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the POLITICS *of* COMMUNITY CAPACITY-BUILDING: CONTESTATIONS, CONTRADICTIONS, TENSIONS *and* AMBIVALENCES *in the* DISCOURSE *in* INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES *in* AUSTRALIA

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■ Abstract

The recent hype and ascendancy in the discourse of community capacity-building has generated a lot of heated debate among development and policy experts on its applicability in various contexts. In particular, questions have been raised on the presuppositions inherent in the discourse and, more so, the tension that exists between theory and practice. This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing debate about the politics of capacity-building. While the paper begins by deconstructing the theoretical principles that underpin capacity-building, it seeks to show how the concept is covertly used to subjugate and create power imbalance between the “builders” (supposedly those with the power) and the “beneficiaries” (those assumed to be powerless), in the name of development and empowerment. Specifically, the paper seeks to respond to the following questions: What is “capacity”? Who needs capacity? Capacity to do what? Whose interest(s) is/are served when peoples’ capacities are built? The paper concludes by critically examining the tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences from the canvassed responses to the questions above and suggests alternatives ways of looking at capacity-building in Indigenous communities.

■ Introduction

The language of development never ceases to create controversy, let alone, contradictions. Over the past two decades the discourse of “community capacity-building” has captured the imagination and attention of government, development practitioners and aid agencies on both sides of the development divide – the “developed” and the “developing” countries. While the hype and ascendancy of the discourse has been unprecedented, its influence on Indigenous affairs in Australia, as is the case with Indigenous peoples elsewhere, has been ambivalent as a result of the legacy of colonisation, dispossession and neo-colonialism.

The purpose of this paper is multifaceted. First and foremost, it seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate about the political economy of community capacity-building with particular reference to Indigenous communities in Australia. The first section of the paper puts into context the meanings, global context, and principles that undergird community capacity-building. The second part critically examines the contestations, tensions, contradictions and ambivalences between theory and practice. Drawing on these issues, the paper discusses how the discourse has been applied in Indigenous communities and its effects. The last section of the paper draws the major thrusts together and reconceptualises “community capacity-building” – what it is not and how it is and should be done in Indigenous communities.

■ Contestations of the meaning of community capacity-building

The definition of community capacity-building should start with a broad understanding of what is actually meant by the term “community”. As is the case with other concepts, the concept “community”, is context-specific. Chambers (1997) succinctly provides an overview and a critique of the usage of the term. In his view, communities are diverse and can be seen

in such differences based on age, gender, ethnic and social grouping, and poverty. Other differences to be considered in the definition of communities include abilities, disabilities, education, livelihood strategies and type of assets. He further contends that communities may also differ based on how poor or rich some of the people are. In some cases there are dominant as well as subordinate groups within a community. Literature on the definition of "community" within Indigenous communities in Australia is equally problematic. While there are linkages with other definitions, the guiding principles, in the case of Australia's Indigenous communities, are geography, identity and issue.

Community capacity-building is a term that has stirred a conflicting and heated debate. Perhaps Community Development Resource Association's (CDRA, 1995, cited in Eade, 1997, p. 1) observation that "our lack of adequate theory of capacity building reduces our own capacity to engage in the practice", may be a good starting point in understanding the intricacies and practicabilities of the concept. While definitions can be deceiving, it is sometimes worthwhile analysing the differing discourses in meanings. Whichever way we do it, one thing should be clear – that community capacity-building may mean different things to different people, groups, communities and contexts. This is truly so not only in Indigenous communities in Australia but globally. While there are numerous views of the meaning of community capacity-building, I examine three definitions which provide greater latitude and depth in capturing the "Western conception" of the term; the Australian government's definition; and the Indigenous perspectives of the term. In doing so, I intend to show the contestations of the meaning.

Lopez and Theisohn (2003), writing from within the United Nations and World Bank system, have argued that capacity-building as an objective, corresponds to the goal of people wanting to learn and increase their options and choices. They further argue that this applies to institutions and societies as well. It is about empowering individuals, institutions and communities to "chart their own development course" (Lopez & Theisohn, 2003, p. 21). An issue paper produced by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) on capacity-building succinctly acknowledges that capacity-building issues are fundamental not only to Australia's aid programme but also for economic growth, effective service delivery and poverty reduction. In this context, it lays bare the government's understanding of capacity-building as "the process of developing competencies and capabilities in individuals, groups, organisations, sectors or countries which will lead to sustained and self-generating performance improvement" (AusAID, 2006, p. 2).

While the two definitions provide some key issues inherent in the discourse of capacity-building, it is equally important that we understand what capacity,

in Indigenous contexts, mean. The Ministerial Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs define capacity as:

The knowledge, ability and commitment for individuals, families and organisations to maintain their cultural identity; interact confidently and effectively with the dominant Australian society; identify goals; determine strategies to achieve goals; and, work effectively with government and the private sector to access the resources necessary to implement these strategies" (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs – [HOR], 2004, cited in Commonwealth of Australia, 2005, section 11.40).

A closer scrutiny of the first two definitions above hardly mention any issues of cultural identity as part and parcel of the process of community capacity-building. Neither is there any reference to "governance", a term that has widely been used in aid and development industry here and beyond. This glaring omission reflects the gap between the Indigenous ways of being and the Western conceptions of development which, over the years, has been and continues to be an arena of contention (see Escobar, 1995; Makuwira, 2006). However, the definitions do provide several clues as to what community capacity-building, in broader sense, is all about. The most notable principles being:

- ownership of capacity-building initiatives;
- broad-based participation in the decision-making processes of issues that affect beneficiaries;
- locally driven agendas to the development of individual, community, and organisational/institutional capacity;
- ongoing learning as the process of capacity-building unfolds;
- sustainability or long-term investment;
- working in partnership with other stakeholders (interdependence); and
- culturally appropriate capacity-building interventions.



Hegemonic metamorphosis of community capacity-building

Capacity-building has a long history. In his maiden speech as a new president of US, Harry Truman, declared:

We must embark on a broad new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdevelopment areas. The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit

– has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concept of democratic fair dealing (Truman, 1967, cited in Estava, 1992, p. 6).

Not only is this statement contradictory to the reality of development and fairness today, but it also shows how this statement initiated an agenda that divided the world into two entities – “developed” and “underdeveloped”. The so-called “development” was to be viewed from a different lens and, those considered backward, had to catch up. The transfer of technical expertise and knowledge featured highly on the development agenda. Capacity-building spawned somewhere along the way. Thus, since then, the concept of capacity-building has undergone a tremendous metamorphosis. Even in theory, its meaning, as already mentioned, has been fiercely contested, with varying contradictions manifested in the way development is done. Table 1 summarises these varying metamorphic nomenclatures.

Why all this change in meaning? Wolfgang Sachs, one of the leading development critics provides a clear answer: “The idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Delusions and disappointment, failure and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work” (Sachs, 1992, p. 1). Today, despite Sach’s sentiments, the discourse of “development” continues to echo the underdeveloped

world with minimal impact. Thus, no wonder that righting of the wrongs of development has to engage such normative discourses as “community capacity-building”.

■ What are the underlying assumptions and tensions?

Several underlying assumptions and tensions abound in the discourse of community capacity-building. In order to fully understand these, we need to understand the poverty system to which capacity-building responds as well as its principles as outlined above. Figure 1 explains the poverty system to which capacity-building responds.

From Figure 1, community capacity-building assumes many issues, some of which are that capacity-building acknowledges a “deficit”, a “need” or some level of “powerlessness”. Capacity-building further acknowledges not only issues of equal opportunity, acts of social justice and equity but reinforces the value of active participation or participatory governance of development intervention. Capacity-building endorses the value of shared responsibility, accountability, and acknowledges that communities (whether defined by geographical location or by communal interests) are not completely powerless but do have strengths and assets (social capital).

Community capacity-building is basically a power game. It is never power neutral. Put simply, capacity-building is an acknowledgement of powerlessness,

Table 1. Capacity-building metamorphosis (Lusthaus et al., 1999, p. 2).

Term	Emergency as a development theme	Associated meaning	Focus
Institutional-building	1950s and 1960s	Equip developing countries with basic inventory of public sector institutions required to manage programmes of public investment.	Design and functioning of individual organisations rather than broader environment or sector.
Institutional strengthening/development	1960s and 1970s	Strengthening organisations rather than establishing them.	Individual organisations/institutions. Also improvement of performance.
Development management/administration	1970s	Reach out and catering for the marginalised groups and communities.	Delivery system of public programmes and capacity of governments to reach target groups.
Human resource development	1970s and 1980s	Development which focused on people rather than institutions.	Importance of education, health, population.
New institutionalism	1980s and 1990s	Institutional economic vitality and sustainability leading to national economic behaviour.	Sectoral approaches and networks, e.g., focus on government, NGOs, the private sector.
Capacity-building/development	Late 1980s to the present	The way to do development using other development approaches assessed against “technical cooperation”.	Ownership, participation, partnership-building, accountability, transparency.

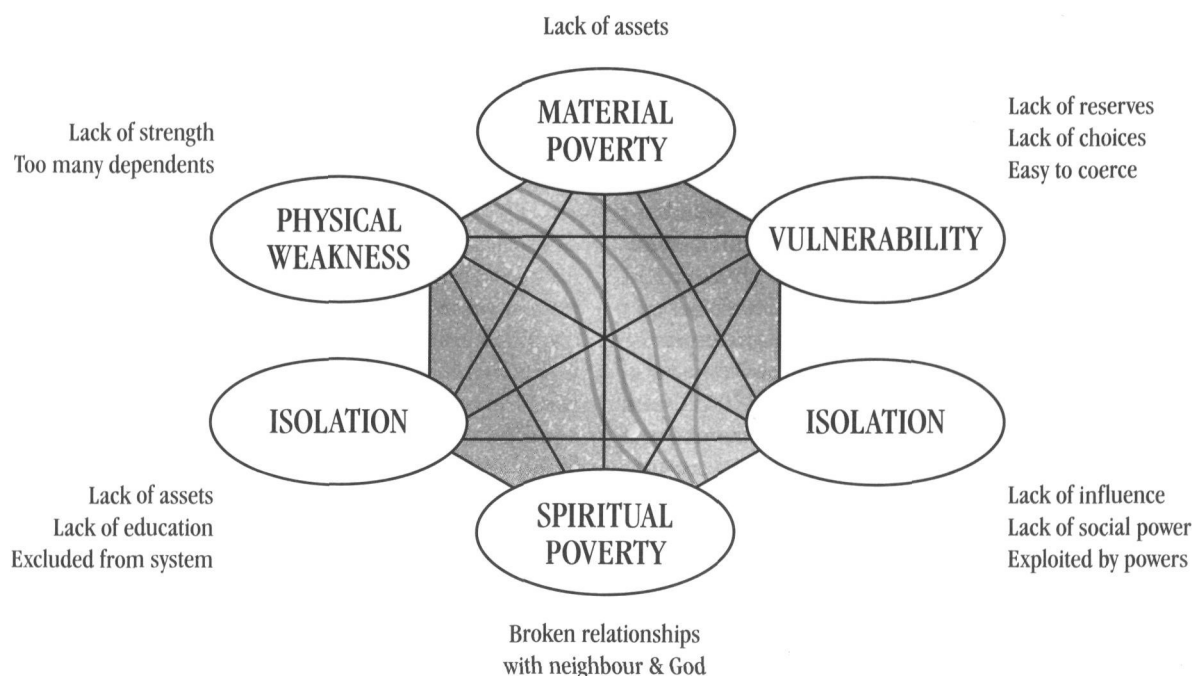


Figure 1. Poverty tapestry (Myers, 1999, p. 67).

weakness, helplessness, hopelessness, vulnerability, acquiescence, marginalisation, oppression, domination, dehumanisation, culture of silence, fatalism, passivity, dependency, exploitation and susceptibility of those considered underdeveloped or poor (Ajulu, 2002). If community capacity-building is about local ownership, participation in the decision-making processes, and sustainability (in other words, an antithesis of powerlessness), then it can be argued that capacity-building is not just the way to do development, rather community capacity-building is a struggle and a process of gaining power, rather than of being “given” power. A response to a “lack of power” is to regain power through initiatives that tackle the tapestry of poverty in a holistic manner rather than piecemeal approaches.

■ Community capacity-building in Indigenous communities

Indigenous peoples around the world are undergoing a period of renaissance for self-determination. As Seton (1999, p. 1) argues, “Their struggle for self-determination are struggles to retain and/or regain their cultural solidarity which unite them as distinct people”. However, this struggle is by no means easy, particularly in light of capitalist notions of “progress”, “development”, and “modernisation”. Commentators (see Blasser et al., 2004; Colchester, 1994; Seton, 1999) point out that one of the major problems affecting Indigenous peoples is related to the deeply held prejudices that see Indigenous peoples as backward.

Several writers (see Broome, 1994; Moran, 2002; Wolfe, 1999) have argued that to fully understand community capacity-building in Australia, we also

need to discern the history and development of Australian settler nationalism whose main thrust was not “exploitation” but “replacement” of a people. This structural feature of settler colonisation which is often confused with exploitative colonisation shaped the Indigenous communities in many ways. The fact that the settler colonisers perceived Indigenous communities as ahistorical societies without distinct cultural traditions and connections to land, tells a story that has since gravitated around dispossession, disempowerment, and assimilation with consequential psychological trauma. The tearing apart of a sense of community through assimilation, lost generation, and other forms of disempowerment, had an adverse effect on Indigenous communities. As Moran (2002, p. 1023) argues, “The cancelling out of the Aboriginal relationship to the land was central to the colonial process”.

Despite all this background, Australian Indigenous communities have significantly gained some ground in repossessing power albeit the government continues to act paradoxically through systematic demolition of some of the structures central to Indigenous self-determination (ATSIC was a very good example). Public policy in Indigenous issues has progressed steadily through a number of well-documented studies, title claims and agreements. For instance, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody; Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation; the Mabo Native Title Legislation; and Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, just to name but a few, are typical examples. In a nutshell, these documents and developments have highlighted the importance of capacity-building in Indigenous communities as way of addressing the gap between Indigenous and non-

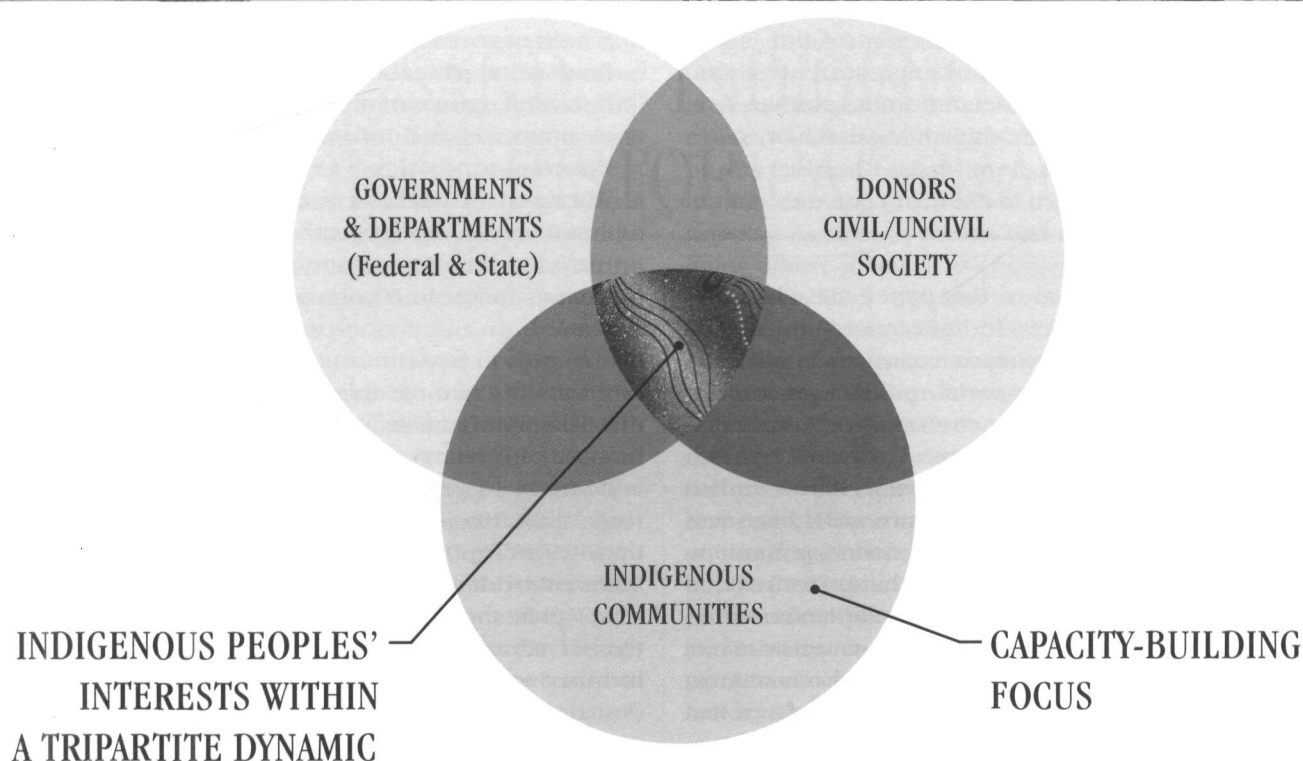


Figure 2. Dealing with the trio.

Indigenous people's social, economic, cultural and political developments and aspirations.

Therefore, following these developments, the notion of community capacity-building has steadily gained ascendancy much the same way as it has on the international level (Cronin, 2003; Hunt, 2005; Taylor, 2003). Amidst the debate is the issue of principles that underpin capacity-building. Australia has not lagged behind on this front. For example, in October 2000, a round table discussion on community capacity-building, organised by the government, emerged with some principles which were aimed to guide the process. These principles highlighted: flexibility in development programming; coordination of whole of government development initiatives; partnership-building between different stakeholders; building existing strengths and assets within families and communities; empowerment of individuals and communities in leadership and management, and encouraging self-reliance and sustainable economic and social development.

However while these interrelated issues seem to be the focus, practitioners researching issues of capacity-building in the area of health (see Feather et al., 1993; Smith et al., 2007) argue against the romanticisation of the "control factor" and argue that it is not yet clear how the issues of ownership or local control of community capacity-building initiatives operate at the individual, group and community levels and, precisely, how effective capacity-building is, when, up until now, critical issues remain unresolved. According to Dodson and Smith (2003), Cronin (2003), Hunt

(2005), McGinty (2003), Sullivan (2006), and Taylor (2003), while the governments (both federal and state) have made capacity-building a policy issue, there are numerous unresolved issues that highlight the tensions inherent in the discourse of community capacity-building in Indigenous communities. In particular, they argue that capacity-building is a challenge because the historical welfare policies of control, assimilation and dependency still exist and create bottlenecks that derail any meaningful progress. In addition, any development initiatives that purely focus on economic growth tend to miss the gist of Indigenous issues. As such, lack of recognition of Indigenous authority and power as a component of social development is largely to blame and only reflect the settler colonial mentality. Other issues that these scholars document in their analysis include: inadequate focus on human resource development at the local level; lack of information to facilitate informed decisions; very little jurisdiction authority for communities to control important matters; lack of effective and strong governance institutions grounded in culture and Indigenous traditions; dependency on government and bureaucracy to meet needs; categorisation of Indigenous people as disadvantaged, rather than as people who have rights and responsibilities; and lack of a land base or no control to traditional lands. To put issues in context, juxtaposing the poverty trap as analysed by Chambers (1997), against Indigenous issues as observed by other Indigenous writers, clearly indicates that capacity-building is by no means easy. It requires not only a

measure of self-determination or control but it also requires effective good governance structures that match with the culture of communities, rather than governance as defined by outsiders (Barchan, 2006; Sullivan, 2006).

■ Who needs capacity?

This question is central to this paper. Based on the dynamics within which Indigenous peoples find themselves, who really needs capacity? Indigenous nations operate within a social, political, economic and cultural space defined multifariously. Figure 2 explains the tripartite relationship.

I have so far argued that capacity-building is a reactive response to a gap, a failure, powerlessness or a deficit, and if viewed from deficit prism, the answer can be as simple as providing the needed things. However, issues of poverty, self-determination, decolonisation of the mind and re-empowerment transcend simplistic, reactionary and short-term remedy – particularly so when parties are engaged in a power-laden undertaking.

My argument, therefore, is: while the poor or marginalised Indigenous communities are viewed as “powerless victims”, it can also be argued that the rich, policy makers or those people in positions of power, and, whose actions perpetuate powerlessness, are also “powerless” in one way or the other. In this case, they can easily be identified as “powerless victors”. This is because while they do not suffer the same way as the poor, “their powerlessness-their helplessness to change things to improve the situation of the poor, contributes to the perpetuation of poverty. The way they suffer personally, however, is in some loss of humanity” (Ajulu, 2000, p. 130).

Unfortunately, community capacity-building initiatives in Indigenous communities across the globe mirrors a “tunnel-vision” process where the focus is “the poor” rather than the power dynamics, as well as the structures that perpetuate inequality and powerlessness. In other words, a country like Australia, with a budget surplus in billions, but having some Indigenous peoples living in Third World conditions, not only contradicts the notion of community capacity-building, but is a crime against humanity. Similarly, viewing capacity-building as only a transfer of monetary resources from Canberra to specific localities is not the ultimate solution. Thus, in my view, the primary culprits who equally need capacity-building/development are those with the resources: the policy makers, the donor community, international community development agencies whose misguided policies contribute to poverty and powerlessness. For example, the rhetoric of “whole-of-government approach” has lately gained prominence in policy debate, yet, contradictions are very apparent in terms of issues of harmonisation. Barchan (2006, p. 22) explains the challenge:

Whole-of-government approach demands a high level of coordination and information sharing between government agencies. Anecdotal evidence is full of stories of problems of miscommunication and misunderstanding between Commonwealth agencies and departments, let alone their relationships with State and Territory governments and stakeholders such as Indigenous communities and groups.

Barchan’s sentiments above highlight one of the chronic problems within development discourse. My conviction is that capacity-building is a multidimensional process targeting both the macro and the micro dynamics. However, often times, we forget that it is indeed such an interactive process as depicted in Figure 2. Perceiving capacity-building from such a narrow perspective distorts the actual praxis. Thus, given such kind of analysis, it can be argued that the definition of capacity-building is highly misleading. But then we need to answer the questions: capacity to do what and, in whose interest?

■ Capacity to do what? In whose interest?

Going back to the definition of community capacity-building, it is clear that capacity-building is about empowering (although I hate to use this term for reasons beyond the scope of this paper) communities to take control of the issues that affect them. It is a process of “facilitating” the strengthening of existing initiatives and social capital. It is about recognising that Indigenous peoples have a knowledge system. As a matter of reiteration, community capacity-building is therefore meant to give “power” to effect change as desired by communities, individuals, and communities themselves. A word of caution: “the power” referred to above is not power to exploit or dominate others (power to disempower) but rather power to challenge networks of relationships that dominate poor communities. In this case, community capacity-building should aim to conscientise people in those communities to challenge the discourses that support and maintain power structures that ultimately lead to dehumanisation, weakening of communities, and consolidation of the status quo. The abolition of ATSIC, as an Indigenous structure through which Indigenous peoples could express and voice their concerns, is a typical example. While indeed its governance was questionable, the speed with which it was abolished surpassed any theory of institutional capacity-building to which this paper makes reference. The question that needs to be answered is; did the abolition of ATSIC benefit Aboriginal people or government?

As discussed by Brown (2003), community capacity-building is full of contradictions because very often, the assumption is that initiatives will be owned by local communities. While ownership implies local

autonomy in Indigenous communities, cooption and coercion are highly common. Conditionalities often dictate and militate against any capacity-building progress. Community capacity-building in Indigenous communities often assumes and connotes consensus. On the contrary, consensual view in capacity-building reaffirms the status quo among interest parties. Self-interest is usually a danger to community building.

Another contradiction, and indeed a danger to Indigenous community capacity-building is the gap between the rich and the poor. When the powerless communities are made to engage in consensual action that does not allow dissenting views, it thus elevates the privileged. It ultimately empowers the powerful. Thus by focusing on the poor and leaving out the government and civil society machinery, it indirectly affirms the poor as being a problem to development agenda. While local initiatives are highly preferred in any community development, we need to be aware that by going local or claiming locally driven capacity-building initiative often creates the danger of downplaying the role of the state. By trusting NGOs or CBOs, the Indigenous communities risk the loss of control as NGOs, CBOs and donor agencies are highly bureaucratic.

■ Conclusion

This paper has articulated and extended the debate about community capacity-building by critiquing the often-ignored aspect, that is, the privileged actors. Capacity-building in Indigenous communities in Australia often involves the transfer of resources which have to be administered either by the communities themselves or under the watchful eye of the state or government. However, based on the most pressing issues confronting Indigenous Australians, that is, self-determination, control of Indigenous futures and active participation in the policy processes that affect them (Hunt, 2005; Sullivan, 2006), capacity-building initiatives need to deal with issues of relationships between the Indigenous Australians and government (state or federal). Gaining absolute mandate to take control of development issues through capacity development amid seemingly weak partnerships can be a frustrating experience. Addressing systemic constraints in non-Indigenous governance structures needs to be a priority. Having done so, the second layer of issues that need to be tackled with utmost sincerity is respect for Indigenous cultural ways of doing development and governance. Indigenous peoples are educated in their own rights and their knowledge of development may not be exactly the same as the Western ways of development. As such, we need to develop appropriate mechanisms through which a middle ground can be achieved, that is, a give and take between government and other actors on the one hand, and the Indigenous communities on the

other. There has to be "listening" among the parties involved. Looking at the poverty trap tells us that poverty eradication is a complex process and so too is capacity-building. Breaking the dependency syndrome means taking a holistic approach. Capacity-building is not just meeting the needs of the people. It is a political process. As such, it means that the starting point is to allow different actors to engage in the social, political, economic and cultural awareness within which capacity-building takes place. As earlier articulated, capacity-building is not only about the poor or the marginalised, rather it is about tackling issues from a holistic perspective. Non-confrontational activism is required in order to raise Indigenous voices at the highest level of policy structures. "Strategic" coalition building between and among Indigenous organisations is vital. However, such coalitions should allow broad-based discussion of dissenting views that reflect the nature of the pressing issues. In such situations, micro-politics may most typically be viewed as a result of certain stakeholders using political clout to muzzle the interests and aspirations of others; all parties must be encouraged to see the long-term agenda and perhaps compartmentalise the micro-problems whilst working towards long-term solutions.

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