capital constraints in develop-

ing and sustaining training institutions in developing countries.

Given the increasing demand for policy changes in environmental and natural resource sectors and the lack of adequate capacity to undertake policy analysis, short-term training efforts in both industrial and developing country institutions need to be continued. Further, the contents of the curriculum of these training programs should be reviewed and revised frequently and adapted to the changing policy environments in the developing countries.

To increase the demand for policy analysis within the government organizations and to use the trained capacity effectively, it is important to introduce organizational changes in the decision-making systems, i.e. policy analysis units. Incentives in terms of career development and peer recognition through appropriate forums within the countries could help maintain a core group of policy analysts.

The links between government ministries and ENR institutions in each country should be strengthened to allow increased policy dialogue and improve the capacity for policy analysis training. A leading institution, which develops sufficient capacity for training in a country, could be strengthened in order to cater to the training needs of the countries in the region (Saint, 1992).

The division of labor among policy analysts, policy decision-makers and policy researchers at various levels in developing countries should be recognized and training programs designed to develop the capacity in each of these areas. This calls for the creation of a network among the ENR training institutions. Post-training

monitoring of personnel, evaluation of their contribution to environmental policy changes, and supporting them through follow-up activities are essential for successful capacity strengthening in policy analysis.

Training institutions tend to respond well to changing demands in the skills of policy analysis. The role of continuous dialogue between the researchers and trainers in academic institutions and policy decision-makers, and between the developing country governments, training agencies and donor agencies in achieving the goals of improved capacity for ENR policy analysis, and hence informed policy decisions, cannot be underestimated. In this respect, there is a need for collaboration and cooperation among the training institutions in promoting the understanding of the issues that they are faced with and in offering appropriate training to make their efforts reach the ultimate beneficiaries—the resource-poor farmers and those faced with degradation of their environment in developing countries.

Conclusion

Several problems confront ENR policy analysis activities in developing countries. The constraints and challenges to increasing the capacity for policy analysis presented here call for a rethinking of the appropriateness of training programs currently offered. Any attempt to reorganize the approaches and methods of policy analysis training should recognize the institutional arrangements in developing countries for using policy information in decision-

making. In addition, the conceptual framework for policy analysis, the appropriateness of the tools and the presentation and advocacy skills currently taught through policy-analysis training should be revised to meet the current needs in designing and implementing policy reforms.

*This article was co-authored by Suresh Babu, Senior Research Fellow and Senior Training Advisor and Valerie Rhoe, Senior Research Assistant, of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). The article, "Capacity Strengthening In Environmental And Natural Resource Policy Analysis: Meeting The Changing Needs" **Journal of Environmental Management**, Vol-*

ume 58, July 2000, by Suresh Babu provides a more detailed analysis of ENR Capacity Strengthening efforts. Also, IFPRI's publication, "Best Practices in Strengthening Policy Research Capacity Around the World" presents more lessons for general application from capacity strengthening for policy research in developing countries. For copies of these publications, please email s.babu@cgiar.org.

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