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Examining barriers and facilitators of capacity building in development: a systematic review of international development projects

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ABSTRACT

This study systematically reviews capacity building projects and programs within the field of international development cooperation, with the aim of identifying key facilitators and barriers across different levels of implementation. While capacity building is increasingly recognized as a central mechanism for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), existing frameworks remain fragmented and conceptually inconsistent. To address this gap, the article proposes a level-based analytical framework that disaggregates capacity development into individual, organizational, and systemic components and conducts a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature. Guided by the PRISMA methodology, this study integrates qualitative synthesis with quantitative text mining and word cloud analysis to uncover thematic patterns and frequently cited success factors. Key success factors include local ownership, partnerships, and context-sensitive training. Conversely, barriers such as misalignment, institutional instability, and resource constraints are shown to significantly hinder capacity outcomes. This study contributes both theoretically by clarifying the operational components of capacity building and practically by offering a diagnostic tool for project design and evaluation. It provides development practitioners and policymakers with actionable insights to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of capacity building interventions.

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Introduction

Globalization has enhanced international development cooperation by fostering collaboration among diverse international actors to tackle complex and multifaceted global challenges. Over time, the international discourse on development aid has evolved to emphasize policy coherence, aid effectiveness, and sustainability (Naylor 2011; Samy and Aksil 2015; Vallejo and Wehn 2016). Since the United Nations (UN) adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2016–2030, capacity development has been recognized as a central pillar of development cooperation (Vallejo and Wehn 2016). Its scope ranges from human resource development to broader organizational and institutional strengthening (UNESCO 2010).

Since the 1990s, capacity building has gained prominence in development discourse, with scholars increasingly focusing on its evaluation, methodology, and conceptual framework (Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022). Given its multidimensional nature, the concept has been defined in diverse ways by both scholars and practitioners, resulting in a lack of consensus on a clear and universally accepted definition (Merino and Carmenado 2012; Sanz et al. 2013). While the term is not used consistently across the development literature, the UN describes capacity development as 'the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes, and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world' (UN 2025). This conceptual framing is essential, as capacity building is closely linked to the development project cycle, which includes programming, identification, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. As such, a clear understanding of capacity development can provide essential guidance throughout all stages of project design and evaluation (Porzecanski et al. 2022).

As the scope of capacity building expanded during the 1990s, specific strands such as Community Capacity Building (CCB) began to receive growing attention in both academic and policy discourse (Craig 2007). Unlike approaches that focus primarily on enhancing individual knowledge and technical skills, CCB emphasizes empowering communities to define collective goals, mobilize

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local assets, and sustain long-term social change. It is understood as both a process and an outcome: fostering community agency while also improving social, economic, and institutional conditions. However, the concept remains contested, with definitions varying significantly across sectors and regions. These variations reflect differing ideological orientations, development paradigms, and implementation contexts. Such definitional ambiguity has created theoretical and practical tensions – especially when translating CCB into development cooperation projects where goals, stakeholders, and modes of engagement may diverge substantially. A nuanced understanding of how CCB is conceptualized and operationalized is therefore essential for assessing its role and effectiveness within the broader framework of capacity development.

Capacity building initiatives span a wide spectrum – from individual to societal levels – and are frequently analyzed using a level-based framework comprising individual, institutional, and systemic dimensions (An, Garvin, and Hall 2017; Merino and Carmenado 2012; OECD 2019). However, few studies have systematically examined how capacity building is operationalized within development cooperation projects. This gap is significant, as the lack of conceptual clarity – driven by diverse definitions and fragmented frameworks – complicates the evaluation of project effectiveness. In practice, capacity building efforts often cut across multiple levels, making it difficult to distinguish discrete elements or apply standardized evaluation criteria (Kühl 2009; Vallejo and Wehn 2016). Combined with the complex and multifaceted nature of development projects, these conceptual ambiguities can obscure what constitutes success or failure. As evaluation mechanisms in international development become increasingly rigorous and outcome-oriented (OECD 2023), the need for clearer conceptual and analytical standards has become more pressing. This study responds to that need by conducting a systematic review that identifies key success factors and barriers, thereby contributing to the development of more coherent and actionable frameworks for capacity building within international development.

Building on the literature review, this study identifies two dominant strands in the conceptualization of capacity development frameworks. The first strand emphasizes single-level approaches, which examine capacity at the individual, organizational, or systemic level in isolation (Hall 2017; Kabeer 2005; Rao 2017; Shah 2016). In contrast, the second strand highlights more integrated, multi-level approaches that understand capacity development as an interconnected and dynamic process (Kühl 2009; Vallejo and Wehn 2016). The diversity of implementation levels across development projects and programs has contributed to substantial variation in how capacity development is defined and operationalized. Given its multidimensional character, distinct approaches have emerged at each level – individual, institutional, and systemic. However, clear analytical boundaries or standardized criteria for assessing capacity building in international development remain largely underdeveloped.

To address existing gaps, this study proposes an analytical framework that delineates key components of capacity development across the individual, organizational, and systemic levels. The framework is intended to support project design and evaluation by enabling practitioners to prioritize level-specific success factors and anticipate potential challenges. While many development projects tend to focus on a single level, this framework facilitates more targeted planning and provides clearer evaluation criteria. The success factors and barriers identified through this study also offer practical guidance for aligning project implementation with the expectations of donors and partners. Although the framework may not be universally applicable, it contributes to more coherent and effective capacity building across diverse development settings.

To explore how capacity building is operationalized and how it evolves within development projects and programs, this study conducts a systematic review combined with text-mining analysis of peer-reviewed literature on capacity development. This approach allows the study to identify key enabling factors and barriers across various levels of intervention. Accordingly, the article addresses the following research questions – (i) How do capacity building projects function differently at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels?; (ii) How is capacity building conceptualized and framed by donors?; and (iii) What are the key facilitators and barriers to effective capacity building in international development projects?

To address these questions, the article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the global literature on capacity development. Section 3 outlines the research methodology employed in the study. Section 4 presents the findings and offers a critical discussion in relation to the existing literature. Finally, Section 5 concludes by highlighting the study's contributions to academic discourse and its practical implications for international development cooperation.

Literature Review

The concept of capacity building began to gain traction in the context of international development cooperation

as early as the 1970s, although development projects were already evolving by that time (Merino and Carmenado 2012, 960). In the 1980s and 1990s, capacity building initiatives primarily targeted the macro level, with a strong emphasis on long-term training and institution-building (Merino and Carmenado 2012, 960). Its significance was reaffirmed in the 2000s and 2010s, as the international community increasingly sought to improve aid effectiveness by embedding capacity development into the core objectives of development assistance. Notably, the Paris Declaration in 2005 and the Accra Agenda for Action in 2008 positioned capacity building as a central pillar in efforts to enhance development outcomes.

Scholars and practitioners have defined capacity building in diverse ways, reflecting its inherently multidimensional character (Merino and Carmenado 2012, 962). Capacity development initiatives range from the individual level to the societal level, encompassing activities such as knowledge transfer, institutional reform, and systems transformation. As such, the objectives of capacity development go beyond human resource development to include broader organizational and institutional strengthening (UNESCO 2010). Given the wide variation in implementation levels and intervention types, the concept often lacks a clear and universally agreed-upon definition (Merino and Carmenado 2012, 966; Sanz et al. 2013).

Among the various frameworks for understanding capacity development, one strand of literature focuses on a single level, while another examines the interrelationships across multiple levels (Hall 2017; Kabeer 2005; Rao 2017; Shah 2016). Eger, Miller, and Scarles (2018) aligned with the latter perspective, proposing a model of capacity development structured around three interconnected levels: individual, relational, and collective. This approach highlights the influence of social and cultural relationships in shaping individual capacities. However, such interrelational models may be less applicable in the context of international development cooperation projects, where donors and implementing agencies tend to design and evaluate interventions according to discrete levels such as individual, institutional, or systemic rather than across overlapping levels.

Another strand of the literature highlights interrelated approaches to capacity development at the organizational, institutional, systemic, and participatory levels (Kühl 2009; Vallejo and Wehn 2016). The organizational approach focuses on enhancing internal capacity within organizations, while the institutional approach seeks to strengthen local institutions and governance structures. System-level approaches adopt a more holistic and multidimensional perspective, integrating both organizational and institutional elements. The participatory approach – people-centered and often overlapping with other levels, is increasingly framed as an interconnected model. However, these frameworks often lack clearly defined boundaries, making their practical application challenging. In response to this ambiguity, alternative approaches such as managerial and structural frameworks have emerged (Collier 2007; Ika and Donnelly 2017). The managerial approach emphasizes leadership, entrepreneurship, and a broad skill set, including knowledge management and innovation. In contrast, institutional frameworks focus on structural components such as behavioral norms, partnerships, and communication systems (An, Garvin, and Hall 2017, 394). Structural approaches go even further, encompassing policies, legal frameworks, social norms, and governance mechanisms (An, Garvin, and Hall 2017, 394; Merino and Carmenado 2012, 966). Given this diversity in definitions and conceptual orientations, there is a growing need for more clearly articulated standards to systematically evaluate capacity development projects.

The discourse on the evaluation of development aid projects has evolved in tandem with the rise of results-based management, the adoption of various standards, and the diversification of evaluation methodologies aimed at assessing project success. Among these, the OECD DAC evaluation criteria – relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability – remain the most widely applied by donors and international agencies. However, debates continue over how to interpret each criterion and define project success. Critics argue that the OECD DAC framework reflects a donor-centric perspective and tends to overlook qualitative and contextual dimensions of development (Eggers 2009; Kotvojs and Hurworth 2013). In contrast, others contend that the framework has significantly enhanced evaluation practices by introducing a common and transparent standard (Longest, Hitlin, and Vaisey 2013; Schwartz et al. 2012). Despite ongoing critiques, the OECD DAC criteria continue to serve as a widely accepted and robust reference point for evaluating development aid initiatives.

Analytical framework

This study adopts a three-level analytical framework – individual, organizational, and systemic – as a foundation for addressing inconsistencies in how capacity building is defined in the existing literature. To enhance conceptual clarity, each level is defined through specific components, as illustrated in Figure 1.

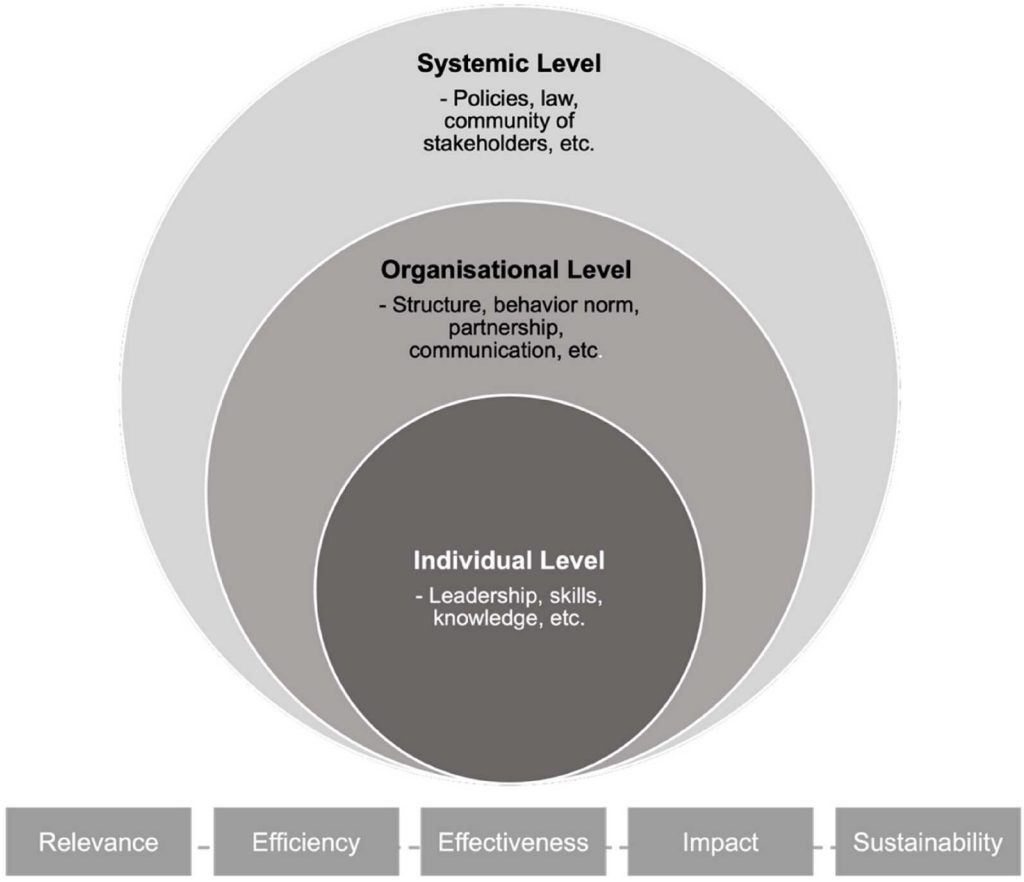

Figure 1. Analytical framework (Source: An, Garvin, and Hall (2017); Merino and Carmenado (2012); OECD (2019))

The individual level encompasses leadership, entrepreneurship, and technical skills including knowledge and serves to assess the capacities of project recipients and key stakeholders (An, Garvin, and Hall 2017; Merino and Carmenado 2012). The organizational level focuses on behavioral norms, partnerships, and communication mechanisms that shape interactions within and between implementing agencies and beneficiary groups (An, Garvin, and Hall 2017). The systemic level captures broader sociocultural and governance dimensions such as policies, legal frameworks, and social norms (An, Garvin, and Hall 2017; Merino and Carmenado 2012). This tiered framework enables a structured and comprehensive analysis of capacity development across distinct but interrelated levels.

Research Methodology

This study conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature to identify key factors influencing capacity development projects. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, ensuring transparency and improved reporting standards. To complement the systematic review, the authors also employed text mining techniques on qualitative data to examine keyword frequency and uncover recurring themes across the selected studies.

Search strategy for identification of studies

A comprehensive electronic search was conducted across four academic databases: PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCOhost. The search focused on capacity building within the field of international development cooperation. The following keyword combination was applied across all databases: '[capacity building] AND [capacity development] AND [(development cooperation) OR (official development assistance)]'. The search was limited to articles published between 1970 and 2022 to capture the historical evolution of the concept and its growing prominence, particularly since the 2010s.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Eligibility criteria were established based on the research objectives to guide the selection of relevant and high-

quality studies. Articles were included if they were original, peer-reviewed journal publications in English between 1970 and 2022, and explicitly addressed the concept or practice of capacity building within the context of international development cooperation. This included a wide range of development modalities, such as bilateral and multilateral aid programs, NGO-led initiatives, and Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects. In line with the empirical orientation of the research questions, the authors limited inclusion to studies that presented primary data or conducted applied analysis relevant to capacity development frameworks, outcomes, or implementation strategies. Exclusion criteria included non-peer-reviewed publications such as books, editorials, reports, dissertations, conference proceedings, and other grey literature. The authors also excluded studies that addressed capacity building within unrelated domains such as corporate training or domestic education policy without reference to development cooperation. Additionally, studies lacking empirical grounding or failing to elaborate on the conceptual or operational dimensions of capacity building were deemed ineligible.

Studies selection

The study selection process is summarized in Figure 2, which outlines the stages of data collection, screening, and inclusion in accordance with PRISMA guidelines. An initial total of 5,919 records was retrieved from four major databases based on a predefined search strategy aligned with the research questions. These records were first imported into EndNote for automatic duplicate removal, resulting in the exclusion of 816 articles. Subsequently, non-English articles (n = 176) and publications not meeting the eligibility criteria (n = 1,260) were also removed.

Two authors (HK, YB) independently screened the initial 3,667 records by reviewing titles to assess their relevance to capacity building within the context of development cooperation. The abstracts of the 187 records that passed the initial screening were then independently assessed by the same two authors. To ensure the inclusion of relevant but potentially overlooked studies, two authors also employed a snowballing method, identifying 46 additional articles through reference lists of the selected studies. This process resulted in a total of 233 full-text articles selected for detailed assessment.

During the full-text screening process, 206 articles were excluded for not aligning with the scope of the study – for example, lacking a substantive focus on capacity development or failing to address development cooperation. An additional three articles were removed due to the absence of primary data. Throughout the selection process, any disagreements between the two authors regarding inclusion or exclusion were resolved through discussion. When consensus could not be reached, a third senior researcher was consulted to mediate the decision. This multi-step review and resolution process ensured transparency and enhanced the methodological rigor of the study.

Data extraction and analysis

For data extraction, the authors developed a structured Excel spreadsheet, with each row representing an included study and each column captured key descriptive information such as research objectives, target population, geographic focus, study design, and the level of capacity development addressed (individual, organizational, or systemic). Initial data extraction was carried out by HK and subsequently cross-checked by YB to ensure consistency and accuracy. The analytical focus centered on identifying key factors related to capacity building and classifying enabling conditions and barriers across the selected studies. Although double coding and inter-reviewer validation were applied, a degree of subjectivity may persist due to the interpretive nature of qualitative screening and thematic classification. To address these limitations, the authors applied transparent eligibility criteria, resolved discrepancies through consensus and third-party consultation, and clearly documented each stage of the review process in alignment with PRISMA guidelines.

Text mining and word cloud analysis

In addition to the systematic review, the authors conducted a text mining analysis of qualitative data extracted from the full-text articles using the R program. This analysis involved examining keyword frequency across the included studies and visualizing the results through word clouds to identify prominent terms and thematic patterns. The text mining approach facilitated the detection of recurring concepts and trends in how capacity building is framed and operationalized within international development cooperation projects, thereby complementing the qualitative synthesis of the review.

Results

This section synthesizes the collective insights from the 27 peer-reviewed articles identified through the three-stage screening process (see Figure 2). The aim is to

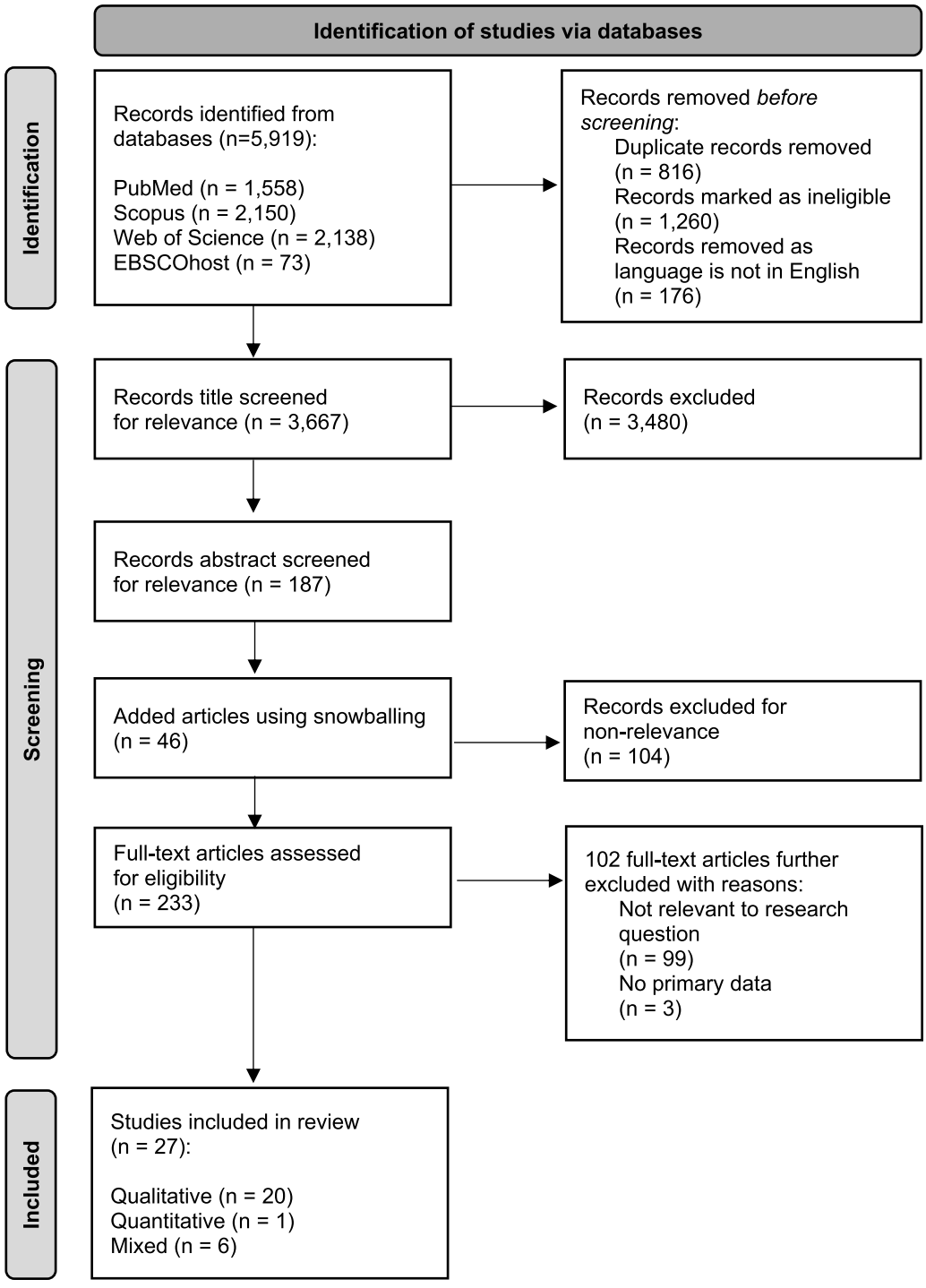

Figure 2. Search flowchart of study selection

uncover recurring patterns and underlying tensions in the literature and to relate these thematically to the analytical framework developed earlier. The findings indicate that while many projects concentrate on capacity building at a single level – most often the individual or organizational level – there is growing recognition of the interdependencies across levels. This tension between conceptualizing capacity building as a set of discrete components and as an integrated, relational process emerges as a central theme throughout the studies. By clearly identifying key elements associated with each level, the analysis offers a practical foundation for more systematic and targeted design, implementation, and evaluation of capacity development interventions. Although the relevance of success factors and barriers may vary depending on project

type and context, the results provide valuable guidance for both planning and evaluation. Anticipating facilitators and obstacles at each level can enhance project alignment with stakeholder needs, improve design coherence, and support the development of more robust evaluation criteria.

Description and characteristics of the included studies

The 27 studies included in this review examined capacity building in the context of development cooperation across a variety of countries, with a predominant focus on low-income settings in Africa and Asia. Spanning publications from 1970 to 2022, they reflect both the evolution of capacity building discourse over time and its practical relevance across diverse regional and sectoral contexts. As summarized in Table 1, the selected studies differ in research focus, geographic coverage, and methodological design.

A clear thematic concentration emerged around the health sector, with a substantial number of studies focusing on areas such as health workforce development, health systems strengthening, hospital partnerships, and disease-specific issues including maternal and newborn health and HIV/AIDS. The predominance of health-related projects can be attributed to several factors. First, the health sector has historically been a primary focus of ODA, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where donor interventions have targeted urgent and measurable needs. Second, capacity building in health systems is often directly linked to service delivery outcomes, making it a compelling focus for empirical analysis and donor investment. In addition, health systems offer relatively structured entry points for capacity development – such as workforce training, institutional accreditation, and public health governance – that align with both donor accountability requirements and local development priorities.

The majority of studies employed qualitative approaches, which aligns with the nature of capacity development as an intangible, context-specific, and relational process – particularly when focused on human resources. These dimensions are often better captured through qualitative inquiry. Notably, many of the included studies assessed capacity not only at the individual level such as skills development and leadership, but also at the organizational and systemic levels, including institutional norms, governance structures, and legal frameworks. While some studies focused on a single level, a significant number of studies engaged with multiple levels simultaneously, underscoring the interconnected nature of capacity building and the need for more integrated approaches.

Text mining results of the included studies

To complement the qualitative synthesis, a text mining analysis was conducted using unigram and bigram word clouds to identify frequently occurring terms across the 27 included articles. As shown in Figure 3, these visualizations reveal dominant themes and linguistic patterns in the discourse surrounding capacity building in international development cooperation. Reflecting the previously noted sectoral concentration, health emerged as the most frequently used term, followed by capacity, development, training, community, and partnership. These terms indicate a strong emphasis on individual-level capacity development within community-based health initiatives, supported by training and collaborative mechanisms. In the bigram word cloud, phrases such as human resources, capacity strengthening, and low-income countries appeared predominantly, reinforcing the geographic and thematic focus of the studies. The frequent recurrence of terms like HRH program (referring to Human Resources for Health) further underscores the centrality of workforce development in health sector capacity building strategies.

Barriers and facilitators of capacity building

The systematic review confirms that capacity building is widely recognized as a core component of development cooperation, regardless of whether interventions target the individual, organizational, or systemic level. Across the included studies, a range of facilitating factors were identified that contributed to enhanced project sustainability and the strengthening of individual competencies. At the same time, several studies highlighted critical barriers that undermined the effectiveness of capacity building efforts, often canceling out their intended benefits.

Barriers: structural, contextual, and operational constraints

Three interrelated categories of barriers emerged from the review. The first is a lack of alignment with local systems and contexts, which was consistently cited across multiple studies. For instance, Neuhann and Barteit (2017) observed that while international partnerships acted as valuable facilitators within relevant departments, the absence of a self-sustaining institutional system and insufficient attention to national contexts weakened long-term outcomes. Similarly, Fass (1984) argued that donor countries' limited understanding of

Table 1. Key characteristics of the selected systematic review

Author(s) (Year)	Research Subject	Country	Objectives Examined	Methodology	Level of Focus	Findings on Capacity Building ODA Projects Facilitator (+) Barrier (−)
Adom, Nyadu-Addo, and Kquofi (2021)	Capacity Building in Cultural and Traditional Craft	Ghana	To develop the capacities of the local people in selected districts in cultural and traditional craft enterprises	Mixed	Organizational Level	Capacity building in cultural and traditional craft enterprises was beneficial in helping the locals in employment and eco-tourism development (+)
Amde et al. (2019)	Health Workforce Development	Mozambique, Rwanda, and Ethiopia	To explore factors influencing the contribution of training to organizational capacity development	Qualitative	Organizational Level	Development of new curriculum and program (+)
Audenhove (1998)	Higher Education and Research	African countries	To examine a precondition for successful programs for both the North and the South	Qualitative	Organizational Level	Partner countries' ownership and donor countries' coordination are both important (+)
Bausch et al. (2018)	Healthcare (Ebola)	Liberia and Guinea	To discuss the implementation challenges as well as the lessons learned in building local capacity in the production of hand-rub solution	Qualitative	Organizational Level	Disaster context, limited access to raw resources, supply conflict (−)
Broucke et al. (2010)	Health	South Africa	To describe a project to strengthen the capacity for health promotion in two provinces in South Africa	Qualitative	Individual Level & Organizational Level & Systemic Level	Planning for health promotion activities and quality assurance instruments can be facilitator (+)
Cancedda et al. (2015)	Health	Sub-Saharan Africa	To outline a framework for health professional training initiatives to address the health workforce shortage in low-income countries	Qualitative	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Country ownership based on funding flexibility is significant (+)
Cancedda et al. (2018)	Health	Rwanda	To present activities and milestones achieved by the program in terms of capacity strengthening	Qualitative	Organizational Level	Strong stakeholder communication, sufficient resources, and appropriate policies to recruit local faculty are required (+)
Corkery, Land, and Bossuyt (1998)	Political Ideology	African countries	To examine what factors of institutional environment are important for capacity development in Africa	Qualitative	Organizational Level	Political stability of developing countries is closely related to sustainable development (+)
Dieleman, Gerretsen, and Wilt (2009)	Health	Low- and Middle-Income Countries	To explore if human resource management interventions improve the performance of professional health workers in low- and middle-income countries	Qualitative	Individual Level & Organizational Level & Systemic Level	Continued education with the support of local authorities and local staff's care can improve health worker's performance (+)
Fass (1984)	Rural Development	Sahelian countries	To demonstrate which factors are needed for successful performance	Qualitative	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Donor countries' limited knowledge about developing countries can be a barrier for successful ODA projects (−)
Grindle and Hilderbrand (1995)	Public Sector	Bolivia, the Central African Republic, Ghana, Morocco, Sri Lanka and Tanzania	To demonstrate what factors are needed to improve public sector performance	Qualitative	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Environment of developing countries is important for capacity building in public sector (+)
Hartvigson and Heshmati (2022)	Higher Education (Research)	Africa	To compare an ideal model of a sustainable research institution and the dominating model used by Sida	Mixed	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Initiatives for improving the conditions for research are crucial (+)
Jones (2001)	Organizational Learning (Twinning Arrangement)	Multiple Countries including Laos and Namibia	To discuss the notion of organizational learning	Qualitative	Organizational Level	The twinning method is a vehicle for sustainable organizational capacity building (+)
Jones and Blunt (1998)	Twinning Method	Developing countries	To investigate the efficacy of twinning method	Qualitative	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Twinning arrangement leads technical upgrading (+), but it is not easy to lead sustainable institutional capacity building (−)
Kanal et al. (2020)	Health (Cervical Cancer)	Cambodia	To discover the key factors contributing to capacity building and system development for the prevention and control of cancer in low- and middle-income countries	Qualitative	Individual Level & Organizational Level & Systemic Level	Partnership and the phased approach with strong commitment of stakeholders who have ownership are key factors (+)

Laverack and Thangphet (2009)	Ecotourism	Northern Thailand	To provide the experiences of applying an approach to build the capacity of two communities	Qualitative	Individual Level & Organizational Level	The participatory approach for building community capacity is effective in ecotourism (+)
Marcondes and Bruyn (2015)	Food Security	Brazil	To demonstrate how Brazil intends to build the capacities of partner countries	Qualitative	Organizational Level & System Level	Well-established domestic strategies can contribute to the improvement of food security (+)
Moore (1995)	Good Government	Developing countries	To examine whether institutional development promotes good government or not	Qualitative	Organizational Level	Analysis on political situation of partner countries in project design stage and long-term twinning method can be facilitators (+)
Neuhann and Barteit (2017)	Health (Hospital Partnership)	Malawi	To evaluate the outputs and outcomes of the partnership	Mixed	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Partnerships aligned with national programs of development agencies can be a positive driver (+) A partnership without considering the partner country's national context cannot lead to self-sustainability (−)
Nurse and Wight (2011)	Health Research	East Africa	To address the knowledge gap between the North and the South in terms of capacity development	Qualitative	Individual Level & Organizational Level & Systemic Level	Partnership, mentorship, collaboration, and facilitation are required (+)
Ofstad (1999)	Institutional Cooperation	Developing countries	To study important preconditions for institutional cooperation	Qualitative	Organizational Level	A shared understanding and ownership between developing and developed countries is a precondition for sustainable development (+)
Potter and Brough (2004)	Health	India	To provide a useful operational understanding of capacity building and systems approach	Qualitative	Systemic Level	The systemic changes and reforms based on national, state, and district plans can lead to a successful capacity building (+)
Raguin (2016)	Health (HIV/AIDS)	Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia	To present the ESTHER initiative and its challenges	Mixed	Organizational Level & Systemic Level	Partnership networks have impacted the broader strengthening of the health system (+)
Ramos and Ferreira-Pinto (2002)	Health (HIV/AIDS)	Mexico	To discuss a collaboratively organizational capacity-building model in HIV/AIDS prevention	Mixed	Organizational Level	Multi-organizational training workshops contribute to achieving organizational capacity building (+)
Stover et al. (2014)	Health (Maternal and Newborn Health)	Ethiopia	To examine the extent of the capacity built to support continuous improvement in community maternal and neonatal health care	Mixed	Organizational Level	The multifaceted approach especially applied to the community level leads to positive improvements in organizational capacity (+)
Tumwine et al. (2022)	Health (SRHR)	13 Countries in Africa and Asia	To examine whether increased team capacity of sexual and reproductive health and rights practitioners resulted in improved outcomes	Quantitative	Organizational Level	Team capacity through support from partner organizations is needed for organizational capacity building (+), but adopting new SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights) does not necessarily produce organizational effectiveness (−)
West, Dawson, and Homer (2017)	Midwifery Educator	Papua New Guinea	To provide insights into strategies that help aid institutions and individuals in implementing international midwifery partnerships	Qualitative	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Knowing your capabilities and being motivated, awareness of the disparity, being able to build relationships, and having a mutual understanding of capacity building are influential (+)

Figure 3. Word clouds for keyword frequency and text mining

recipient contexts often led to misaligned project goals, thereby undermining implementation efforts.

Second, unstable implementation environments presented significant challenges. Bausch et al. (2018) emphasized that resource-limited settings – particularly those affected by health emergencies – often experienced supply shortages and logistical constraints, even when community engagement and program design were strong. Such structural limitations undermined otherwise well-designed capacity development interventions.

Third, the introduction of innovative or unfamiliar approaches did not always produce positive results. Tumwine et al. (2022) found that while partner support and media engagement generally facilitated organizational capacity, the adoption of new frameworks – such as those related to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) – occasionally had the opposite effect. Survey data revealed a decline in organizational effectiveness, suggesting that innovation without sufficient contextual sensitivity may act as a confounding factor (Tumwine et al. 2022, 9).

Facilitators: enabling environments and relational dynamics

The systematic review also identified a wide range of facilitators that positively contributed to capacity development across all levels. Several studies emphasized the role of favorable institutional and political environments. Political stability, government ownership, and policy coherence were consistently cited as critical factors for long-term capacity development (Audenhove 1998; Corkery, Land, and Bossuyt 1998; Moore 1995; Ofstad 1999). Cancedda et al. (2015; 2018) further highlighted that strong communication, comprehensive planning, and adequate resource availability supported effective implementation. In addition, flexible funding mechanisms enabled projects to adapt to evolving local needs.

Partnerships emerged as one of the most frequently cited and influential enablers of capacity development. Whether through bilateral commitments (Kanal et al. 2020; Raguin 2016), mentoring relationships (Nurse and Wight 2011), or multi-organizational training collaborations (Ramos and Ferreira-Pinto 2002; Stover et al. 2014), such partnerships were found to facilitate not only knowledge transfer but also long-term cooperation and trust-building among actors involved in capacity building efforts.

At the individual level, studies identified personal motivation, tailored support, and targeted skills development as key drivers of capacity enhancement (Dieleman, Gerretsen, and Wilt 2009; Laverack and Thangphet 2009; West, Dawson, and Homer 2017). West, Dawson, and Homer (2017) emphasized that acknowledging individual characteristics – such as prior capabilities and intrinsic motivation – can significantly shape learning outcomes, particularly in professional education settings like midwifery. Similarly, Laverack and Thangphet (2009) found that improved knowledge and competencies within communities contributed to capacity gains. Building on this, Dieleman, Gerretsen, and Wilt (2009) argued that continuous education and role-specific training enhance not only

knowledge acquisition but also task performance, thereby strengthening individual-level outcomes. Taken together, these findings highlight that capacity development at the individual level is most effective when it is context-sensitive, personalized, and sustained over time.

Key success factors of capacity building in development projects

The authors identified recurring patterns across the 27 included studies in this review. Table 2 presents a synthesis of key success factors, organized by the level of intervention – individual, organizational, and systemic. This level-based classification addresses the ambiguity found in earlier literature, where inconsistent or vague definitions have often hindered meaningful comparison of capacity building efforts across diverse contexts.

At the organizational level, several studies emphasized the value of community-based approaches and locally grounded implementation strategies (Adom, Nyadu-Addo, and Kquofi 2021; Amde et al. 2019; Cancedda et al. 2018; Corkery, Land, and Bossuyt 1998; Moore 1995; Ramos and Ferreira-Pinto 2002; Stover et al. 2014). Providing employable skills to community members and incentivising their participation generated spillover effects, extending the impact of capacity building beyond the initial target group (Adom, Nyadu-Addo, and Kquofi 2021; Amde et al. 2019; Moore 1995; Stover et al. 2014). In addition, strong organizational ownership, sustained partnerships, and resource availability emerged as critical enablers of effective implementation (Cancedda et al. 2018; Corkery, Land, and Bossuyt 1998; Ofstad 1999; Ramos and Ferreira-Pinto 2002; Tumwine et al. 2022).

At the systemic level, Potter and Brough (2004) demonstrated that a systematic diagnostic approach – focused on identifying and addressing sectoral gaps – led to more efficient resource allocation. Other studies similarly emphasized that alignment with national priorities, supportive policy environments, and inter-organizational coordination were critical for enhancing system-wide capacity (Cancedda et al. 2015; Hartvigson and Heshmati 2022; Laverack and Thangphet 2009; Marcondes and Bruyn 2015; Raguin 2016; West, Dawson, and Homer 2017). Several projects operated across multiple levels, integrating interventions at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels. These multi-level approaches often produced more sustained outcomes. Recurring success factors included recipient country ownership, context-specific design, and mutual trust between donors and local stakeholders (Grindle and Hilderbrand 1995; Jones and Blunt 1998; Kanal et al. 2020; Nurse and Wight 2011). In the health sector, interventions that prioritized local participation and provided tailored support for health managers, which proved especially effective in fostering long-term capacity (Broucke et al. 2010; Dieleman, Gerretsen, and Wilt 2009).

Taken together, these findings suggest that while the specific modalities of capacity building vary across levels, the core enabling conditions often converge. Local relevance, strong partnerships, recipient ownership, and contextual alignment consistently emerged as critical success factors across individual, organizational, and systemic interventions. This reinforces the notion that, despite variation in project design, capacity building efforts can be systematically categorized and evaluated based on shared principles that underpin their effectiveness.

Discussion

This systematic review analyzed the barriers and facilitators of capacity building in international development projects by synthesizing evidence from 27 peer-reviewed articles. The study introduces an analytical framework that integrates existing models with level-specific determinants, offering a more structured lens through which capacity development can be understood, assessed, and applied. By categorizing success factors and obstacles across individual, organizational, and systemic levels, the framework helps clarify the ambiguous concept of capacity building – particularly within the context of international development cooperation.

The findings indicate that most capacity development interventions are concentrated at the individual and organizational levels, with comparatively fewer efforts targeting systemic change. This imbalance may constrain long-term sustainability unless broader structural conditions – such as policy environments and institutional governance – are also addressed. Three recurring success factors emerged from the review. First, local ownership and community-led knowledge sharing were essential for ensuring project sustainability, particularly when local actors actively managed and adapted interventions to their contexts (Laverack and Thangphet 2009; Ramos and Ferreira-Pinto 2002). Second, partnerships grounded in coordination and mutual commitment were consistently associated with improved capacity building outcomes (Cancedda et al. 2018; Kanal et al. 2020; Raguin 2016). Third, education and training programs that delivered relevant skills and incorporated local incentives proved especially effective at the individual level (Adom, Nyadu-Addo, and Kquofi 2021; Stover et al. 2014).

Table 2. Success factors of included studies on capacity building

Author(s) (Year)	Level of Focus	Findings on Capacity Building ODA Projects Facilitator (+)	Contributing Factors for Successful Project Results
Adom, Nyadu-Addo, and Kquofi (2021)	Organizational Level	Capacity building in cultural and traditional craft enterprises was beneficial in helping the locals in employment and eco-tourism development (+)	Offering employable skills to the local people is crucial and the success of the capacity building was based on its tutorial approach
Amde et al. (2019)	Organizational Level	Development of new curriculum and program (+)	The dynamics among trainees' knowledge/skills, their role/position, and proper incentives such as career advancement contribute to enhancing the capacity of trainees
Audenhove (1998)	Organizational Level	Partner countries' ownership and donor countries' coordination are both important (+)	The development cooperation between the North and the South is a precondition for successful projects
Broucke et al. (2010)	Individual Level & Organizational Level & Systemic Level	Planning for health promotion activities and quality assurance instruments can be facilitator (+)	The active participation of recipient countries in health promotion is a notable factor in capacity building
Cancedda et al. (2015)	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Country ownership based on funding flexibility is significant (+)	Project objectives aligned with local priorities and setting up sustainable partnerships are critical for building the capacity of institutions
Cancedda et al. (2018)	Organizational Level	Strong stakeholder communication, sufficient resources, and appropriate policies to recruit local faculty are required (+)	Based on strong partnerships, multi-year training for the local people and flexible funding can contribute to enhancing the sustainability of projects
Corkery, Land, and Bossuyt (1998)	Organizational Level	Political stability of developing countries is closely related to sustainable development (+)	The strong national administration of developing countries helps make projects successful
Dieleman, Gerretsen, and Wilt (2009)	Individual Level & Organizational Level & Systemic Level	Continued education with the support of local authorities and local staff's care can improve health worker's performance (+)	Local staff's awareness of existing problems and proper incentives such as quality of care are important factors in enhancing the capacity of health managers
Grindle and Hilderbrand (1995)	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Environment of developing countries is important for capacity building in public sector (+)	For better public sector performance, strong organizational atmosphere, management skills, and effective network are major factors, while opportunities for meaningful work and promotion are more important than specific skills for better individual performance in the public sector
Hartvigson and Heshmati (2022)	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Initiatives for improving the conditions for research are crucial (+)	The improvement of research performance contributed to an emerging research culture and a more sustainable research institution
Jones (2001)	Organizational Level	The twinning method is a vehicle for sustainable organizational capacity building (+)	For professional technical upgrading, twinning arrangements are beneficial
Jones and Blunt (1998)	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Twinning arrangement leads technical upgrading (+), but it is not easy to lead sustainable institutional capacity building (−)	Establishing the outset organizational cooperation based on all activities of project can lead to sustainable capacity building
Kanal et al. (2020)	Individual Level & Organizational Level & Systemic Level	Partnership and the phased approach with strong commitment of stakeholders who have ownership are key factors (+)	For sustainable capacity building, adopting joint society initiatives is a novel approach
Laverack and Thangphet (2009)	Individual Level & Organizational Level	The participatory approach for building community capacity is effective in ecotourism (+)	Involving locally based organizations in the project is essential for building the capacity of communities
Marcondes and Bruyn (2015)	Organizational Level & System Level	Well-established domestic strategies can contribute to the improvement of food security (+)	Institutional, political, and contextual factors of partner countries play a decisive role in development projects
Moore (1995)	Organizational Level	Analysis on political situation of partner countries in project design stage and long-term twinning method can be facilitators (+)	The direct intervention of aid staff to the internal affairs of developing countries may lead to project success
Nurse and Wight (2011)	Individual Level & Organizational Level & Systemic Level	Partnership, mentorship, collaboration, and facilitation are required (+)	Recipient-led partnerships among donors, recipients, and commissioning agencies are significant in facilitating capacity building
Ofstad (1999)	Organizational Level	A shared understanding and ownership between developing and developed countries is a precondition for sustainable development (+)	Institutional partnership and twinning arrangement based on equal participation and responsibilities from both sides
Potter and Brough (2004)	Systemic Level	The systemic changes and reforms based on national, state, and district plans can lead to a successful capacity building (+)	Systemically building capacity is necessary to diagnose shortcomings and to improve project design and monitoring in view of the effective use of limited resources
Raguin (2016)	Organizational Level & Systemic Level	Partnership networks have impacted the broader strengthening of the health system (+)	Robust partnerships among hospitals are effective in developing and supporting capacity building for actors in the health sector
Ramos and Ferreira-Pinto (2002)	Organizational Level	Multi-organizational training workshops contribute to achieving organizational capacity building (+)	Investment in financial and human resources for capacity building can contribute to achieving successful project results

Stover et al. (2014)	Organizational Level	The multifaceted approach especially applied to the community level leads to positive improvements in organizational capacity (+)	The multifaceted approach can lead to improved capacity and the spread of positive impact to other areas
Tumwine et al. (2022)	Organizational Level	Team capacity through support from partner organizations is needed for organizational capacity building (+), but adopting new SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights) does not necessarily produce organizational effectiveness (−)	Support from partner organizations and media engagement was a key enabler of organizational effectiveness
West, Dawson, and Homer (2017)	Individual Level & Organizational Level	Knowing your capabilities and being motivated, awareness of the disparity, being able to build relationships, and having a mutual understanding of capacity building are influential (+)	Individuals' attitudes, social norms including expected roles, and supportive environment are crucial for capacity building

This study makes a theoretical contribution by proposing a level-based analytical framework that enables conceptual clarity in defining and analyzing capacity building. While the term 'Community Capacity Building (CCB)' is widely used in the literature, it often lacks a unified definition. This framework helps disaggregate the concept into distinct yet interrelated levels – each with its own enabling conditions. Such an approach offers a more nuanced understanding of CCB as a layered process rather than a singular construct, revealing how its functions vary depending on the level of intervention. By distinguishing between surface-level inputs (e.g. training) and deeper systemic level transformations (e.g. governance or ownership), the analytical framework provides a structured means of analyzing the complexity of capacity development efforts.

The framework also serves as a practical tool for practitioners involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of international development projects. For project designers, it can function as a checklist of level-specific components – such as motivation and skills at the individual level, partnerships and communication at the organizational level, and policy coherence at the systemic level. For evaluators, the framework offers a structured approach to assess whether project activities are aligned with appropriate capacity goals across levels, and whether key success factors are adequately addressed or obstructed. This clarity is particularly valuable for donor agencies and implementing partners who must demonstrate measurable impact. By translating an otherwise abstract concept into concrete and actionable elements, the framework helps bridge the gap between conceptual ambiguity and practical application in the discourse on capacity building.

The authors acknowledge that the proposed framework may not be universally applicable. International development projects are highly context-specific, operating under diverse institutional, cultural, and political conditions. Moreover, because the majority of studies included in this review originate from the health sector, the findings may reflect a sectoral bias. Expanding future reviews to include grey literature and capacity building documentation from donor and NGO-led projects would strengthen the generalisability and applicability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the study makes a meaningful contribution to both theory and practice. It underscores the importance of identifying success factors not in isolation, but as part of a multi-level, interdependent system. Future research could apply this framework to empirical case studies across sectors to further validate its relevance and explore context-specific adaptations.

Disclosure statement

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