

Motivating Change: Mozambican Organizations Transform Themselves through the Participatory Organizational Assessment Process (POAP)

From revitalizing dormant governance bodies to learning about the interdependence of basic structures and systems, Mozambican civil society organizations (CSOs) are creating concrete and lasting changes using an institutional strengthening process and tools that fosters transparency and accountability. That process is the Participatory Organizational Assessment Process (POAP), introduced by the Capable Partners Program (CAP Mozambique).

In creating the POAP, we drew from the best of available organizational capacity assessments (OCAs) then, “Mozambicanized” the tool and the process to suit the country context.

CAP has been building the capacity of Mozambican CSOs implementing HIV and AIDS treatment, care and prevention activities since 2006. CAP Mozambique is both a funder (as an intermediary for USAID) and training and technical assistance provider. As a funder, we must ensure that our grant recipients have sufficient capacity to effectively manage project funds and implement quality programs. As an institutional strengthening resource, we understand that tackling broader organizational issues is fundamental to achieving quality results in local communities and, more importantly, to helping Mozambican civil society develop and thrive.

Ingredients for Success

Through interviews for this article, and during the CAP mid-term evaluation, a number of critical elements emerged that have contributed to the success of the POAP in the past seven years of its utilization in CAP Mozambique.

Five Ingredients to Spur Successful Learning and Growth

1. Ownership through self-assessment
2. Engagement of all levels of the organization
3. Training on organizational development
4. Strong facilitation
5. Commitment of resources to implement capacity building plan

1. Ownership through self-assessment

To start, we debated which is best for measuring and supporting institutional growth—external or internal organizational assessments. Both have advantages and disadvantages.

External assessments may introduce more objectivity to a scoring process; however, external evaluators may be less likely to uncover what is really going on inside an organization (USAID 2000). When a donor-recipient relationship is added to the mix, assessments can also feel more like an externally imposed activity that extracts knowledge rather than facilitates local reflection or new learning (INTRAC 2005). In the end, organizational learning is sacrificed for potential increased accuracy in measurement.

The Participatory Organizational Assessment (POAP)

The POAP provides tools to facilitate self-assessment of an organization’s systems, assets and activities. During the assessment, participants assign numerical ratings to the organization’s current status or performance in key organizational development (OD) domains.

The POAP data yield both an organizational profile and a calculation sheet that presents a baseline from which to track the future evolution of the organization along a development continuum.

The POAP process compresses multiple steps—data collection, analysis and decision-making—into one activity.

In reality, all institutional assessment processes are subjective, relying heavily on individual perception, judgment, and interpretation (USAID 2000). Although external assessments might reduce some bias, we deliberately chose to use a participatory self-assessment process in Mozambique to emphasize the opportunity for learning. This coincides with a growing appreciation in the field that unless there is an element of participatory self-assessment then the process is likely to fail (INTRAC 2005) – largely because organizations that do not feel they own the assessment process or have access to the results have little incentive to do what it takes to grow.

The Starting Point

Most grant recipients were surprised that CAP did not intend to evaluate their organization during the POAP, but rather facilitate a conversation to help them discover their own strengths and areas for improvement. Multiple perspectives within the organization are engaged (all levels within the staff through the Board of Directors); the facilitator makes clear his/her role to ask probing questions, help people understand all of the areas and the meaning of the scores, and create a safe space; the participants work together to agree on each score. As a result, the POAP belongs to each organization—it is not a product of CAP.

In order to maintain a balance between self-assessment for learning and informed measurements of growth, certain measures are introduced to reduce bias in the process: the ratings at each level of organizational growth are clearly described; and actual documents and complementary evidence are consulted to verify ratings as often as possible. In addition, in 2009, CAP Mozambique introduced a number of complementary external assessments encompassing mainly programmatic expertise (HIV&AIDS behavior change communications and OVC care), financial management, umbrella grant management, and the quality of reporting. The results of these external assessments are shared with the organizations as evidence to consider when rating specific categories of their organizational performance.

The POAP is a learning process that typically takes a few applications before showing results. As an ADC staff member said, “For us the POAP was new, so we thought that we should show all of our strengths. But then we learned that, no, the purpose was to look at the reality and accept our problems so that we can correct them.”

Many CAP partners have begun implementing the POAP within their networks or with their own sub-partners. Organizations have also requested that CAP facilitate follow-up POAPs with them even after their financial relationship with CAP ends. This shows that organizations appreciate the inherent value of the process, even when the donor does not require it.

“It was better than a SWOT exercise done (to us) externally in the past. In the POAP, we felt that the facilitators were there shoulder-by-shoulder with us, so we understood that it was ECoSIDA making the analysis...”

...“There are many issues that are ours to take care of. It wasn’t CAP that did the evaluation (POAP). It was us that did the evaluation.”

—ECoSIDA staff members

2. Engagement of all levels of the organization

Typically in Mozambique, an organization’s governing bodies—Board of Directors, Fiscal Council—play a tangential role in the life of the organization, called upon when there is a problem to solve, but otherwise not engaged. The POAP reveals the potential consequences of this absence to staff and

“The POAP helps me as a person. I can accept my errors and the opinions of others about my mistakes. It helps you become more humble. First it cleans your mind, and opens your conscience to be open to hear about your mistakes in order to improve.”

—ADC staff member

leadership alike. For example, we share stories of multiple cases where a lack of effective, timely oversight permitted relatively small problems to go unaddressed, and become serious issues that resulted in a loss of funding and/or credibility. As a result, the members of governing bodies welcome TA interventions (internal controls, role of the fiscal council, governance & leadership), tools and resources that are designed to improve the odds their organizations will be successful over the long term.

“The inclusion of the Board of Directors helped the growth of LDC because before it was only the staff that participated in meetings with donors. We are happy when the Board now asks staff to be accountable,” said LDC staff member.

3. Training on organizational development

Because Mozambican civil society is still relatively young, discussing – much less evaluating and scoring – aspects of organizational performance is a new concept. To tackle this, we integrated training on OD in the first and second applications of the POAP. This helped organizations develop a frame of reference from which to assess themselves and enabled them to more realistically score each organizational area.

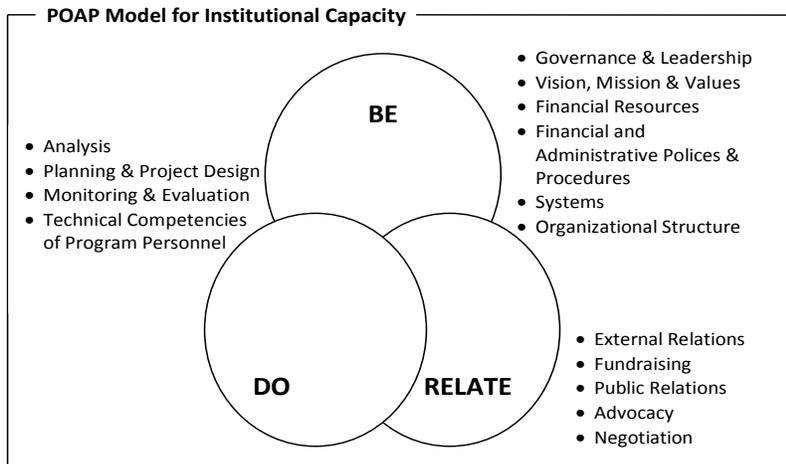


Figure 1. The POAP Model for institutional capacity strengthening uses a holistic approach.

We developed a methodology that simultaneously orients organizations on basic OD elements and facilitates their conversations about where they fit along a scale of clearly identified criteria for each of four stages of organizational growth. And yet, we discovered early on that this wasn’t enough. Organizations were struggling to understand how the components fit together. To bring complex ideas closer to ground, CAP adapted the widely recognized “be-do-relate” model. This model groups key elements together by function (see figure 1), and helped

organizations visualize the linkages between components within a circle, as well as across circles. “The be-do-relate model helped us to be open to discuss more things. It helped stimulate conversation. When we talked about administrative issues, we saw how these are related to other areas,” says ECOSIDA staff member.

4. Strong facilitation

Helping an organization take stock of sensitive topics, including staff competence, salary policies and conflicts of interest, in front of its Board and a donor is a challenging task. In Mozambique, it is rare for employees of an organization to speak out against the opinions of colleagues or board members present

in the same room. The facilitator must recognize and understand the needs, motivations and agendas of those involved (whether hidden or not), negotiate a genuine consensus about what the impact assessment process is for, and ensure that each individual in the room accept responsibility for his or her role in bringing the organization to its current stage and moving it forward. That is why we nurtured highly-skilled internal facilitators who, over time, have built the trust necessary to help organizations conduct authentic self-evaluations. Using Appreciative Inquiry as an approach, the facilitators are able to engage organizations in a new way, by exploring the positive rather than focusing on the negative.

“The facilitator raised questions to make us think about reality. Not about what I would like to be the reality, but in fact the reality (of the status of our organization),” said ANEMO member about his transformative POAP experience. Another added, “The methodology was great. It made the people reflect and created an opening and conditions for people to tell the truth, without being afraid.”

Experience shows that poor facilitation of the POAP can de-rail the process. Early in the project, CAP Mozambique contracted external consultants to facilitate the process, and it didn’t always go well. In some cases, organizations felt they were being asked to evaluate CAP, rather than themselves. In other cases, the consultants were not able to create a safe environment for sharing—which is the starting point of the POAP process. From that point on, we focused on training a few key individuals to facilitate all POAPs, thus providing both the organizations and CAP with a consistent application of the tool and the process.

“The dynamics created by the facilitators help the participants talk about things they were never able to discuss before in the organization,” said the CAP OD Technical Officer. “The facilitators bring the spice to the room – stir up the debate – and then leave to let the participants talk amongst themselves before wrapping up key points when the facilitator returns.”

CAP facilitators set the mood by asking those who have participated in the process before to share their experiences and by using ice-breakers and other tactics create an open atmosphere. Without a doubt, humor is also one of the best tools for helping people open up. “That’s what (the facilitators) would do bring up a serious issue but use a little humor to help people talk comfortably,” commented an ECoSIDA staff member.

5. Commitment of resources to implement capacity-building plans

Many OD tools have an action plan component built into the process. Just as frequently, these plans are shelved almost as soon as they are written, due to lack of commitment, time, resources or a combination of all of these elements. Yet, it is the application of what is learned and the implementation of plans that leads to meaningful change and advancement.

CAP partners quickly learn that the POAP Capacity Building Plan is an exciting mechanism for real institutional growth. Resources for institutional strengthening are typically quite scarce, but USAID has demonstrated a commitment to Mozambican organizations by channeling these funds through CAP to its partners. We tackle the priorities in conjunction with each organization, providing training and follow-up TA over the period of time necessary to reach positive results. In some cases, this may take a few months. In other cases, we support organizations for a few years to reach their goals.

Organizations tell us they appreciate our systematic approach to prioritizing, assigning responsibilities, and follow-up. Says one ADC staff member, “It is important to have priorities to know where you need to attack first. And it is (equally) important to identify who is responsible for doing each thing. Otherwise, when the moment arrives it is hard to peg down who should have completed the task. Now (with the Capacity Building Plan) we have already identified who should do each thing, and it is much clearer how the work will get done.”

Conclusion

Our partners are witnessing real and lasting changes in their organizations by their and our measures. Progress reflects each organization’s own priorities.

According to the externally-conducted CAP Midterm Evaluation, many partners described the POAP as one of the most valuable elements of their work with us. Many are replicating at least some form of the POAP in their own organizations and/or with their sub-partners. One faith-based organization said, “The majority of our churches (14 of 17 churches) have adopted the POAP tool.”

In addition to providing organizations with an assessment process that they can call their own, the POAP provides them with the skills to reflect and act. “The POAP has forced (Mozambican) organizations to look critically at each component of their organizations that affect service provision and develop the critical analysis skills that they will need post-CAP to continue their growth and development,” stated the CAP Midterm Evaluation.

The PAOP was new in Mozambique when CAP introduced it, and we faced some skepticism and resistance. Yet, the way we designed the process, chose to implement it and adjust and improve it along the way have made this one of the most transformational elements of the CAP Mozambique program.

“In the beginning (of the process) we realized that we had a problem with criticism. We discussed this between ourselves and came to the conclusion that we need to be critical and honest about these issues. The facilitators told us that they were mediating the conversation and that it was a safe space. This made us feel more comfortable in sharing the information,” said one CAP partner. In a culture that tends to avoid conflict, candor is powerful.

CAP Mozambique & Partners: Concrete Results

As a result of the POAP, subsequent training and/or technical assistance, CAP partners attained the following:

- 9 organizations have Board-approved HR policies and procedures manuals.
- 7 organizations have “ready-to-approve” HR policy & procedures manuals.
- 8 organizations have Board-approved Finance and Admin policies and procedures manuals.
- 7 organizations have “ready-to-approve” Finance and Admin P&P manuals.
- 9 organizations have conducted General Assemblies.
- 11 organizations revised and approved their organizations’ mission, vision, and/or value statement.
- 6 organizations have revised their Statutes and Internal Regulations.
- 6 organizations have conducted staff performance evaluations.
- 3 organizations completed their registration as legal entities in Mozambique.
- 3 organizations have created Strategic Plans.
- 4 organizations have board-approved salary policies.
- 9 organizations have board-approved Codes of Ethics and Sexual Harassment Policies.
- 5 organizations improved financial systems, resulting in grant awards.

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