

The effectiveness of training in building capacity for governance reform

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What is the evidence on the effectiveness of individual training as a means of building capacity for governance reform?

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The K4DD helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Rapid evidence reviews are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

Rapid evidence reviews are commissioned by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, & Development Office and other Government departments, but the views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, the UK Government, K4DD or any other contributing organisation.

1. Summary

This rapid evidence review seeks to answer the following question: ***What is the evidence on the effectiveness of individual training as a means of building capacity for governance reform?*** ‘Governance reform’, in this context, is limited to state governance (such as public administration reform, or anti-corruption) and democratic governance (women’s political participation, parliament, political parties); it does not include economic governance, security sector reform, or governance in other sectors such as health, education, or the environment. The main region of interest is the Eastern Neighbourhood (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova), but since rigorous evidence from here proved to be slim, the focus has been widened to other middle- or low-income countries.

The effectiveness of training is concerned with whether it leads to change, at different levels and over time. Models of assessing training effectiveness may consider the initial response of trainees, the extent to which they demonstrate acquisition of the intended knowledge, skills, or attitudes, and subsequently apply these in their work, and finally whether there are any outcomes from the training such as benefits to an organisation or influence on a system. The further one moves along this trajectory, the harder it is to determine any kind of causal link (Simister & Haddock 2021).

The literature on capacity building suggests that narrow interventions, conducted independently of wider change processes and systems, are unlikely to have effect (Brinkerhoff & Morgan 2010; Pearson 2011). As the understanding of capacity building has evolved and appreciation of its complexity has deepened, so the attention given to any one particular modality in the literature, such as training, appears to have declined. Consequently, it was difficult, within the scope of a rapid review, to locate evidence that directly answers the research question; the findings of this review are therefore only illustrative. However, taken as a whole, they suggest that training is more likely to contribute to the capacity needed for governance reform when it is:

- ▶ **Contextualised:** relevant to the specific political and institutional context, in all its dimensions, and tailored to the priorities and needs of trainees and clients.
- ▶ **Purposeful:** has a clear sense of what the training aims to achieve, and for whom.
- ▶ **Problem-centred:** focuses on specific and practical challenges in a reform process, and encourages the analytical and critical skills to address these.
- ▶ **Connected:** part of a comprehensive and strategic approach to organisational and institutional change, in which each intervention is designed to complement others.
- ▶ **Sustained:** more than a one-off intervention, with mechanisms to reinforce its application over time.
- ▶ **Timely:** provided when it has greatest value to the client – for example, at the right moment in an electoral cycle, or when an organisation is best-placed to apply it.
- ▶ **Quality:** well-planned, carefully targeted, and thoughtfully designed, and applies the principles of adult learning.

The report reviewed both academic and grey literature on different areas of intervention that fall within the two broad categories of state and democratic governance; these provide the structure for the detailed evidence in sections 3 and 4. Some studies refer to training taking place but do not analyse its effects. Others use ‘capacity building’ generically, or interchangeably with ‘training’, making it difficult to be confident about the nature of the intervention being discussed. One limitation of this review is therefore its reliance on keyword searching among adjacent literatures. The literature pays little attention to gender and none to disability. Women may be prioritised within certain areas of training, such as political empowerment, but within this, the particular needs and situation of marginalised women are neglected (Brechenmacher 2021: 5; UN Women 2018: 31). Other areas of training, such as anti-corruption, are assessed as gender-blind (Zinnbauer 2023: 19).

2. Training, capacity building, and change

Capacity is commonly said to operate at three levels: individual, organisational, and institutional (Kacou *et al.* 2022: 216). At the individual level, the traditional focus of capacity building has been to fill gaps in skills and knowledge through training (Brinkerhoff & Morgan 2010: 4). Over time, approaches to capacity building have evolved, with a conceptual shift from ‘training’ to ‘learning’ (Pearson 2011: 9) and a more diverse set of learning methods applied (Kacou *et al.* 2022: 222). Linear assumptions of a causal link between training and organisational performance have been challenged on the grounds that change processes are by their nature complex and unpredictable (Vallejo & Wehn 2016); there are many factors that influence whether knowledge and skills are applied (Danquah *et al.* 2023: 251; Simister & Haddock 2021). Furthermore, isolating the direct contribution of training as one intervention among several is challenging (Gulzar & Prillaman 2023: 8).

Brinkerhoff and Morgan (2010), building on a partnership with the European Centre for Development Policy Management, argue that the ability of external actors to influence endogenous processes of change is highly circumscribed. Their paper applies a systems perspective to capacity building which emphasises its multiple inter-connected elements. These are not just tangible (skills, resources, systems) but also intangible (such as values, vision, leadership, management style, and organisational culture), and therefore both harder to measure and often unrecognised (Brinkerhoff & Morgan 2010: 7-8). Since no single factor can explain the development of capacity, “narrow interventions, such as staff training, are not likely to make a significant difference in performance unless they can create opportunity space or leverage that can shift actors’ behaviors” (Brinkerhoff & Morgan 2010: 9). Similarly, Pearson (2011: 9) notes that “[t]raining individuals is rarely an adequate capacity development response in and of itself”.

A stock-taking of the peer-reviewed literature on capacity building published over the last 50 years concludes by outlining a ‘new pragmatism’ (especially when building capacity for public administration) which is sensitive to context and complexity, places diagnosis before prescription, and looks for ‘best-fit’ rather than ‘best-practice’ solutions (Kacou *et al.* 2022). A

similar shift has taken place within the field of technical assistance (TA).¹ The new paradigm is ‘politically informed and adaptive’: it takes a problem-solving approach, looks for context-specific solutions, aims for incremental improvements in capacity rather than comprehensive reform, and ensures that local actors lead the identification of both problems and solutions (Cox & Norrington-Davies 2019: iii). However, the transition from concept to practice can be slow: while there has been some uptake of these new approaches to TA there is as yet limited evidence of their effectiveness, and traditional approaches still dominate (Price 2019: 5).

With this background in mind, this rapid review seeks to answer the following question: *What is the evidence on the effectiveness of individual training as a means of building capacity for governance reform?* The search strings included both ‘capacity building’ and ‘capacity development’ which are often used interchangeably (Kacou *et al.* 2022: 227), although they are also differentiated: the first understood as intervention and the second as process (Danquah *et al.* 2023: 249; Timmis 2018: 3).

A striking consensus across the literature reviewed is the weakness of the evidence. For example:

- ▶ *Capacity building*: Timmis (2018: 2) finds “a dearth of rigorous evaluations of capacity building interventions”.
- ▶ *Technical assistance*: “The body of evidence on the effectiveness of TA is relatively weak. There has been little detailed analysis of whether some types of TA have been more successful than others, or of the conditions under which TA is most likely to be effective” (Cox & Norrington-Davies 2019: 10).
- ▶ *Training*: Garavan *et al.* (2019) analyse 217 quantitative empirical studies into the link between training and organisational performance, published between 1997 and 2018, and find “significant validity threats...that raise questions about the methodological rigor of the field” (Garavan *et al.* 2019: 291).
- ▶ *Public sector institutional reform*: “There is a lack of rigorous, systematic evidence on what external support for public sector institutional reform has or has not been effective, and on how and why this is the case” (Joshi & Carter 2015: 2).
- ▶ *Anti-corruption training*: “there is very little publicly available empirical evidence [of] which types of training approaches work in practice or how training impacts have evolved and morphed over time” (Zinnbauer 2022: 5).

¹ TA is relevant to this review given its use in public sector reform and its close association with capacity building (Price 2019).

3. State governance

3.1 Anti-corruption and integrity training

Training has been central to anti-corruption efforts (Camargo & Passas 2017). Across the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region, a key determinant of its effectiveness is **the working environment for civil servants**, and specifically whether this encourages and facilitates the application of new knowledge and skills (OECD 2015: 72). A cross-country review of national prevention practices in Eastern Europe and Central Asia highlights Estonia's public service ethics training, which is voluntary but in high demand. Three factors underpin its effectiveness: (i) **high-level political commitment**, which ensures sustainability; (ii) **an emphasis on values-based reasoning**, i.e. the ability of participants to recognise and analyse ethically problematic situations, rather than a simple focus on the regulations; and (iii) **the competence of the trainers**, who are drawn from a mix of professional and organisational backgrounds (OECD 2015: 71; OECD 2013: 36-41).

Zinnbauer (2023, 2022) reviews the empirical literature on integrity training since 2013 and finds limited evidence of what works and what does not.² The 24 studies and 8 meta-reviews in the sample have three general weaknesses: (i) little information about the training provided and its specific design features; (ii) short timeframes, which rarely look at effectiveness beyond 18 months; and (iii) inadequate attention to gender. None of the studies looked at gender-specific training and only two achieved close to gender parity in survey participation; most even lacked information about the gender breakdown of training participants (Zinnbauer 2023: 19). The lack of attention to gender is problematic – not just because it neglects the differing exposure of women and men to the risks associated with corruption, but also because anti-corruption training might benefit from experience in other fields about how to help women deal with power asymmetries (Zinnbauer 2023: 19-20).

Whilst there is little clarity on which anti-corruption training approaches are more effective than others, and under what circumstances, the literature points to three features that make success more likely: (i) **a balanced mix of training components** across values, knowledge, and skills; (ii) **careful attention to group composition and dynamics** before and during training; and (iii) **learner-driven and interactive formats**. However, there is no clear evidence of effectiveness in terms of the optimum length of training or the merits of on-site versus online delivery (Zinnbauer 2023: 14-15).

Zinnbauer (2023: 10-13) is optimistic that training effectiveness can be satisfactorily measured and points to a number of innovative data sources for doing so, such as experimental cheating games or textual analysis of organisational documentation. Recommendations for enhancing integrity training focus on ways to reinforce its application in real-life situations:

² 'Integrity training' covers compliance, ethics, and anti-corruption (Zinnbauer 2022: 2).

- ▶ Widening the repertoire of strategies and tactics that help participants resist corruption and manage situations of asymmetric power.
- ▶ Introducing new pedagogies likely to incentivise the application of training, such as commitment devices, or direct engagement with stakeholders whom participants are likely to encounter in situations of corruption risk.
- ▶ Broadening the function of training, for example by also contributing to research (drawing on participants' reflections), or by building peer support networks that help participants deal with future integrity challenges, complemented by continued access to expertise and resources (Zinnbauer 2023: 16-18; Zinnbauer 2022: 9-14).

Camargo and Passas (2017) emphasise the critical importance of context. Despite substantial investment in anti-corruption programmes globally, high levels of corruption persist, including in countries committed to reform. Drawing on comparative research in seven countries,³ the authors attribute this to the strength of social norms and the persistence of informal practices and networks. They argue that anti-corruption strategies should start from a deeper understanding of the logic of these informal mechanisms to those involved. Some of the lessons and recommendations have implications for training:

- ▶ anti-corruption efforts should focus on networked corruption rather than on individual corrupt behaviour (Camargo *et al.* 2022);
- ▶ a problem-solving approach may be more effective than a normative one (Camargo *et al.* 2022);
- ▶ where the gap between formal reform processes and informal practice is large, the provision of technical assistance to government bodies risks deepening the façade and validating a commitment to anti-corruption that may not be genuine (Camargo & Passas 2017: 17).

3.2 Public administration reform

Few studies were found that consider the contribution of training to public administration reform in the Eastern Neighbourhood, and those that do are anecdotal, such as an EU-funded civil service training programme in Azerbaijan whose implementation was negatively affected by its short timeframe and lack of flexibility (Wiskow 2017). Karini (2017) considers the process of policy learning for administrative capacity in the Western Balkans and identifies a number of constraints on training as a capacity-building instrument. Most of these suggest inadequate attention to context and needs assessment, and include: (i) high levels of turnover in public bodies; (ii) stand-alone training, rather than being integrated in wider programmes of administrative capacity-building; (iii) an over-emphasis on training for EU accession processes; and (iv) a narrow understanding of the actors with influence on policy transfer, particularly the informal networks of bureaucrats, contractors and civil society actors. Beyond the region, Lyu *et al.* (2022) consider the link between the quality of government and the outcomes of civil service training in south-east Asia (Vietnam, Laos,

³ Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda

Cambodia, Myanmar, and Indonesia) and suggest that the former is not necessarily a result of training programmes but rather an independent variable that affects training effectiveness.

3.3 Using evidence

The Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme supported governments and parliaments in 12 low- and middle-income countries in Africa and Asia between 2013 and 2017. Training was a key intervention, and the evaluation of BCURE identified a number of conditions under which its application was more effective:

- ▶ where training and learning activities were **well-targeted, contextualised, practical, and participatory**, and where **follow-up support** was available;
- ▶ where training was **reinforced by other mechanisms**, such as tools to help staff carry out their work, or incentives to encourage behaviour change (Vogel & Punton 2018: 36-38).

Parliaments in Kenya and Zimbabwe were supported with a mix of training, mentoring, exchange visits, and internships. There was more evidence of effectiveness in Kenya than in Zimbabwe, attributed to a number of factors:

- ▶ **Timing:** the training came at a time when the parliamentary research unit was expanding and needing to equip new staff.
- ▶ **Leadership:** senior managers already recognised the value of evidence; a team-working culture encouraged trainees to share skills with other colleagues; career incentives, such as assignments to high-profile parliamentary committees, were used to recognise good performance.
- ▶ **Sustained and comprehensive approach:** technical support was ongoing, flexible, and joined-up (Vogel & Punton 2018: 81-85).

The evaluation also tested the assumption that training a critical mass of evidence users would lead to broader change, but found that this required specific and targeted strategies that take account of organisational context. In summary, building capacity for evidence use requires a politically-informed approach in which interventions at multiple levels (individual, organisational, institutional) combine to affect the system as a whole. Since government reform processes are unpredictable and context-specific, a flexible and tailored process of accompaniment is more effective than *ad hoc* or isolated support (Vogel & Punton 2018: 34).

4. Democratic governance

4.1 Women's political power and participation

There is a persistent gender gap in political participation and leadership which is a function of multiple constraints rooted in individual resources, social norms, and the functioning of institutions (UN Women 2018: 4). Capacity building programmes have been one strategy to address this gap, particularly as it concerns access to information and knowledge. Recent studies on efforts to enhance the political participation and leadership of women include:

- ▶ An evidence review of more than 220 papers published since 2000, limited to those with clear theories of change and rigorous and replicable methodologies (Gulzar & Prillaman 2023).
- ▶ A rapid evidence assessment of the lessons from 119 country-level and thematic evaluations posted to UNDP's Evaluation Resource Centre and UN Women's Global Accountability and Tracking of Evaluation Use database since 2012 (Guerraggio & Tateossian 2022).
- ▶ A study of EU support for women's political participation since 2016, based on four country case studies⁴ (Brechenmacher 2021).
- ▶ A corporate evaluation of UN Women's contribution to women's political participation and leadership between 2011 and 2017, drawing on a sample of 43 countries with in-depth analysis in 24 of these (UN Women, 2018).

These reports draw similar conclusions about capacity building in general and training in particular:⁵

Interventions that aim to fill gaps in women's political knowledge and skills can be effective, but only if other barriers to women's political participation and power are also addressed (Gulzar & Prillaman 2023; Brechenmacher 2021; UN Women, 2018). These barriers may be social norms, financing, political violence, or candidate selection processes.⁶ For example, skills training for women candidates may not be a good fit in situations where political parties are clientelistic, and where the women selected tend to be those with close ties to male politicians (Brechenmacher 2021: 5). Stronger theories of change may help to position capacity building within a broader vision for change and avoid the fragmented nature of current support (Brechenmacher 2021: 5).

The timing of training matters. Effectiveness may be undermined if it takes place too far in advance of an election (UN Women 2018: 47), or equally too close and leaves insufficient time to work with candidates (Guerraggio & Tateossian 2022: 6), or if support is not sustained throughout the electoral cycle (Brechenmacher 2021: 5).

Capacity building that is collectively or institutionally-based is more likely to lead to sustainable improvement than that which is individually-based or *ad hoc*. Examples include working through women's parliamentary groups, caucuses, or forums at different levels of government in El Salvador, Pakistan, Turkey, and Kyrgyzstan (UN Women 2018: 54, 67; Guerraggio & Tateossian 2022).

Political turnover may affect the sustainability of capacity building results, particularly since some evidence suggests that women's political careers are shorter than those of men.

⁴ Bosnia and Herzegovina, Morocco, Sri Lanka, Zambia.

⁵ It is not always clear whether 'capacity building' is being used generically, or as a substitute for 'training'.

⁶ The latter is illustrated by Egypt, where female candidates tended to be placed at the bottom of their party lists (Guerraggio & Tateossian 2022: 6).

This highlights the importance of post-training follow-up and longer-term tracking that considers the effects of training beyond political life (UN Women 2018: 67).

These overall conclusions are echoed in a study of women's political participation in North Macedonia. This argues for a systemic, multi-year approach to the transfer of knowledge and skills, which is tailored to the particular needs of different categories of women, and prioritises learning through practice rather than one-off short-term training (Koložova & Savovska 2019: 42-43).

4.2 Institutionalising training in electoral bodies

There is relatively little research in general on the training provided by electoral management bodies (EMBs) to their staff, particularly cross-country studies (James *et al.* 2023: 416). The institutionalisation of training is defined, in this context, as “the strength of the mechanisms for ensuring that training provision is embedded into electoral processes by electoral management bodies” (James *et al.* 2023: 420). It may be achieved through a mix of institutional incentives, legal requirements, and accountability mechanisms. Institutionalisation is explored through survey responses from 49 EMBs.⁷ The authors caution that institutionalisation is not synonymous with quality, but suggest that greater attention to it could accelerate the effects of training quality (James *et al.* 2023).

4.3 Training and capacity building for political parties

Between 2011 and 2015, Sweden's strategy for democracy support through its Party Affiliated Organisations sought to strengthen “democratic development and increased respect for human rights in developing countries” (Bryld *et al.* 2015: 13). However, the approach to capacity development focused on the training of individual politicians rather than supporting strategic processes of party reform (Bryld *et al.* 2015: 49). While the evaluation found evidence of enhanced awareness and understanding among those trained, there was little evidence that this contributed to organisational or institutional change. In the few cases where this was achieved, including in Ukraine and South Africa, it was attributed to either **targeting the right person or taking a more strategic approach** to capacity development that centred on longer-term institutional reform (Bryld *et al.* 2015: 32-33). The same evaluation also notes a lack of data to assess the quality of programme outputs and outcomes, and a lack of follow-up or tracer studies post-training (Bryld *et al.* 2015: 41).

⁷ Among the surveyed countries, training institutionalisation in 2021 was classified as average in Moldova (where poll worker training, testing, and certification is required under the Electoral Code) and very low in Bosnia and Herzegovina (James *et al.* 2023: 430).

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6. About this review

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6.3 Review overview

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