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# Theory within a Policy

## Dissecting Capacity Development, Harvesting Knowledge Stances

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**Abstract:** This essay unpacks capacity development policies, discussing its core rationales and building theory out of its main conceptual assumptions. Capacity development focuses on addressing and improving the elusive terms, qualities and means of ‘capacity’ needed for lasting development.

The essay addresses the following questions: what are the core rationales of capacity development? What theoretical sources lay within capacity development? Is it possible to distil analytical synthesis from these theoretical sources? It draws upon the understanding of agency as described by capacity development. Its theoretical foundations are extracted and discussed, building a single corpus: the knowledge stance perspective is proposed to observe meso-level agency. It builds on institutional work and innovation intermediation scholarly streams.

The knowledge-stances perspective on agency shows a set of knowledge stances as analytical tools. Stances of boundary exploration, boundary setting and practice work are shown as forms of enacting, positioning and expanding a practice field. Stances of knowledge exploration, intermediation and supply are shown as strategies to enlarge its cognitive base. The theoretical value of this perspective accounts for a twofold purpose. First, addressing the realms of knowledge at stake in meso-level interaction, as a means to deepen conceptual reach on the myriad of discourses currently fostering change. Second, promoting a scope of practice and research that allows framing (capacity) development beyond the project level and the donor-focused scope.

**Keywords:** capacity development; knowledge stances; critical policy analysis; governance technologies; social change.

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## Introduction

This essay discusses a possible STS approach to policy analysis. The argument is built on the Foucauldian assumption that technologies of power are knowable objects (Jessop 2006). Rather than taking the more common critical policy analysis approach developing criticisms of power, this essay builds on policy as a possible ontological state of knowledge (Jasanoff 2004), and experiments on extracting and building from theoretical sources likely rooting policy itself.

Following a backwards-analytical inquiry, the essay unpacks capacity development policies, discussing its core rationales and its main conceptual assumptions. Capacity development performs as an umbrella term in the context of development practice (cf. DAC-OECD 2009). An unstable concept, it focuses on addressing and improving the elusive terms, qualities and means of ‘capacity’ needed for lasting development. Interestingly, capacity development as a model brings together various aspects in a way not often seen in scholarly work. The expression identifies and describes capacity, mediating both analytical frames and practical experience in its attempt to guide change-oriented agency: agency oriented towards what has recently been labelled as transformative change (Grin et al. 2010).

On the assumption that “there is nothing more practical than a good theory” (Lewin 1951, 169), the essay addresses the following questions. What are the core rationales of capacity development? What theoretical sources lay within capacity development? Is it possible to distil analytical synthesis from these theoretical sources? As a possible answer, the analysis builds on institutional work and innovation intermediation literature to propose a knowledge-stances perspective on agency.

The essay draws specifically upon the understanding of agency as described by capacity development policies. Capacity development is therefore not used here as a source of contents, rather as a knowledge reference (Keller 2011). Relevance of these questions – and the proposed exercise – can be stated at several levels. As a STS scholar approach to policy, these questions pose an example of an inquiry into the ontological status of knowledge in policy. As such, the case has been rarely raised for the case of social sciences. Capacity development is seen in this essay as a performative form of knowledge (Van Egmond and Zeiss 2010) that can be addressed as an object and further analysed. Knowledge stances describe a set of repertoires, gestures that can be played by actors in the attempt of change (as inspired by capacity development).

But there is more to it in what relates to the theory-practice continuum. Because of its context and sectorial challenges, policies related to capacity development attempt to set comprehensive models as means for action. These models bring together knowledge sources and rationales that would be otherwise divided.

However, there is a fundamental shortcoming to it: capacity develop-

ment policies are concerned with development of other actors. Policies are functional to developmental aims, sight focusing only in the counterparts of aid, on those at the other end of the string. As policy development tools, capacity development policies aim at affecting agency of other actors, yet they do not acknowledge the full agency of those issuing the policy, their presence as counterparts. Actors themselves are not visible.

One main assumption of our discussion is that it might be worth exploring the hidden theoretical implications beyond this invisibility. By digging deeper into the theoretical foundations of these policy tools, it should be possible to see how is it that different actors gather around new practices. Moreover, it should be possible to illustrate how embedded institutions and rationales of these actors might affect other parties and the extent (and deeper challenges) that actors might have to face towards the goals of transformative change.

Therefore, this essay focuses on the understanding of agency in capacity development. Capacity development theoretical foundations are extracted and discussed, building a single corpus: knowledge stances are proposed as analytical units to observe meso-level agency. To this effect, we comparatively discuss institutional work and innovation intermediation scholarly streams, arguably the theoretical background of capacity development policies.

The essay is composed of three sections. The first section discusses the context, foundations and overarching rationales of capacity development policies, as enacted by international organizations, NGOs and governments playing in the sector. The second section discusses the scholarly streams that, more or less explicitly, nurture international capacity development thought and practice: institutional work and innovation intermediation. The section also builds on their theoretical overlaps and complementarities, revealing both the shortcomings and potential of practice-laden social scientific work. The third section proposes a comprehensive theoretical synthesis focused on features of meso-level agency.

## I. What is Capacity Development?

This section discusses capacity development, following a twofold purpose. First, it aims to deepen our understanding of capacity development as a discursive *dispositif* (Foucault 1972; Keller 2011). Second, it aims to set some points of reference in order to ground theory (Charmaz 2014). Capacity development is discussed as a tool of international development policy. The section describes its background settings, discusses its epistemic status and delves into its (veiled) assumptions.

The various definitions of capacity development originate from the international development sector – and the scholar activity taking part in it. The most influential definitions are given by the United Nations (2008a, PAG??), who define capacity development as: “the process through

which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time". In the World Bank context, Otoo et al. (2009, 3) define the term as: "locally driven process of learning by leaders, coalitions and other agents of change that brings about changes in socio-political, policy-related, and organizational factors to enhance local ownership for and the effectiveness and efficiency of efforts to achieve a development goal". The OECD (2006, 12) defines the concept as: "the ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully". Following a systemic approach, Ubels et al. (2010, 4) define capacity development as: "change processes [in] the ability of a human system to perform, sustain itself and self-renew." Overall, capacity development refers to increasing people-based autonomy deployment.

The tenets behind these definitions can be traced to Sen's and Nussbaum's works on human capabilities. Sen (from economics) and Nussbaum (from ethics and law) proposed seminal insights for the human development framework (Gasper 2003). According to their approach, human beings and social, cultural and environmental sustainability are to be regarded as the priorities for development efforts, where capacities constitute both the means and ends of development. Acknowledging, creating and maintaining capacity is, in this sense, acknowledging, creating and maintaining development (UNDP 2010a). "When we talk about capacity" – says Sen – "what we are ultimately looking for is the capacity of human beings, what they are capable of doing, what they have the freedom to do" (UNDP 2010b). These principles are at the core of the concept's axiological references.

Beyond the realm of discourse, capacity development has brought about institutional change for international development practice. It was used to drive the transformation of technical assistance practices, which with time became also a battleship to bring about changes in international aid architecture, as seen in the various aid summits (Dabelstein 2012). The concept brought to the table alternative approaches, creating a path (e.g. Browne 2002) and scoping and embedding new practices into development agencies (e.g. DAC-OECD 2006; Otoo et al. 2009; UNDP 2008b). Many actors built the term, adding formal networks (e.g. OECD's GOVNET's reference DAC-OECD 2006), informal networks (e.g. LenCD.org 2013) as well as independent consultants (e.g. Morgan 1997).

In the following paragraphs, we will discuss several overarching aspects lying in the background thinking of capacity development. The first relates to the understanding of social learning as a means of social change. The second relates to the levels at which capacity is to be found and nurtured. The third relates to the analytical scope of capacity development, situated at the meso-level. We will finish reflecting on what these rationales entail to the understanding of change agency.

## 1.1 Theorizing Social Learning as Means of Social Change

Often capacity development texts aim at making sense of social learning as a vehicle for “development” or “social change,” unveiling the necessary means to strive for it (e.g. Brinkerhoff and Morgan 2010; Taylor 2007). These texts try to assemble the various pieces of the puzzle, addressing this subject as broadly as possible.

Capacity development texts’ understanding of social learning includes the distributed capabilities that would imply the change of individuals, organizations and societies (e.g. Alaerts 2009; Kaspersma 2013; Morgan 2005), but also the role played by more complex social processes, like power, local history and change drivers. DAC-OECD (2006) stresses how: “capacity is not only about skills and procedures; it is also about incentives and governance”. Interestingly, this link between the account of distributed capabilities and governance suggests some practical understandings of the cognitive dimension of institutional work (see Lawrence et al. 2013).

Expectedly, capacity development often stresses the importance of the non-material dimension of change. Or, at least, it implies more importance should be given to this aspect as a determinant of change. To specify these realms, Ferreira (2012) introduces the concept of social technologies. Social technologies are: “methods and designs for organizing people in pursuit of a goal or goals” (Beinhocker 2006, 262). According to Beinhocker, social technologies include institutions – in North’s sense (1990) – but also include other ingredients, such as structures, roles and cultural norms (Beinhocker 2006).

Examples of social technologies are facilitation methodologies, management practices, electoral systems and rural small market cultures. Changes in social technologies, says Ferreira, suppose dialogues between various local and general knowledges. The use of the plural form for knowledge is deliberate: it implies convergence of multiple sources, rationales and values behind knowledge. These sources would refer to social technologies’ components, dimensions or processes. Dialogue between knowledges, it would be expected, creates new ways of understanding and constructing local realities.

Therefore, capacity development assumes that social change is a function of social learning, with change coming about as a result of transformations in individuals, organizations and societies, especially in the realm of social technologies. This is seen through transformations in the ways people organize themselves to go about their circumstances. Expectedly, models adding to capacity development as a reference framework delve into mechanisms of social learning – one could say absorption, learning, and innovation on social technologies – attempting to tackle these complex layers. These models are here means of theory, in the sense that they provide an abstract understanding of the social phenomenon at hand (Abend 2008).

## 1.2 Identifying and Linking Capacity Levels

Where is capacity to be found according to development practice? We have already mentioned capacity is seen as a feature of individuals and organizations. But capacity is also to be found at less concrete levels, such as in society, the system and/or the enabling environments. Capacity development texts often assume a close interrelation between these levels. Here are some details of this approach.

The notion of an enabling environment describes “the broader system within which individuals and organizations function and one that facilitates or hampers their existence and performance” (Land et al. 2009). In a sense, it describes an aggregation of social technologies, to use Beinhocker’s concept. The enabling environment is the changing – trending and/or conflicting – space of encounter between organizations and the cultures it is drawn upon. But it also appears in the multiple forms of institutions: the less tangible “rules of the game” and the formal ones in the form of norms or policies (UNDP 2008b). All these elements constrain or foster change. In spite of the difficulties of effectively addressing this level, it is regarded as a core objective of capacity development efforts.

The organizational level is perceived as functional to the enabling environment level. Therefore, the capacity development framework stresses the organization’s effectiveness at delivering on mandates as a core performance criterion (ECDPM 2008; Mentz 1997). From this starting point, various aspects referring to organizational capabilities extend the capacity development literature. The individual level, again, is subordinated to the organizational level. The capacity development approach supposes an evolution from a generic provision of disperse technical assistance and training initiatives to a more systematic understanding of social learning and decision-making, thus to a more strategic role of an individual’s potential in organizational contexts (Browne 2003).

## 1.3 Analytical Scope

Expectedly, capacity development texts do not give an explicit account of their analytical scope. It is possible to infer it, however, by means of its role and settings as a concept. In other words, it answers the questions: what kind of practice does the concept inform and for whom?

As said, capacity development performs at the same time as an embedded tool and a goal of developing practice. It informs policy-making, project management and boundary relations of the many international aid stakeholders and operators. Its regular setting is that of the meso level, defined as the concrete sphere where encounters between diverse organizations take place, the sphere in which, in the interaction of actors in “fields, arenas or games [...] social orders [...] are constructed and re-produced” (Fligstein 2001, 107). The meso-level comprises the interac-

tions of diverse organizations, whatever their purpose and nature, and the forms of practice and institutional spheres they build in that process. These arrangements play roles at the local, regional, national and international levels.

Capacity development texts attempt to identify and address lasting features of the meso-level. Although its rationale is limited to the project level – in tune with development practice – it is concerned with the building of enabling environments (e.g. DAC-OECD 2006; Otoo et al. 2009; UNDP 2008b): understanding and intentional agency towards sustained governance and institutional depth (e.g. World Bank 2012), is expressed in the design of practical ways to tackle its multiple levels, multiple actors and multiple dimensions (Ubels 2010).

This form of agency, that is, pro-development through interaction at the meso level, is built and suggested by the collection of models informing the framework. These models are often presented as a result of learning processes (e.g. Browne 2003; DAC-OECD 2006; ECDPM 2008). They further inform, guide or frame practice by means of setting guidelines (e.g. UNDP 2008c), assessment of previous experiences (e.g. ECDPM 2008), evaluation criteria (e.g. Otoo et al. 2009), or facilitation references (e.g. JICA Research Institute 2008).

#### **1.4 Change Agents as Means of Governance**

Who brings about change? One can infer from capacity development texts that social change can be triggered and led by any actor within society. We have above introduced the World Bank's (2011) definition, coining change agents as: "leaders, groups, coalitions and others that can initiate and drive positive changes towards the achievement of a development goal". In this sense, neither the type of agent nor his or her impact scale is relevant, for developmental value is not exclusively a state matter (DAC-OECD 2011).

The assumption that "any actor can initiate and drive change" suggests a specific understanding of policy and governance. Here we are reminded of Ostrom's definition of an actor being: "a single individual or a group functioning as a corporate actor", and action being those "human behaviors to which the acting individual attaches a subjective and instrumental meaning" (Ostrom 2007, 30). This understanding implies power distribution at multiple levels, including that of the international and non-governmental agencies authoring the framework.

In effect, pursuing 'developmental' value (as any other value) supposes defying (with more or less degrees of antagonism) a certain state of affairs. It is not difficult assuming that such endeavour enacts a purpose, responds to (more or less legitimate and shared) motives, is expressed in a (more or less elaborated) discourse and is (more or less) contested by other actors. Policy, following this thread, is seen (and enacted) by the capacity development framework as the result of a multiple governance

grid (Hupe 2006).

Capacity development texts do not overlook the existence of political struggle in these processes. However, following the rationale of social learning as social change, they emphasize its contents. Or, as Li (1999) has argued, social change is rendered as a technical matter. Change agents, from this perspective, are vehicles of knowledge and institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio 1988). They are means for the building of competence, organizational accountability and institutions.

In summary, capacity development texts, scholarly and practice alike, reflect the means by which actors play a governing role at the meso-level. Capacity development is a collection of models, guides, recommendations and reports informing practice, in which models inspired in theoretical sources mix with accounts of experience. As such, capacity development illustrates the inner workings of a governance technology.

## **2. What is the Epistemic Status of Capacity Development?**

What is the reach of capacity development as a reference, which is created in the realm of policy? A brief answer to this question allows understanding the particular approach of capacity development to its object, and therefore its theoretical limits. In the context of this essay, this answer accounts for the reason why digging deeper in capacity development's tenets is needed.

As loosely sketched in the introduction, we argue that capacity development was constructed as a developmental practice-based reference. Various threads come in line with this assumption. First, capacity development knowledgeable sources are practice-based sources. The work by Mosse about how development is cultivated allows interpreting capacity development as a practice-based reference model. Following Mosse, it is likely that capacity development emerged "through critical reflections on practice" providing "second-order' rationalizations [...] helping the way in which [...] practice is represented and communicated" (2005, 154).

Capacity development reference documents from international organizations show semi-formal and informal networks playing a role as knowledge reservoirs (e.g. OECD 2006). These reservoirs include all kinds of reference sources. Websites linking to informal networks, such as LenCD.org and Capacity.org, display experiences (cases, editorials, and critical reflections), practice-oriented resources (handbooks, concept notes, toolboxes) or focused peer-to-peer assistance (topic communities). Sometimes they also edit bulletins or journals. These networks are specially focused on Capacity development as a topic. Others, such as km4dev – knowledge management for development – link to practice following practitioners' interest in addressing knowledge in development, focusing on knowledge-related functions, problems or tools, addressed by



and to any setting within the world of development.

Following this thread, the epistemic value of capacity development is shaped by international development cultures to the scope of a model-based, project-sized prescriptive approach. Except for one critical essay (Kühl 2009), scholarly work shares both the scope of practice and the prescriptive approach. Nurtured by the various development fields, scales and functions within development practice, Capacity development plays a role as an umbrella concept (Swierstra and Rip 2007). More a tentative than a mandatory or stable concept, it works as a transversal reference for the sector, set to affect its everyday routines and operative protocols: core documents of capacity development are meant to bring new rationales into project design (e.g. World Bank 2012; UNDP 2008c).

## 2.1 Conceptual Anchors

However, this does not mean the capacity development framework lacks conceptual anchoring. A knowledgeable reader will see that institutional thought is embedded in the approaches of the World Bank, OECD and United Nations. The systemic complex adaptive thinking shapes, more explicitly, the European Center for Development Policy Management – ECDPM approach.

The existence of institutional and systemic thought as theoretical references would allow seeing the capacity development framework as a performative form of knowledge or, as Van Egmond and Zeiss (2010) have suggested in a similar case, a boundary object informing policy. However, scholarly capacity development texts do not delve into these disciplinary fields. They do not give step-by-step accounts of its rationales and assumptions, nor do they discuss any disciplinary research (Alaerts 2009). These texts mostly draw on sources – and their experience – to sketch models that development actors could follow in order to develop the capacity of others.

Scholarly references nurturing these networks are scattered in types of content, purpose and approach. The references somehow resemble practice itself, in the sense of bringing in analytical frames to describe, justify or explain everyday uses. In order to do this, disciplinary sources are adapted or re-contextualized. The texts embed disciplinary explanations as model rationales, in the form of normative references (e.g. Otoo et al. 2009). Innovation studies or knowledge management languages appear often, although their ‘natural’ settings do not necessarily fit development rationales. Interestingly, the development sector is rapidly acquiring innovation jargon (e.g. Klerkx et al. 2011; Ngwenya and Hagmann 2011).

### 3. Building Blocks: A Conceptual Discussion

What does the previous account of capacity development unveil? In short, it describes practical means for governance, a detailed illustration of governance agency. As previously said, capacity development embeds a theoretically and practically informed understanding of: i) governance settings, set at the meso-level in interaction with actors; ii) governance layered accounts, specified by capacity levels; iii) governance means, focused on the realm of social learning; and iv) embedding of various disciplinary streams.

#### 3.1 Constructive Means for Theory Grounded in Capacity Development

The overall approach builds on an interpretative reading of capacity development's disciplinary foundations. Arguably, this exercise will open capacity development's black box, informing scholarship from a practice-informed boundary-object model. As such, the exercise illustrates a constructivist effort, sets as an epistemological lens to read policy as well as to deepen the theoretical reflection. We propose this approach as a plausible way of unpacking knowledge within a policy: it means as a *dispositif* (Foucault 1972).

The discussion builds on linking capacity development policies to plausible scholar streams laying on its background. This approach builds on various assumptions. The first is that if capacity development is a performative form of knowledge, there might be some value in unveiling and intertwining core concepts of theoretical sources plausibly inspiring practice. For this, we use literature on institutional work, innovation and learning intermediation, and cognitive studies.

A second assumption sets the specific intersection linking capacity development practice and literature: the focus is set on agency. Capacity development will be understood as a performative form of institutional work and innovation and learning intermediation strategies. Capacity development agency is seen as embedding rationales and repertoires reminding those described by literature.

We will discuss the theoretical sources following two steps. First, we will discuss an overview of the bodies of literature. We will discuss also those layers detailing agency, pointing and nurturing at both complementary and overlapping sets of concepts of each stream relating to one another and possibly to capacity development. This will be the starting point in order to attempt a comprehensive analytical synthesis afterwards: a set of knowledge stances.

### 3.2 Institutional Work

The notion of institutional work is used to describe “the broad category of purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, 215), where institutions are understood as “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North 1990, vi).

As a field of study, institutional work interconnects various roots. The first root brings agency to the fore of institutional change. It describes agency as “dependent on cognitive (rather than affective) processes and structures [and] focuses on understanding how actors accomplish the social construction of rules, scripts, schemas and cultural accounts” (2006, 218). This foundation is based on contributions by DiMaggio (1988) and Oliver (1991) on institutional entrepreneurship and institutional processes, respectively. Therefore institutions – and change processes in institutions – are the result of deliberate agency.

A second root of institutional work comes from the so-called practice turn in sociology. Practice draws attention to how institutions are expressed in embodied, incarnated forms. It refers to “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and von Savigny 2001), as quoted by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006, 218).

Practice builds on the assumption that all human action, speech and object embody knowledge (Berger 1991). Here knowledge is enacted (related to the world-at-hand in which knowledge has a domain), incarnated (received and shaped in a human body basis), and intersubjective (a product of human collective nature) (Maturana and Varela 1990). This assertion shares scholarly roots with cognitive science (Varela 2000), sociology of knowledge (Hornidge 2013; Hornidge et al. 2013; Keller 2011), and knowledge management (e.g., Goldkuhl and Röstlinger 2002).

Here the domain of experience is set as a first – given, spontaneous – feature of agency. The domain of experience provides a setting to acknowledge the features of specific actors in their specific contexts. This accounts for the multiple relations of non-tangible human features (e.g. culture, organizational culture, cognition, capabilities, social capital, etc.), as well as their location and multiple possible relations with a materially bounded space and time (Boisier 2006).

This local character is a source of boundaries: practice expresses the social technologies of a local culture at a given time. This token applies to international agencies and grassroots organizations alike: local situations bound practice itself. Inter-organizational exchange, encounter, clash, agreement or compromise at the meso-level can be understood as a feature of practice diversity. We argue that boundary effects of practice show a way towards the understanding of knowledge and governance interaction. Boundary effects of practice also point to the interplay of insti-

tutional settings as means and arenas of power positioning.

Practice is an object of concern of institutional work: practice work, as a form of institutional work, studies “how actors affect the practices that are legitimate within a domain... [focusing] on how practices are created, maintained or disrupted” (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010, 242).

A third root of institutional work comes from boundary work literature. Boundaries separate practices, organizations, constituencies or stakeholders. Boundary work refers to various forms of agency oriented to “establishing, expanding, reinforcing, or undermining” these borders (Zietsma and Lawrence 2010; Gieryn 1999, 190). When conceptually set as a reference for agency, boundaries allow describing forms of positioning.

In a “within” position, an agent creates ways to “protect autonomy, prestige and control of resources” (Zietsma and Lawrence 2010 quoting Abbott 1988, 194). In a “between” or “outside” position, agency focuses on strategies to create connections. Creating connections is performing as a boundary spanning actor (Bartel 2001; Hargadon and Sutton, 1997) and, going some steps further, aiming at various possible effects at the boundaries. This role might account for managing cross-boundary connections, as Hoppe (2010a) discusses, for science/government interactions in the Netherlands. Or perform, in less collaborative contexts, strategies of boundary breaching, that is, framing and mobilizing resources as strategies to influence opportunity structures (Benford and Snow 2000; Zald and McCarthy, 1987).

A fourth root of institutional work brings to the fore the role of boundary objects. Boundary objects are different kinds of processes or artifacts establishing a shared context between boundaries (Bechky 2003; Carlile 2002; Kellogg et al. 2006; Star and Griesemer 1989). Boundary objects are relevant in the context of capacity development, for shared contexts create room for repertoires of institutional work and practice work. In global development, for example, projects, programs and policies have special interest. Hoppe (2010b), for example, discusses the extent to which such devices perform as the effective means of collaboration in Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) efforts.

It is evident that capacity development describes forms of institutional work. As such, it is “intelligent, situated institutional action ... [which is based on] the creative and knowledgeable work of actors which may or may not achieve its desired ends and which interacts with existing social and technological structures in unintended and unexpected ways” (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, 219). Capacity development can be read as a (normative) attempt to push forward the cycle of creation, maintenance and disruption of institutional change (Zietsma and Lawrence 2010).

### **3.3 Learning and Innovation Intermediation**

Arguably, in the realm of capacity development the notion of innovation is rather generic. It stands for the incorporation of alternative ways of

thinking, doing and organizing. Its relevance resides more in its change-oriented purpose than in the extent of its originality. We have given here this ampler sense by introducing a learning dimension, as developed by Marcus (1995). Learning and innovation intermediation is understood here as the support of innovation processes between various parties (Howells 2006) that aim to obtain and sustain knowledge-related assets such as skills, competences and/or new knowledges.

Naturally this understanding already bridges learning and innovation intermediation and institutional work literature, the former highlighting an intentional purpose to affect a cognitive dimension. It is evident here that local processes from the parties start in a given context at a given moment, and exchange – at the spatial, organizational, functional or field level – implies shifting, scaling, expanding, recreating or resignifying a field of practice and/or its bounding institutional settings.

‘Innovation intermediary’ is a key concept in this regard. It is defined as an organization or body that acts as an agent or broker in any aspect of the innovation process between two or more parties (Howells 2006). Such intermediary activities include helping to provide information about potential collaborators; brokering a transaction between two or more parties; acting as a mediator, or go-between, for bodies or organizations that are already collaborating; and helping find advice, funding and support for the innovation outcomes of such collaborations.

Any actor can play the role of an innovator intermediary. It has been noted how public, private or civil actors perform this role (Van Lente 2003). It has also been noted that this role can be performed as a specialized function or as one amongst other activities (Yang et al. 2014). Literature on innovation intermediaries has labelled some agents as systemic intermediaries. A systemic intermediary is an actor that “functions primarily in networks and systems [...], primarily operate in the public, public-private, but not exclusively in the private domain and focus on support at a strategic level” (Van Lente 2003, 255).

Innovation intermediation encompasses a wide range of functions. The World Bank (2007) points out how various support activities are as important as knowledge access in innovation processes. Some of these activities relate forms of institutional work, in various aspects. A first aspect, related to norms and standards, includes fostering change in norms, regulations or other regulating practices. A second aspect, related to boundary work, includes activities to find and create connections between various actors and prompting policy changes. A third aspect relates to gatekeeping in networking activities, such as filtering and matchmaking (Kilelu et al. 2011). Some of these boundary activities exceed the realm of searching for innovation opportunity settings. Depending on the context, boundary work relates to strategic positioning of the intermediary. Therefore, boundary work at this level implies also leverage strategies in markets and political arenas. This aspect shows institutional work’s manoeuvres played by intermediaries that innovation literature has not yet discussed at length.

Knowledge intermediation describes various forms of engagement within or between knowledge stakeholders. There are two distinguishable streams of literature. One refers to knowledge intermediation, while the other to knowledge brokering. Both describe similar phenomena, with a different emphasis: while literature on knowledge intermediation brings to the fore the theoretical discussion about mediation (Latour 1994) and intermediation (Doganova 2013; Meyer and Kearnes 2013; Schlieff and Meyer 2013), knowledge brokering brings about a descriptive approach on agency repertoires (Schut et al. 2013; Turnhout et al. 2013). This discussion will profit both streams.

A first form of knowledge intermediation repertoires is close to knowledge supply. It involves a clarifying role about the knowledge demand of the user (Turnhout et al. 2013). This role resembles the retrieval phase of knowledge management cycles, focused on “identifying knowledge that is likely to result in the satisfaction of a need or solution to a problem” (Carlile and Rebentisch 2003, 1189), or as Howells (2006) describes it, filtering. Knowledge supply refers an offer-demand relation in which knowledge solutions are provided to a knowledge user either directly (on the assumption the agent has the solution his or herself) or indirectly (appointing suitable sources with a solution) (Turnhout et al. 2013).

Supply should not be associated solely with technical or expert forms of knowledge. Literature also addresses context-related knowledges, such as foresights, forecasting, strategic intelligence and market research (Howells 2006; Kuhlmann 2002). Further, we argue that this knowledge base includes incarnated forms of knowledge: experiencing contact with specific contexts, such as markets, organizations, procedures or fora, is a form of expanding a practice base and prompting forms of boundary work. Which means, in other words, that knowledge supply refers practice itself as a source.

Supply is also performed at other moments, as with legal or technical advice, as means of a support function. In such cases, effects of knowledge supply might have a different impact: although this repertoire can be spontaneously assimilated as a repertoire close to practice, it has a place on boundary work strategies as well.

Another function of innovation intermediation refers to knowledge exploration. It refers generically to practices of knowledge production, accounting for different kinds of knowledge contents and sources nurturing knowledge supply and intermediation. In intermediation processes, it implies knowledge processing, generation and combination. Howells (2006) recognizes two forms of this repertoire: first, a combinatorial form, in which the intermediary helps to combine knowledge; second, a generation and recombination form, in which the in-house result is combined with partner knowledge. There are clear examples at the grassroots level: there are practices of “engaging and supporting actors (farmers, researchers) in participatory knowledge generation through facilitating demand led research or articulating experimental/local knowledge” (Yang et al.,

2014). In its more specialized forms, intermediation supposes forms of translation between domains and facilitation in pursuit of “doable problems” (Fujimura 1987; Latour 1994) within feasible inter-organizational frameworks.

There is also knowledge exploration in the pursuit of joint quests. A salient feature in these cases relates to its effect on boundaries: they tend to blur, or redefine. This phenomenon captures “how knowledge intermediators account for the unpredictability and uncertainty of their practices and activities and the fact that new knowledge and identities arise out of this” (Schlierf and Meyer 2013, 435). In other words, knowledge exploration has possible effects both at the innovation and the boundary levels. Doganova describes a distinctive characteristic of exploration as the fact that “the socio-technical collective involved cannot be known *ex ante*: it is a result of the exploratory process, rather than its point of departure” (2013, 450). Hoppe (2010a) discusses a similar image in a different setting. He raises a case about scientific advice and policy-making in the Netherlands, describing how both advisors and policy-makers to some extent share knowledge production at a given time.

In this sense, a knowledge exploration repertoire could be described as a form of coproduction (Ostrom 1996), and as such, a form of boundary work with a twofold possible outcome. The first possible outcome relates to practice innovation in a specific niche (Geels 2002), affecting practice to some extent (local, sectorial or regime level) by collaborative means. The second outcome relates to describing mechanisms of boundary work as a form of change by engagement in collaborative/explorative settings (Cajaiba-Santana 2014).

Innovation intermediation literature gives texture to the cognitive dimension of capacity development. It adds conceptual richness to the understanding of forms of knowledge circulation, scaling out and scaling up. As a function, it can be attributed to a variety of agents and, most important from the point of view of agency, it describes the deployment of various possible repertoires. This understanding brings about the opportunity to attune the more abstract objects of institutional work with those more concrete objects of learning and innovation intermediation. To the goal of this essay, this adds to the aim of capturing the features of agency as an array of deployed repertoires involving knowledge.

#### **4. A Knowledge Stances Perspective on Meso-level Agency**

We discussed institutional work and innovation intermediation streams of literature in the last section. We also reflected deeper on their tenets, pointing at overlapping and complementary features to be found on its foundations. As a whole, the section shows a strong focus on meso-level agency, sketching on its relations to practice, boundaries and institu-

tions. As a result of this analysis we propose here an analytical synthesis, in an attempt to define a set of concepts likely capturing agency as it is illustrated by capacity development.

The synthesis discusses possible repertoires played by actors, labelled here as knowledge stances. Knowledge stances are agency gestures to be found in actors' relations to their contexts. Stances appear here as plausible heuristics allowing a comprehensive view of knowledge flows at the meso-level, pointing at the ways practice, boundaries and institutions might link to one another. By way of synthesis, knowledge stances reduce the complexity of the theoretical discussion to a comprehensive set of meaningful notions.

Agency is here seen as an act of positioning (Downey 1992), describing strategies as adaptive forms of practical coping (Chia and Holt 2006). Agency strategies are, in this sense, a function of agents' relative positions in their contexts. Therefore, knowledge contents feeding these repertoires are context specific and relate to a specific appreciation of institutional and cognitive settings that might be political (Mosse 2005) or calculative (Callon 1998).

The assumption is here that (meso-level-change-oriented) agency describes a variety of repertoires in the pursuit of creating, stabilizing and expanding specific fields of practice, and knowledge stances are useful to specify the agency situations in which these repertoires materialize.

As analytical tools, knowledge stances work as heuristics addressing moments, scopes, situations or performance of the various repertoires taking place in this kind of agency. Stances allow for making distinctions amongst various possible gestures of an actor, as well as pointing to the ways these gestures condition one another.

To add clarity, we will refer to a Colombian example, adding empirical detail to each of the stances. Built as a multi-sited case, the example refers strategies of cocoa producer organizations as change agents. Data was collected in various regions of Colombia (Balanzo 2016).

#### **4.1 Boundary Exploration**

Strategies under this category refer to coping strategies linking actors to their peers or to other partners. Simply, boundary exploration summarizes moments of "collaborating", "joining forces", "working together to achieve" or "finding solutions together."

Boundary exploration refers to meso-level collaborative quests, suggesting forms of shared agency where boundaries might blur. Implications of collaborative searches vary for involved agents. Boundary exploration is a form of institutional work aiming to create collaborative opportunities to generate or expand practice fields.

Boundary exploration supposes a form of rescaling the size or reach of the actors by means of collaborating. The scope and depth of rescaling depends on the means and ends of collaboration. Boundary blurring ap-



pears only in forms of shared performance. These grouped forms of agency overlap local, sub-regional, national or international scales and can have effects on any practice field as a whole. This stance is at the base of inter-actor collaboration, at any level, in the search of new institutional arrangements.

A good example appears in producer organizations, where boundary exploration appears in various possible degrees. The first set of strategies relates to partnering to share assets. Physical assets include logistical solutions, distribution channels and storage infrastructure. Some other intangible assets could also be included here, such as information about market conditions and support opportunities, linking to organizations' peer-to-peer technical and non-technical training, and advising. Because of its natural link to knowledge practices it will be detailed later. It is worth noting, however, that peer-to-peer knowledge supply is also a feature of boundary exploration.

Another group of strategies refers to forms of shared performance, namely, networking to access public investment, partnering with third parties and scaling public investment. Unlike the first set, where boundaries are kept except to take better advantage of specific assets, these types describe modes of shared operation, showing repertoires of boundary expansion. This is the case of some clusters of organizations at subregional levels. Shared operation, interestingly, takes place also in some collaborative projects involving enterprises, farmers' organizations and NGOs.

The last set of types relates to boundary exploring as a means to power shared positions, namely, to coordinate positions to negotiate prices (which might entail also partnering to collect cocoa grain), gain sector influence and demand local accountability. Boundary strategies here attempt to supersede disadvantageous boundary situations by means of showing the extent of re-scaled potential. While this might work at the business level to negotiate price, this allows organizations at the sector level to voice their interests in policy-making fora. At the local level this allows organizations to bring topics to the territorial agenda.

Strengthening the network is itself another type of boundary exploration. Which is telling about the place of this strategy in organizations' priorities. In effect, networking aims to be useful for organizations in terms of facilitating economies of scale, optimizing support access and striving to achieve a steering position in the sector.

## **4.2 Boundary Setting**

Boundary setting describes the actor-related and normative contexts bounding an actor's agency, as well as the ongoing actions of an actor towards these contexts. Simply, boundary setting focuses on agency reacting to and coping with the given circumstances in which actors perform vis-à-vis other actors.

Boundary setting can refer to boundary situations, focused on the po-

sition of an actor in relation to other actors, or can refer to boundary conditions, focused on the effects on the actor of norms, rules or regulations. Boundary conditions and situations (are set to, and) bound the extent and means to which organizations can actually interact.

A good example is set in the case of producer organizations. Boundary setting shows differentiated patterns. Some strategies relate to positioning patterns while others relate to protecting patterns. When positioning, organizations are striving to be visible, to highlight their existence and determine the way to go about their business. This can take place in the realm of boundary situations (as in the case of demanding attention from authorities at the local level) or conditions (as in the case of creating a legal persona as a means of existence and representation at the national level).

Some other strategies attempt protecting a space. Drawing boundaries is understood here as a rather defensive move, shielding the organization or its practice base. It is the case with strategies such as assessing risk of partnerships and keeping gates, avoiding local disruption and adjusting terms and conditions of support schemes. The latter also include strategies such as blocking, negotiating and re-formulating.

Organizations deploy protecting strategies to safeguard their boundaries by filtering exogenous input, for example, when public initiatives seem unfit for organizations' priorities or when project terms have been set beforehand. Adjusting terms or blocking initiatives are forms of buffering, or shielding. The organizations take care of their boundaries by deploying means to take place before or after engaging in partnerships, both within and between contracts and projects.

Amongst these, shifting boundaries deserve some attention. This strategy appeared empirically in two situations. First, it appeared as a move to shield the organization from politics by rendering politics a matter of individuals. Afterwards it appeared to shield practice by engaging in projects with contested actors from the sector, despite bitter negotiations taking place at the negotiation table. The strategy speaks for itself on the complexity of social phenomena always at play, and somehow points to further scholar links yet to be made in order to tackle its full extent vis-à-vis, for example, literature on social movements.

It is worth mentioning that the deployment of some of these strategies takes place in markets. In these cases, the boundary strategy employs price as a means of calculative agency (as in the case of local price regulation and quality incentives) or expected return (as in the case of investment schemes).

### **4.3 Practice Work**

Practice work describes those arrays of activity enacting, making possible, sustaining on time and shaping the rationale and values of a practice field. Put more simply, practice work refers to those activities describing how actors 'go about' creating and sustaining a practice field for a long

time. An integrating category, practice work adds texture to the understanding of various knowledge repertoires as means to create, consolidate or disrupt a practice field.

We will give an example to better demarcate this notion: soccer clubs 'go about' their field by means of being voluntary associations, its field expanding by internal and external selection of players and technical directors. Organizations for the promotion of Zen meditation 'go about' their field by means of master-to-disciple teaching and past learners' donations, and its field expands by means of voluntary shared practice and specialization of the apprentices.

We could say then that farmers' organizations go about cocoa business in a different way than other players. Not just in the more evident sense of having a specific place and heft in a value chain, but in the sense of striving to perform in such a way that will secure having a societal impact.

Practice work takes place through different means. The first way is through agency itself, by means of enactment. A set of practices (often starting with a promise) is incorporated in the actions of an organization to engage or develop with a practice field, as is the case when local champions take on breeding cocoa as an alternative and strive to convince others to follow.

Organizations are here a vehicle of exogenous practices entering the local realm. Knowledge is enacted by organizations' own means or by bringing third parties to the table in what constitutes a form of bringing about a role and positioning an identity. It is the case when leaders risk everything to start with a cocoa project out of the blue. Actors' presence comprises here a form of knowledge supply, embedding itself as a culture, a way of doing, and an example of practice. These acts embed or mark an initial or original stance. Arguably, this stance goes hand in hand with the boundary strategy of 'negotiate to exist' as its inner facet.

A second means of practice work refers to intermediation through practice. Here organizations devise ways of sourcing and financing practice itself. In effect, deepening existence of the practice field as an embedded social reality implies accessing, for example, financial resources, technologies and legal advice.

Strategies include creating funding and support opportunities and bypassing level restrictions. This latter strategy refers to organizations' attempts to solve gaps at the local level due to corruption or municipal weakness. It is worth remembering these strategies are played in different fields and therefore require deployment of different protocols. Some are business based, while others are development-project based or politically lobbied. The common feature between them relates to how meso-level endeavours are carried out in order to secure means allowing developing the field of practice.

Organizations look for partnerships or sponsorships making it possible to fund research, training or specialized staffing. Often the process describes some sort of triangulation: A partnership lacks a piece of a puzzle.

zle and then the organization strives to obtain it. For example, an organization can fund specialized internships in agreement with a university, the logistic costs of expert training or a cocoa quality lab. Organizations deploy these strategies to strengthen the endogenous realm with a long-term rationale, striving to breed the field of practice. Complementary strategies, namely, allocating resources incrementally, informing and including are telling about organizations' aims given a scarce or shifting context.

The last type of practice work refers to normalizing practices. Here, organizations set rules as means to guide and stabilize a field of practice. For example, they can set rules with quality contests, best organizational and developmental practices, or visions attempting to influence local policies.

Some of these strategies, such as setting a market access vision, productive standards or best practices, take place within the sphere of action of organizations. Here organizations aim at developing practice in a specific direction by utilizing these normative devices.

Some other attempts go beyond the immediate sphere of action of organizations, as with organizations' attempts to position a vision to influence policy. Policy is a way organizations stream their visions, values and interests at territorial and sectorial levels. By targeting policy, organizations strive to set a guiding compass in a broader scale, shaping mid-to-long-term planning sceneries of other actors.

#### **4.4 Knowledge Supply**

Knowledge supply refers to knowledge delivery complementing other stances. Contents of knowledge supply include local, contextual, technical, expert and/or scientific forms of knowledge. Along with these various forms of knowledge, there are also different knowledge containers, including up-to-date information (e.g. program calls), reports of various kinds (e.g. technical or legal), technologies (e.g. protocols, eventually linking to new objects) and persons. Knowledge supply is a crosscutting stance, performing in boundary exploration, boundary setting and practice work stances.

A good example is set in the case of producer organizations, where knowledge supply has shown to play strategies related to knowledge filtering, allocating and delivery. First, we will refer to knowledge filtering. Here organizations (or their scaled forms) cope with knowledge requirements or gaps and manoeuvre to satisfy them. For example, organizations request legal advice to assess possible intermediary legal structures or develop a better understanding of their assets and decide on technological requirements to access specialized marketing niches. Knowledge filtering includes strategies such as clarifying knowledge demands and appointing providers.

The second group of strategies describes knowledge allocation. The term allocation stresses a conscious function of targeting or distributing knowledge means, in various ways. One way, knowledge scaling, focus on

training strategies, assigning at different scales (that is, at member, organizational, node or network levels). Another way, staffing, refers to appointing or shifting the appointment of people and knowledge provisions to other levels, as is the case, for example, with member-sourced provision schemes or the flexible scaling or re-design of organizations based on sub organizational emerging capabilities.

The last group of strategies clusters forms of knowledge delivery. Naturally, delivery stresses the knowledge providing function as such. Strategies such as training, gathering and circulating information, and peer advising are included in this group. Strategies take on specific contents and rationales in each field. In-field technical aspects of seedling breeding, for example, have different vehicles and containers than project management.

#### **4.5 Knowledge Exploration**

Knowledge exploration is the process of knowledge unveiling and production. Knowledge exploration includes research, as broadly understood, but also includes facilitating access to unknown contexts and scaling out of tacit knowledges.

The experience of organizations can give nuances to this broad understanding. In their case, some strategies describe repertoires of knowledge unveiling outside the immediate practice field of organizations, namely, performing in other links of the value chain and piloting complementary income sources. Not the original core of organizations' activities, these are understood as forms of expansion by means of relating to complementary fields, often linking to territorial or sectorial scaling strategies.

Other strategies refer to knowledge exploration within the field of practice, which, in other words, refers to its deepening as a field. For example, organizations' attempts to identify and try cocoa genetic materials are by all means their most important asset. Creating, actualizing and retrieving knowledge as strategies relate to a core aim: building a knowledge base for the field of practice, in other words, setting reference foundations to normalize their practice field as cocoa organizations.

#### **4.6 Knowledge Intermediation**

Knowledge intermediation refers to forms of knowledge work (that is, knowledge storage, manipulation and delivery) aiming to protect a practice field. Knowledge intermediation describes here creative forms of receiving, filtering and delivering knowledge in the attempt to adequately fit boundary crossroads.

The case of Colombian cocoa organizations adds detail to this broad understanding. Here knowledge intermediation consists of knowledge translation and mediation. The former illustrates attempts to better match

endogenous interests or capabilities with external input, manoeuvring to synchronize paces and priorities, adjusting internal and external languages and providing internal bases to match external standards. The latter strategy, mediation, stresses organizations' conscious design of educative means.

Translation and mediation strategies show organizations' interests in securing mid-to-long-term knowledge provisions, which we referred to before as a keen interest in knowledge sustainability. Evidence also indicates the interest to deliver education in both physical and social technologies, this includes technical productive aspects as well as managerial and personal development knowledge. To this end, organizations partner with actors both from the rural development sector as well as actors within the cocoa value chain.

## 5. Conclusions

This essay discusses a constructivist theoretical approach to work theoretically from the inner rationales of a policy tool: capacity development. Institutional work and innovation intermediation literature bring insights to understand this purpose. By intertwining them analytically, the article proposes a knowledge-stances perspective on agency as an overarching approach, with a set of knowledge stances as its analytical tools.

To sum up, figure 1 illustrates knowledge stances. Rather than matching one another linearly, stances complement one another. The figure sketches the rough, uneven, adaptive landscape in which developmental agency takes place. Stances of boundary exploration, boundary setting and practice work are shown as forms of enacting, positioning and expanding a practice field, tackling the institutional features of the field. Stances of knowledge exploration, intermediation and supply are shown as strategies to enlarge its cognitive base.

The theoretical value of this perspective accounts for a twofold purpose. First, it addresses the realms of knowledge at stake in meso-level interaction, as a means to prompt further research and inform emerging policy settings, development practice and the myriad of local discourses and initiatives currently fostering change.

Second, it promotes a scope of practice and research that allows framing (capacity) development beyond the project level and the donor-focused scope, which gives a natural reach to the concept as a policy tool. This feature suggests that the epistemic status of the capacity development framework (and therefore its conceptual scope) is but a result of the boundary setting in which it was created.

This theoretical approach is meant as a heuristic tool, and it accounts for phenomena with political and ethical implications. Li (1999) and Mosse (2005) accounts of development projects describe knowledge-intensive forms of disguising contradictory practice, as well as questiona-

ble forms of boundary work with project partners and beneficiaries. It is likely that capacity development in volatile or sensitive contexts prompt 'grey' arrangements as forms of strategic coping with exceptional circumstances. The focus on knowledge stances and a cognitive approach will help tackle explicit as well as implicit forms of institutional work, thus maximizing the impact of diverse agencies tackling the challenges of social change.

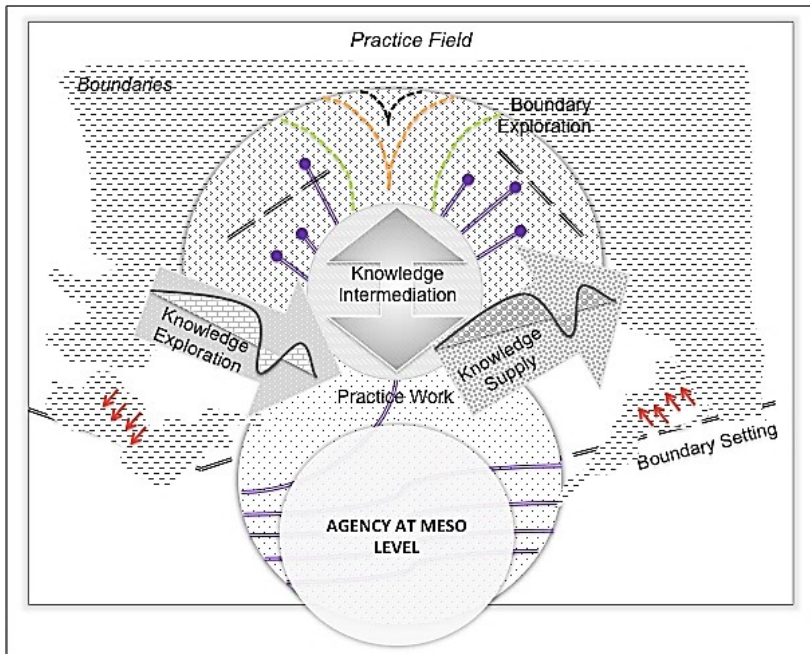


Fig. 1 – Meso-level agency featuring knowledge stances.

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