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FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY FOR HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING

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OVERVIEW

This document provides a framework for assessing the capacity of an organization that supports health systems strengthening. The framework is based on six core organizational competencies and is intended to be used for comprehensive organizational strengthening activities aimed at strengthening the organization as a whole. Because of the wide variety of organizations engaged in health systems strengthening, the framework is not intended to be prescriptive – skilled organizational capacity-building consultants can adapt it to the role and functions of the organization they are assessing. Following this overview are three major sections: an introduction that provides the context for the use of the framework tool, a description of the core competencies that are at the heart of the tool, and guidance on how to use the tool based on Health System 20/20's experience.

BACKGROUND

One of the mandates of Health System 20/20 has been to develop the capacity of regional and local institutions that are essential to strengthening health systems in their respective regions and countries. These organizations include key national government institutions that play a stewardship role, NGOs and consulting firms that provide technical assistance and training, research institutions that provide the evidence for health systems strengthening efforts, and training institutions that train public health leaders and specialized personnel such as health economists, health informaticians, and human resources experts.

From the outset of the project, Health Systems 20/20 used a comprehensive approach aimed at developing capacity in the full range of organizational competencies. The basic premise was that strengthening an organization required much more than technical capacity building and that for an organization to be effective in carrying out its mandate, it needed to have capacity in all areas.

The framework in Figure 1 was used to develop a draft assessment tool in the first year of the project and then adapted to conduct organizational assessments and develop intervention plans based on the findings with multiple organizations over the ensuring years. The core competencies were identified for organizations that provide technical assistance and training such as NGOs, universities, and consulting firms.

According to the conceptual model, in order to be effective in supporting health systems strengthening activities and become self-sustaining, institutions must have core competencies in six areas: technical expertise, technical assistance and training, resource mobilization, management systems, organizational development, and organizational governance.

FIGURE 1. CORE COMPETENCIES

The framework and instrument have been tested in five years of field experience doing capacity building with various types of institutions such as the Kinshasa School of Public Health, the African Field Epidemiology Network (AFENET) based in Kampala, and PROSLAUD, an NGO that provides services to the urban poor in Bolivia. It has also been adapted and used for capacity building of three program offices in the Ministry of Health of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

CORE COMPETENCIES

The next section defines the core competencies for an organization that provides technical assistance and training. For each of the six competency areas, there is a description of the competency as well as a list of questions that need to be answered in order to determine whether and to what extent that competency is present in the organization. These are not necessarily the questions that would be used in an interview or focus group protocol or survey. Rather, these are the questions that the consultant is seeking to answer through data gathering and analysis.

1. TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

All organizations that have a role to play in health systems strengthening require technical expertise that allows them to accomplish their mission. A national AIDS commission must have strong HIV/AIDS expertise, coordination capacity, and skills in resource mobilization. A research institution must have expertise in research design, data collection and analysis, and report writing. An NGO specializing in field epidemiology must have expertise in surveillance and response systems. A national malaria control program must have strong experience in planning and coordination of malaria control programs.

Core question:	Does the organization have sufficient technical capacity to carry out its mandate?
Specific questions:	• What experience has the organization had in using its required technical expertise? • What is the quality of its services and/or products? • What is the organization's reputation in terms of having the required technical expertise? • Does the organization have ready access to information and tools that have been developed in the area of expertise? • Do staff need technical upgrading of knowledge and skills through training, mentoring, or working side by side with experienced consultants? • Are there systems for keeping up-to-date on new developments in the field and continuously upgrading the staff's technical competence? • Do staff exhibit interest in keeping up-to-date on new developments in the field and continuously upgrading their technical competence?

2. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND TRAINING

One of the roles that regional- and country-level organizations play is to address specific health systems strengthening constraints and reduce the reliance on international sources of technical assistance and training. Delivering technical assistance requires skills in the consulting process that go beyond the technical expertise of the individuals involved. They include a set of skills that will provide results-oriented and client-centered consulting throughout all the phases of the consulting process. These phases are contracting, assessment, intervention design, implementation, monitoring, and closure.

Effective training requires the use of modern, participatory, training methodologies and skills in training design and delivery. It also requires effective management of the training process, which includes identifying and inviting the right participants, arranging training venues, producing training materials, conducting after action reviews, and tracking results to ensure training is meeting the objectives.

Core question:	Do staff and consultants have basic skills in training and consulting that are required to provide effective technical assistance and training?
Specific questions:	• Do staff have the skills to be effective consultants? - Understanding of the role of a consultant - Ability to use the phases of the consulting process - Interpersonal and communication skills required for effective consulting • If the organization provides training as part of its mandate does it have the following skills? - Ability to assess training needs of the organization and individual - Ability to design participatory training and develop effective trainer and participant materials - Ability to conduct participatory, customized, and skill-focused training - Capacity to measure effectiveness of training and modify accordingly - Capacity to manage the entire training process • Does the organization have the management capacity to support technical assistance activities? - Work collaboratively in teams - Manage the logistical and administrative aspects (e.g., arrange transport, workshop venues) - Develop and monitor project budgets - Produce quality on-time deliverables

3. RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

Self-sustaining organizations must have the capacity to access adequate funding to be financially viable. The starting point is a realistic "business model" that defines the products and services that are offered, the sources of potential funding, and a strategy for accessing these resources. If, for example, a research institution relies primarily on contracts and grants, it must understand the requirements of funding organizations, have basic business development skills, and be able to write winning proposals. Similarly offices in ministries of health such as HIV/AIDS or family planning must be able to access resources – both governmental and donor – to implement their programs. In order to implement a business model, organizations must also have resource mobilization skills.

Core questions:	Does the organization have a "business model" that allows it to be financially viable? Does it have the capacity to mobilize resources in line with this business model?
Specific questions:	• Has the organization analyzed whether its "business model" is the most effective given the organization's current and future condition, situation and environment? • Does the organization have diversified sources of funding so it is not dependent on one funding agency? • Is the organization guided by a viable and up-to-date plan to mobilize resources? • Is the organization capable of doing market research regarding potential funders and competitors? • Does the organization have the capacity to market its products and services? • Does the organization create quality marketing tools and use them effectively (e.g., websites, brochures, personal contacts, and presentations at conferences and meetings)? • Do skills exist to develop and write winning proposals for funding? • Is there a fundraising strategy in place to identify and access funds from organizations that do not necessarily require competitive proposals such as foundations and corporations?

4. MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Business or management systems include the full range of financial, human resources, information technology, and administrative systems needed to: account for the use of funds; hire and retain staff; plan and manage activities; manage, analyze, and communicate information; and enter into contracts and grants. Well-run organizations have systems and procedures in all these areas that are easy to use and consistent with the size and complexity of the organization.

Core questions:	Does the organization have and use the necessary business or management systems to function effectively?
Specific questions:	• Is there a financial management system in place that budgets, manages, and accounts for funds? • Is there a human resources system that recruits, hires, deploys, and retains staff? • Are personnel policies in place? • Is there an information technology system that is well-designed, adequately resourced, and fully utilized? • Is there a system in place for procurement of goods and services? • Does the organization have the capacity to enter into grants and contracts? • Is there a system to plan, implement, monitor, and track activities and related resources? • Are there adequate administrative systems and procedures in place?

5. ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Management or business systems and procedures are necessary but insufficient to become an effective organization. In addition, organizations must be skilled in the key aspects of organizational development. These include setting long-term direction and developing strategic and operational plans, having a well-defined organizational structure with clear roles and responsibilities, building a workforce with the skills to lead and manage an organization, demonstrating the capacity to work effectively in teams, solving problems and resolving conflicts, and establishing productive relationships and partnerships with external organizations.

Core questions:	Does the organization have the capacity to plan and manage its activities, work together effectively, and build positive external relations?
Specific questions:	• Are there strategic and operational plans in place to guide decision-making? • Is there effective leadership that provides direction and motivates staff? • Do staff work as a team? • Is there an organizational structure that clearly defines roles and responsibilities? • Is there an adequate number of qualified staff to carry out the work of the organization? • Has the organization established effective working relationships with key external stakeholders? • Does the organization have management capacity to plan, budget, and implement activities. • Is the organization able to manage its operations effectively (e.g., make decisions, share information, and promote open communication)? • Is there a performance management system and if so, is it successfully in eliciting feedback and acting on it?

6. ORGANIZATIONAL GOVERNANCE

All organizations should have a governance system that provides guidance to the organization to achieve its objectives, stay true to its values and brand, manage its resources responsibly, and meet professional and ethical standards. An effective governance system provides checks and balances. Governance mechanisms are often defined in a constitution or by-laws that are formally adopted by the organization. Some countries require these formal foundation documents as part of the legalization process. These documents typically define the mission of the organization, the governance structure, the division of powers and authorities, financial oversight mechanisms, and, in the case of a private firm, ownership. The primary oversight mechanism for an NGO or private company is usually a board of directors, and for a university school or department it is generally the university structure.

Core questions:	Is there a governance system that provides direction and oversight to the organization?
Specific questions:	• Does the organization operate under the right legal charter for its mandate? • Is there a formal, legal document that defines the governance of the organization (e.g., by-laws, articles of incorporation, constitution)? • Does the document describe the role and authorities of the board, committee structure, frequency of meetings, formal decision-making process, and process for amending the document? • Is there a functioning board of directors or other type of governing body that provides direction, accountability, and oversight? • Is the board effective in carrying out its functions?

HOW TO USE THE TOOL

USES OF THE TOOL

This framework can be used for a variety of purposes:

- Basis for an assessment of institutional strengths and weaknesses
- Development of an intervention plan to address the areas needing improvement
- Evaluation of an organizational improvement effort

Health Systems 20/20 used this assessment approach almost entirely as the basis to develop intervention plans for organizational strengthening activities.

Customize the tool for the type of institution

One can increase the usefulness of the tool by customizing it according to the type of institution being assessed – a research institution, academic institution, consulting firm, NGO, or regional network. The two competency areas that would typically be customized are Technical Expertise and Technical Assistance and Training. The others are likely to remain the same for most organizations albeit with some modifications. The assessment team can replace them with the type of product or service that the institution provides. For example, in the case of the Kinshasa School of Public Health (KSPH), Technical Expertise was replaced with Academic Programs, and Technical Assistance and Training was replaced with Research and Consulting. The core and specific questions were then tailored for these new categories as shown in the box below.

ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Core questions:	Does the current MPH academic program meet the public health needs of the DRC?
Specific questions:	• Are the goals and objectives of the MPH program clearly defined and appropriate for the DRC? • Is the instructional program the right length and up to date? • Should the program be accredited to meet international standards? • Is there an organization structure that supports the program? • Does the recruitment and selection process result in the desired student body including the balance of men and women? • Is there an adequate number of faculty? • Are doctoral students being adequately prepared for their future role as faculty?

RESEARCH AND CONSULTING

Core questions:	Do KSPH faculty and staff have the necessary skills in research and consulting?
Specific questions:	• Do staff have the skills to be effective researchers? - Ability to design public health research - Ability to conduct public health research - Ability to write research reports including for peer-reviewed journals • Do staff have the skills to be effective consultants? - Understanding of the role of a consultant - Ability to use the phases of the consulting process - Interpersonal and communication skills required for effective consulting • Does KSPH have the capacity to manage and administer research activities? - Develop budgets and monitor expenditures - Produce deliverables that are on time and of high quality - Manage contractual requirements

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

PLANNING

Review of background documents

The assessment team should review documentation prior to the data collection. Documents to review include background information on the institution, previous assessment reports, and reports on other institutional strengthening activities.

Assessment Plan

The assessment team should discuss with the client organization in advance the purpose of the assessment, who will have access to the findings, and how the data will be used. The emphasis should be placed on using the findings to identify the gaps and develop an intervention plan.

The team should then develop an assessment plan including the number of individual and focus group interviews desired. Interviews and focus groups should be held with all levels of the organization in order to get a complete picture. Interviewing as many people as possible will give staff a stronger stake in the assessment process and help to bring about commitment to the implementation of the intervention plan.

An organizational assessment typically takes two weeks with the first week devoted to data collection and the second to analysis and validation of findings. The duration of the assessment is, of course, driven by the size and nature of the organization, but the assessment should be as rapid as possible so that the emphasis is placed on implementation and the assessment is seen as a necessary step to develop the intervention plan.

Develop interview and focus group protocols and/or survey questions

The questions in the tool are those that the assessment is seeking to answer. The actual questions to be used in the data-gathering activities of interviews, focus groups and surveys need to be developed based on the questions from the tool. Some of the actual questions from the tool may be used in the protocols. The assessment team will need to develop questionnaires for different categories of interviews so the questions are relevant to the person being interviewed. There might, for example, be separate questionnaires developed for senior leadership, managers, staff, and external stakeholders.

ASSESSMENT IMPLEMENTATION

Entry meetings

Entry meetings should be held with the leadership of the client organization to clarify the scope of the assessment, review information needs and the data collection plan, and finalize the interview schedule.

Data collection

Not all questions can be asked to all interviewees. Some interviewees might be asked questions in only one or two competencies. Some interviews might be able to speak to all competencies, which would mean only asking a few questions in each area. Focus groups should be used if the institution is large and there are too many people to interview everyone individually. It is generally recommended to be as inclusive as possible in interviewing staff in order to gain buy-in and commitment to the findings. If an organization is a regional network with members in different countries, data collection would be by telephone interviews or perhaps a web-based survey.

Data analysis

When the assessment team reviews the data generated by interviews and focus groups, the team needs to look not only at each of the competency areas, but also explore the relationships and connections between the various competency areas. This provides a more holistic understanding of the challenges facing the institution, and will be useful in developing an implementation plan that takes into account these connections. It is also beneficial to explore whether there are similar patterns among challenges in different competency areas. This can identify fundamental and cross-cutting themes that need to be paid attention to.

For example, a resource mobilization plan from a research institution may anticipate significant revenue from indirect costs from the institution's many research contracts. However, the institution may not be able to successfully negotiate the inclusion of indirect costs in those contracts due to a lack of a justifiable indirect cost rate because the financial management system does not produce reliable numbers. Thus an intervention in strengthening the financial management system may be necessary to address the resource mobilization challenge. A second example may be that an organization has the capacity to create quality documents such as a resource mobilization plan or financial procedures manual, but does not have the capacity to implement what is described in those plans or procedures manuals.

It is tempting when doing an assessment to focus primarily on problems, or areas where the organization is lacking in competencies. The assessment team also needs to remember to pay attention to the organization's strengths, and to see them as the foundation upon which improvements can be built. An overly negative assessment or evaluation may be inaccurate, and also may reinforce a sense of hopelessness in the client. Even with the most challenging organizations, it is important to find, appreciate, and articulate strengths.

Validation with funder and client system

Once the assessment team has determined the findings, they need to be shared and validated with the funder and the client organization. There are usually separate meetings with the funder, the leader of the client organization, and the organization's managers and staff. At these meetings the team hears the opinions of the funder and client regarding their perception of the accuracy of the assessment, their sense of priority areas, and their openness to engaging in the areas identified in the assessment. This is also a time to begin to set reasonable expectations with the client and funder, and to begin to let the client know what will be required of them in the intervention and change effort.

SKILL AND EXPERIENCE REQUIRED TO USE THE TOOL

While the composition of the assessment team will depend on the size and complexity of the organization, Health Systems 20/20's experience is that a two-person team is usually adequate and with small organizations a single person is probably sufficient. The assessment team needs the following skills:

- Experience in the field of organizational development. This is not a cookie-cutter approach. The tool is useful to the extent that it provides a comprehensive approach to data gathering and analysis of a complex organizational system. The assessment, implementation plan, and evaluation applications of this tool all require analysis and judgments that only an experienced organizational consultant can provide.
- Sufficient experience across a wide range of competencies.
- Experience in qualitative data collection and analysis. The assessment team will need to develop interview protocols and have the ability to ask follow-up questions to determine "how much" or "how well" the organization can carry out specific competencies. In addition, for many of the questions, the consultant will need to determine whether a formal or written system, plan, or

structure exists, whether actual organizational behavior is aligned with the system, plan or structure, and how adequate to the needs of the organization.

- Ability to use the results of the assessment to develop an intervention plan.
- Report writing to concisely capture the assessment findings and intervention plan.

Effective organizational capacity building depends on a true partnership based on a relationship of trust between the consultant and the organization. Assessment results need to be honestly and sensitively shared. The selection of priorities for intervention depends on the organization's perception of what is important, urgent and feasible. The consultant's genuine intention to build the organization's capacity is a critical building block of the trust needed to lead to a long-term organizational capacity building. Over time, the deepening trust can lead to identification of deeper organizational issues that may be preventing the organization from reaching its full potential. At every step of the way, the consultant needs to make choices to engage the organization as a partner, and to be creative in finding ways to build organizational capacity.

USING THE ASSESSMENT FINDINGS TO DEVELOP THE INTERVENTION PLAN

After validation of the assessment findings, the assessment team develops an intervention plan. The plan depends on a number of factors, including the funder's goals, budget, and timeline and the client organization's priorities. These provide the parameters within which the plan is developed.

In developing the intervention plan, the assessment team should use a change management paradigm to select and sequence interventions. Health Systems 20/20 uses John Kotter's approach to change management to guide the development and implementation of capacity building interventions. The example below shows how this change management framework was used to develop the intervention plan for the Kinshasa School of Public Health.

KOTTER'S EIGHT STEPS FOR CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Source: John Kotter. Leading Change. 1996.

Kinshasa School of Public Health

Urgency was increased by involving all levels of the organization in the assessment and planning process. The guiding coalition was developed by both strengthening the existing Management Committee and creating a guiding coalition that included a wider range of persons including junior faculty and administrative supervisors. Vision was developed through participatory workshops and communicated repeatedly by the leadership of the school.

Action teams were created to work on specific issues and empowered to act. Procurement of such essentials as IT equipment, an electrical generator, projectors, copiers, and a mini-van provided a series of short-term wins that helped people believe that change was occurring. Quarterly workshops provided the opportunity to consolidate change by assessing progress and planning for the next phase. Change was institutionalized by training staff, by developing and implementing new policies and procedures in a variety of areas including IT and financial management, and by creating and staffing new units such as the business development center.

In selecting specific interventions, consider the following questions.

- Does the intervention respond to needs felt by the organization?
- Does the intervention respond to needs identified in the assessment?
- Can the intervention be implemented within the available budget?
- Can the intervention be implemented within a reasonable period of time?
- Does the intervention have a high likelihood of success?
- How do interventions across competencies relate to each other?
- Is there enough time to implement the intervention plan, especially when taking into account the absorptive capacity of the client organization?
- If implemented successfully, will the interventions result in a more effective and sustainable organization?

CONCLUSION

It is important to emphasize that institutional strengthening is an iterative process. It is not the case that the initial assessment has the last word on the organization's strengths and weaknesses, or that the initial intervention plan should be rigorously followed through to its completion. Rather, the assessment provides the initial direction to make intelligent choices on where to begin the intervention. The consultant and client together learn from each intervention activity. That learning deepens their understanding of the organization, which in turn shapes subsequent interventions. This might lead to slight adjustments to the initial implementation plan, or could mean significant changes to it, albeit in keeping with the overall objectives of the activity.

To be sure that the intervention is on target it is critical to plan and hold periodic evaluations of progress with the leadership and staff of the organization. Besides ensuring that problems are solved and progress is made, this is an opportunity for the organization to develop its own strength in tracking and ensuring that improvement activities occur and have the desired effect. The same assessment questions from the relevant categories of the model can be used to help determine how much progress has been made.

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