

# *Capacity Across Cultures: Global Lessons from Pacific Experiences*

*By Deborah Rhodes*

## **Academic Summary**

### **Introduction**

*Capacity Across Cultures: Global Lessons from Pacific Experiences* is the second title by experienced aid and development practitioner, researcher and trainer Deborah Rhodes. The book proposes that development cooperation activities, in all sectors, will be more effective if they consider and respond to the cultural values which influence the existence and nature of capacity and how it changes over time. The book is centred on stories told by Pacific Islanders and their development partners about effective capacity-focused experiences.

*Capacity Across Cultures* considers and compares western and other definitions of capacity and cultural values, with a focus on Pacific Island countries. It takes existing theory on cultural value differences (Hofstede 1980 and 2005; House et al 2004) and applies it to concepts associated with the nature and development of capacity in the world of aid and development. Part 1 of the book then discusses the application of this combined analysis to Pacific contexts to illustrate both broad and practical implications. Part 2 of the book includes examples of Pacific people and organisations engaged in capacity-strengthening processes themselves. These stories illustrate the relevance of cultural values for understanding different perceptions of existing and potential capacity. Part 3 of the book suggests frameworks and approaches towards improved practice, using theoretical and practical steps which take account of and respond to different cultural values. Chapters in Part 3 are intended for people who work on or study capacity issues globally as researchers, practitioners, aid policy makers, program managers or simply as partners with others on capacity strengthening processes. It links together concepts from contemporary capacity literature (e.g. Morgan 2006; Baser and Morgan 2008; James and Wrigley 2007) with practical steps through a program cycle or in partnerships focused on development processes.

Ultimately, *Capacity Across Cultures* aims to challenge existing paradigms that assign western ideas about the nature and extent of capacity, and how capacity changes over time, to non-western contexts. Through a re-evaluation of the respective cultural values and roles of contributors and recipients of capacity-strengthening activities, Rhodes guides readers to conclude that greater understanding of cultural values is essential for aid effectiveness. Those involved in setting aid policies and designing and implementing aid programs must be willing and able to invest in understanding the role of cultural values in

their work. Detailed preparatory measures, beyond determining objectives and management processes, should include analysis of the values which influence the nature and extent of capacity in each context, if there is an expectation that values or behaviour will change. Practitioners must be willing to reflect on their own cultural values and those of their colleagues and partners and develop the skills to navigate any differences. Rhodes argues that when the specific cultural values of a setting are understood, whether at sector, community or organisation levels, the results of capacity-focused work will be more relevant. Thus, for all involved, there is a greater likelihood of effectiveness in the achievement of shared development outcomes.

The presence of existing capacity within communities and organisations in which aid projects take place, is of great importance to this argument: it constitutes both a philosophical and practical theme within the book. Rhodes is an advocate for mindful, relevant and culturally-specific capacity contributions which build on existing capacity, rather than ignore or undermine it. At the policy and programming level, she has identified qualities for and approaches to ensuring culturally-appropriate development activities and partnerships. At the practitioner level, she provides guidance and tools to help organisations and individuals pursue effective practice. The book therefore suggests both a new approach for effective aid as well as practical and valuable tools for anyone working across a cultural divide, with the expectation that their partnership will contribute to improvements in the lives of others.

The book is comprehensive and thorough, combining theory, case studies and practical guidance. It is written for a wide audience: it is both a solid reference for students and researchers in international development as well as a source of general and practical advice for people working in the sector already, both in the Pacific region and beyond.

### **A gap in the literature**

The mention of cultural values in current development literature is fleeting and marginal. Typically, Rhodes says, authors who do mention the link between cultural values and capacity either list culture as one of multiple influences or express frustration that 'culture' holds back positive change. Some aid agencies have begun to undertake political analyses of the environments in which they work but few appear to have considered the role of deeply held and different values about leadership and hierarchy, collectivism, relationship and risk-taking (some of the elements of cultural values research identified by e.g. Hofstede 1980 and 2005; Trompenaars 1997; House et al 2004; and Gesteland 2005) in their work.

*Capacity Across Cultures* synthesises principles from diverse academic disciplines, including psychology, management and community development to create a model called *Cultural Dialogue for Change*. This includes concepts about the role of values on individual and organisational behaviour (e.g. Lewis 2006), the impact of interaction between people from different cultures on the nature of collaboration (e.g. Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) and the use of strengths based approaches (e.g. Cooperrider and Whitney 2005). It thus brings together and

applies sound theoretical models to the international development field and specifically to policies and programs which are founded on the concept of building capacity in people, organisations, sectors or countries.

### **Intersection between capacity and cultural values**

*Capacity Across Cultures* argues that despite the centrality of capacity in development theory and practice, little attention has been paid to the influence of cultural values on the nature and extent of capacity. For Rhodes, cultural values should be considered as fundamentally important, not just the last of a long list of influences on capacity. Economic, political, geographical and historical factors are all shaped by cultural values too. Chapter 1 explores this concept and argues that understanding differing cultural values can profoundly influence one's perceptions of capacity. For example, in some cultures, equality is more important, whereas in others, hierarchy is more important, so perceptions about those who should have access to capacity-strengthening opportunities in these contexts will differ. Also, cultures can be placed along an individualistic/collectivist spectrum which in capacity terms means that expectations and roles related to individual or group learning will be different.

When a person from a low hierarchy culture looks at a high hierarchy culture they may see 'weaknesses' in leadership capacity, because the signs of a good leader (from a western perspective) may not be evident. At the same time, a person from a high hierarchy culture looking at a low hierarchy culture may see 'weaknesses' in leadership capacity, because the leaders are not decisive and authoritative (characteristics of a leader in a high hierarchy context). The issue is that the person in the first scenario may be writing policies about, determining the content and nature of an aid program, or implementing a program which aims to build leadership capacity, in the image of leadership in a low hierarchy context. Seeing the 'lack of leadership capacity' through the lens of another culture, is likely to mean that existing capacity strengths are not identified and thus undermined. Without sufficient understanding of the role of cultural values in determining the nature and extent of capacity, donor countries' agendas risk imposing the cultural values of their own societies, which in practice rarely succeeds in aid settings. People and organisations globally are generally resistant to the *imposition* of change, rather than the concept of change itself.

### **Major themes**

The idea that *views of capacity are influenced significantly by cultural values* is the primary and overarching theme of the book. The book uses examples from Pacific Island countries to illustrate links between values, behavior and capacity.

Another major theme, illustrated with examples, is that no-one can build another's capacity. Examples of capacity stories told by Pacific Islanders confirm *that they are responsible for changes in their capacity themselves*. While aid policy makers, program managers and implementers may believe they are the ones 'bringing about change' in reality, this is not the case. Of course they can

contribute to change, but this is likely only if their contribution makes sense in cultural values terms. This is not to say that values and behaviour do not change in aid contexts, but that the best way to support such change is respectfully and mindfully. In this light, and through the lens of cross-cultural collaboration, the idea of aid donors imposing performance targets and tying these to aid flows seems fraught with complications.

*Capacity Across Cultures* also confirms the oft-stated idea that *context really does matter*. Rhodes argues that the cultural values which underpin the behaviour of organisations and communities in each context should have much greater influence on externally delivered aid programs. This has implications for all aspects of aid – from concept and design, to implementation and monitoring. It has particular implications for determining whether aid is successful or not. For example, a person from a donor country may consider a successful organisation in a developing country is one with the same qualities and values as organisations in their own country: flat structure, leaders with open-door policies, competitive staff and a strong focus on getting tasks completed according to plans and standard rules. It is highly possible that such organisations could be regarded as ‘lacking capacity’ from the perspective of a person who places primary emphasis on relationships (rather than tasks), on collectivism (rather than individualism) and on strong decisive leadership. While clearly there is scope for middle ground, finding it will take mutual understanding and cross-cultural negotiations skills.

### **Case studies**

Part 2 of the book describes and analyses a variety of Pacific Islanders’ experiences of capacity-focused processes. These examples demonstrate the strength of links between cultural values and capacity and the differences that values make to perceptions of the nature and extent of capacity. The book argues that building on the strengths of existing knowledge and value systems makes any new knowledge, idea, approach, practice or system more likely to be relevant and sustainable. Five detailed case studies shed light on the benefits of self-driven capacity change and culturally-responsive partnerships. Chapter 9 suggests ways in which donor-initiated capacity activities can maximise relevance and Chapter 10 pays particular attention to the role of leadership values in capacity-focused work.

Examples suggest that processes emphasising confidence-building, such as supported practical experience and long-term mentoring, are more likely to contribute to success than externally driven short-term inputs. The case studies are not simply practical examples of effective capacity strengthening processes but also inspiring and motivating stories. They illustrate the belief that processes which understand and reflect positive values about communities, leadership, respect, trust, risk, tasks and other elements of change are more likely to bring about sustainable change than those which are based on ‘foreign’ values.

### **Guidance, strategies and solutions for those seeking to strengthen cross-cultural capacity**

Part 3 of the book identifies the qualities and features which will contribute to effective cross-cultural partnerships and suggests strategies for all those involved in capacity-focused processes. Rhodes aims to assist all aid stakeholders, from policy makers to field officers and from the holders of capacity to their colleagues and partners from donor countries, to apply some of the principles derived from the cultural and capacity analysis to their work.

Part 3 opens with a case study from Solomon Islands of positive cross-cultural capacity collaboration in the public sector. The case study includes success factors which are then expanded in remaining chapters. A synthesis of international literature on capacity development is provided alongside definitions of capacity development given by Pacific Islanders.

The book argues that capacity development in the context of aid and development is, to varying degrees, about changing cultural values in developing countries, whether all stakeholders in the process acknowledge this or not. In practice, aid activities often aim to change behaviour without acknowledging that for such changes to be sustained, they need to be aligned with changes in values. Negotiating changes in cultural values is not easy but Rhodes assures readers that capacity changes can be achieved both at the level of values and behaviour if undertaken respectfully and mindfully. If partnerships, programs and processes are culturally informed, then it is more likely that benefits and changes will be relevant and thus sustained.

The image of 'teaching a person to fish, rather than giving them a fish' is deconstructed in *Capacity Across Cultures*. On this basis, images of fish and fishing hooks appear throughout the book. The book concludes that 'going fishing together' and 'engaging in development dialogue with people under their local conditions, drawing on *their* expert knowledge and values, and tapping into their already established capacity' are preferred ways of contributing to change.

## ***Bibliography and references***

*Bibliography and references shown are for this summary only.*

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