

Museums, communities and societal development

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Abstract

In an effort to counterbalance the inequalities and unequal power relationships that have resulted of globalisation, and to include varying perspectives of development in decision-making, non governmental organisations (NGOs) are increasingly acting as forums for marginalised and vulnerable communities. Through networks, NGOs have also enhanced the exchange of ideas, skills and knowledge between a wider sector of society. However, NGOs have been criticised by failing to effectively use their resources and capacities to significantly influence debates and decision making. To reach effectiveness, NGOs need to develop certain capacities and better understand their relationships. For this, planning and decision making support processes like strategic environmental assessment can be useful. In this paper the experiences that were gained by the museum members and communities of Samp Intercontinental Museum Network, a Swedish registered NGO, are presented. The results were participant engagement, process ownership, capacity mobilisation, and the identification of key issues to better understand the work of the network. It is argued that participative, adaptable and flexible strategic environmental assessment processes can support cultural network organisations to make their higher level guiding concepts operable, to share and develop capacities across borders and to reach long term transformations in society.

Key words: culture, non-governmental organisations, networks, partnerships, capacity development, strategic environmental assessment, sustainable development.

Introduction

In many circumstances the role of NGOs is to act as forums for marginalised communities, encouraging a free exchange of ideas, skills and knowledge amongst a wide sector of society and allowing the marginalised to have a voice in international debates (Gardner and Lewis, 1996; Jordan and Van Tuijl, 2000; Nelson, 2002).

However, NGOs have had difficulties to carry out actions to bridge organisational, cultural, professional and individual borders, and have given little consideration to assess their organisational capacities that are fundamental to reach an effective implementation of their programmes (Schuh and Leviton, 2006).

To tackle these difficulties, NGOs can focus on identifying and developing their key capacities through a partnership approach, where participation, learning, reciprocity and transparency are emphasised (Bontenbal, 2009).

A case study was carried out to explore how the individuals, multicultural organisations and communities engaged in a museum network NGO could benefit from developing a network-based strategic environmental assessment (SEA) process.

In this paper, the concepts of capacity development and SEA are introduced, and an attempt is made to determine if applying an adaptable, flexible and network-based SEA process serves to develop multi-level organisational capacities to support network

organisations to make their strategic approaches more tangible and contribute to long lasting transformations in society.

Organisational performance

One way for organisations to enhance their performances and their contributions to societal development is for organisations to develop their capacities (UNDP, 2006). To develop their capacities, organisations can focus on applying the processes of capacity development and SEA (OECD, 2006; Vicente and Partidario, 2006).

Capacity development

Capacity development is a process that enables the right conditions to design strategies for development (UNDP, 2006). The process of capacity development is endogenous, focuses on empowering and strengthening local capacities, builds on available human capital, stimulates self-esteem and respects local values (OECD, 2006; UNDP, 2006; UNDP, 2009).

The process can be described as a set of five functional capacity steps (Fig. 1). Step 1 focuses on facilitating dialogue between stakeholders and encouraging engagement, step 2 on assessing existing, desired and missing capacities to define development visions, step 3 on formulating programmes and strategies, step 4 on managing and implementing activities, and step 5 on evaluating and monitoring identified key issues (UNDP, 2009).

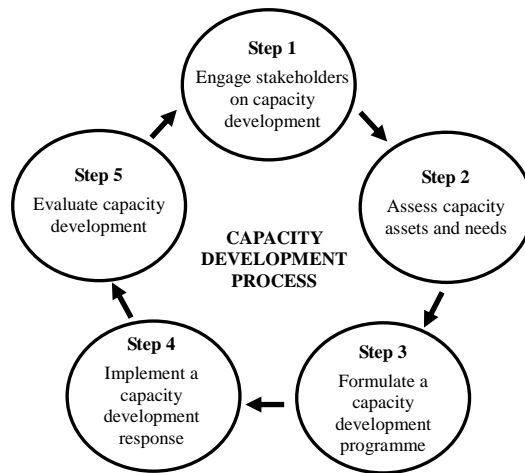


Figure 1: Steps in the capacity development process. Source: UNDP (2009).

With such a capacity development process, organisations can address their capacities at the individual, institutional and societal level, and engage with stakeholders in various sectors of society to reach multi-stakeholder agreements (OECD, 2006; ECDPM, 2008).

Multi-stakeholder agreements could be an opportunity for organisations to reach sustainable results through partnerships and to become engaged in networks, which can be a powerful tool for its members to exchange information, knowledge, tools and methodologies (UNDP, 2002; Bontenbal, 2009).

However, measuring the benefits of adopting a capacity development approach can be challenging because results may take time to be delivered, and because comprehensive

analyses to understand the complex multilevel relations and the evolving non-linear nature of capacity development are needed (OECD, 2006; UNDP 2006; UNDP, 2009). To surpass these and other challenges to capacity development supporting approaches for the process are needed (UNDP, 2006).

Strategic environmental assessment

SEA is a process that promotes sustainable development by supporting and improving planning and decision making processes (Therivel and Partidário, 1996). SEA promotes sustainable development by focusing on strategic issues (Rossouw et al., 2000).

Moreover, SEA promotes sustainability by enhancing cooperation between institutions and improving stakeholder involvement in planning and decision-making (Hedo and Bina, 1999; Sheate et al., 2001).

However, it is suggested that the role of SEA in planning needs to be developed so that SEA better adapts to different situations and conditions (Hildén, 1999; Nitz and Brown, 2001). In addition, it is argued that SEA should better understand decision making processes so that SEA can provide timely and pragmatic advice, and deal with complex non-linear processes to address the strategic dimensions of planning (Vicente and Partidário, 2006; Jiliberto H., 2007).

To provide inputs for new approaches of SEA, exploring the application of flexible, adaptable and participative approaches to SEA can be of use. Moreover, it can be useful to study how these types of SEA can link to and support the process of capacity development in organisations to enhance their performance and contribute to a more balanced societal development.

Case study: Samp Intercontinental Museum Network

Samp Intercontinental Museum Network (Samp) is a registered Swedish NGO open to all museums from any country, with over 20 years of experience in connecting cultures (Samp, 2009a). The purpose of the network is to facilitate the development of museums as fora for dialogue promoting human understanding and human rights together with the community, through responsible use of heritage, history and science (Samp, 2009b).

To address its purpose, Samp started the development of a network-based SEA process aiming to facilitate a better understanding of the effects the network has on its member museums and communities.

Samp's network-based SEA process

The first step of Samp's network-based SEA process was for member museums to express their interest in developing the process. This was done through a questionnaire that was filled in by member museums. The interested museums were assessed by analysing their organisational characteristics and cultural contexts. Based on the analysis, a network SEA team of three member museums was established. The three member museums in Samp's SEA team were the State Museum of Azerbaijan Musical Culture, Azerbaijan, the Museo Sang Bata sa Negros, Philippines, and the Museum and House of Culture, Tanzania.

The next step in Samp's network-based SEA process was for the SEA team to conceptualise and implement four workshops. Samp's core values or guiding principles, "Sharing", "Cross-border", "Dialogue" and "Respect", were used as SEA themes to start

to design the workshops. Each workshop considered the four SEA themes but each focused on one particular SEA theme. For instance, in the workshop in Sweden the *Sharing* SEA theme was specifically addressed, in Azerbaijan the *Cross-border* SEA theme was placed in focus, in the Philippines the *Dialogue* SEA theme was particularly addressed, and in Tanzania the *Respect* SEA theme was specifically considered.

In the workshops, the SEA themes were used as a base to select participants from the participating museums’ staff and communities, to choose the community partners with whom the participants would interact, and to conceptualise the workshops by formulating workshop objectives, drawing activities, and selecting network communications tools to facilitate the implementation of the planned activities.

This specific step in Samp’s SEA process was characterised by an iterative exchange of ideas, skills and experiences, and it allowed for a network context analysis to take place (Fig. 2).

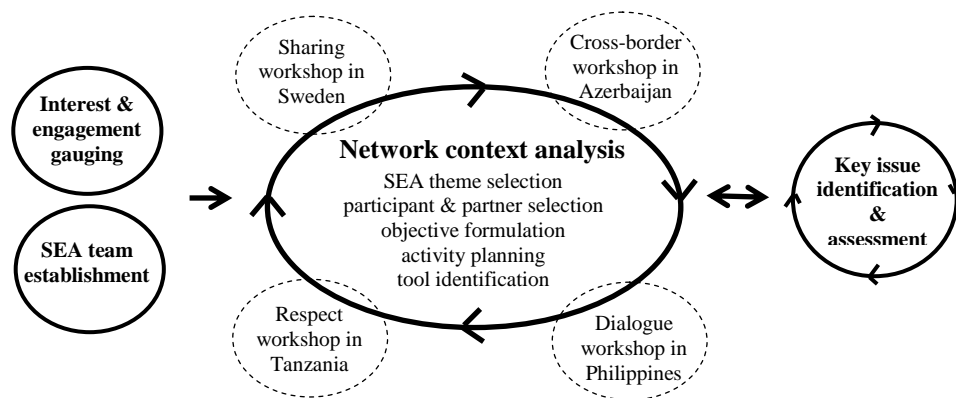


Figure 2: Samp’s network-based SEA process.

In the third step of the Samp’s network-based SEA process the data that was collected from the dialogues and exchanges that took place in the iterative network context analysis was used to derive key issues for Samp’s guiding principles. An assessment of the key issues for each network guiding principle was carried out, and a synthesis of the meaning of each of Samp’s guiding principles was derived (Table 1).

Table 1: Meaning of each of Samp’s guiding principles

Guiding principle	Meaning
Sharing	Multi-level inputs
Cross-border	Multi actors and place factors
Dialogue	Brewing cross-border conceptualisation for mutual benefit Empowering, engaging, including and encompassing for active participation
Respect	Challenge preconceptions and process attitudes

Discussion and conclusions

The iterative sharing of ideas, skills and experiences that took place in the Samp's network-based SEA process allowed participants to work with Samp's guiding principles, providing museum members and their communities with an opportunity to better understand the work of the network. The synthesised statements for each of Samp's guiding principles were the main results of these interactions. The synthesised statements facilitate linkages between Samp's guiding principles and the activities that are carried out in the network by its member museums and communities. In other words, the synthesised statements make Samp's guiding principles more operable, facilitating an enhancement of Samp's performance as the network's member museums and their communities can conceptualise and apply network activities using its guiding principles.

Moreover, it can be stated that in the developed network-based SEA process, it was possible to address the first two steps of UNDP's proposed process for capacity development (UNDP, 2009). The first step of the capacity development process, facilitating dialogue between stakeholders and encouraging engagement, was achieved as participants, member museums, communities and partners, successfully engaged in idea, skill, and experience sharing. As well, engagement was achieved by empowering participants, who considered having ownership over Samp's SEA process.

The second step of UNDP's capacity process, assessing existing, desired and missing capacities, was addressed during the workshops of the Samp's SEA process, as museum staff of the three participating museums and their communities shared experiences on their museum and community needs. The shared experiences translated into the need to develop individual, organisational and community capacities. Emphasis was placed on enhancing partnerships between member museums and between member museums and their communities. Focus was also placed on the need to invest resources and develop skills to reach the most vulnerable sectors in the communities of member museums.

In conclusion, it can be stated that through a participative, adaptable and network-based SEA process, Samp operationalised its guiding principles, making it possible for participants in the process to gain an understanding that it is important to conceptualise and implement activities in line with the network's guiding principles. Moreover, it can be concluded that individual, organisational and community level capacities were addressed and developed with the implementation of Samp's SEA process. With the dialogues that were generated in the SEA process, museum staff and community members could gauge their individual and organisational capacities, and thereby needs for capacity development in the network were identified. However, as only three member museums were engaged in the network-based SEA process, there is a need to implement a fully scaled SEA network-based process in Samp. This experience could provide the network with more information on its guiding principles, and it could further enhance the development of network capacities. A possible future result of a full-scale Samp SEA process could lead to the formulation of network capacity development programmes and strategies, and of programmes to monitor and evaluate the development of network capacities. Lastly, developing and linking full-scaled network-based SEA and capacity development processes could provide Samp, and any organisation, with an approach to enhance and measure its positive contributions to its members and communities, and ultimately to society as a whole.

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