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ABSTRACT
Capacity building has become a key focus area in EU peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Yet, despite considerable efforts, EU capacity building activities have struggled to deliver on their objectives. While such programmes have sometimes been able to strengthen pockets of capacity in specific organizations, they have had less success in building capacity in the round and in a sustainable manner. Drawing on empirical evidence from EU capacity building programmes in the Horn of Africa and the Western Balkans, this article shows that, to a great extent, this failure has been a consequence of the difficulties EU capacity builders have faced in engaging with local actors in complex political contexts. This, in turn, has led to a "legitimacy deficit" for EU programmes, which have had little involvement from local stakeholders and knowledge, and whose goals have often been at odds with local preferences and priorities.

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Introduction

Capacity building forms a central pillar of international peacebuilding, conflict prevention and security sector reform (SSR) efforts by a variety of actors, including the European Union (EU). It aims to strengthen the ability of governments, communities and individuals in target regions to better manage the challenges of development and security that they face. Capacity building can incorporate a range of partners, from the institutions and organizations of states, to community groups, and civil society organizations. It comprises a variety of different deliverables, including knowledge and skills, institutional infrastructures, procedures and rules, and material equipment and technology (Safe Seas, 2017, p. 3; Juncos et al., 2017). The EU aims to build capacity in the areas of governance, the rule of law and security sector reform, primarily (see European Union, 2016). As such, the EU has focused its external capacity building efforts on those sectors in partner states that will ultimately promote the EU's own security – as such, it primarily builds partner states' security and defence capacities.

This article draws on the experience of programmes in the Horn of Africa and the Western Balkan regions to examine the EU's capacity building experience to date and, in particular, the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Somaliland. These case studies have been chosen because they present the EU with similar challenges in capacity

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building (multi-actor complexity, as well as difficulties in ensuring local ownership and sustainability) (Algar-Faria et al., 2018, p. 38). But they have also been selected because, beyond this, the characteristics of these missions are quite different. While the interventions in both regions are ultimately responses to insecurity and attempts to conduct security sector reform, capacity building efforts in the Horn of Africa are focused on anti-piracy operations, supporting for the most part nascent indigenous institutions to fulfil their functions correctly. In the Western Balkans, meanwhile, capacity building is much more focused on the rule of law in line with the aims of the EU's enlargement strategy. However, as this article will explore, the challenges that the EU has confronted in the course of its capacity building efforts in both of these regions are similar.

In this article we argue that, despite a considerable investment of resources and effort, capacity building activities have struggled to deliver on their goals. While it is possible to identify some specific examples where local institutions or organizations have been strengthened and despite the holistic ambitions underpinning such programmes, these initiatives have had less success in building capacity in the round. Moreover, sustainability (or lack thereof) has continued to be an important problem as capacity building initiatives have not been able to achieve results that are likely to be sustainable and enduring once donor engagement has come to an end. In large part this failure has been a consequence of the difficulties international capacity builders have had in engaging with complex local actors, circumstances and political environments, in which actors are multiple, agency is negotiated, and outcomes are dynamic and iterative. This has damaged the legitimacy of EU programmes as the latter are often perceived to be pursuing goals that are at odds with local preferences and priorities. Notwithstanding the EU's rhetorical commitment to local ownership, many of these activities have prioritized forms of external technical and expert approaches over embedded forms of local knowledge, practices and ways of doing things.

The article's analysis is derived from secondary sources and primary data, including official EU documents and interviews. The fieldwork in Brussels, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Somaliland took place between May 2016 and November 2016, totalling 48 interviews. Interviewees included, but were not limited to, EU officials, other international officials (from other international organizations and Member State embassies), local governmental representatives and employees of NGOs (local and international). All interviews have been coded to preserve anonymity.

Capacity building and local ownership

Capacity building has a long history. As Kuhl (2009, pp. 554–555) notes, capacity building emerged in the development assistance community as early as the 1950s, through the rise of so-called "institution building" approaches which aimed to strengthen governmental infrastructure in newly independent postcolonial states. It also has parallels in the colonial period, when local administrations were developed under imperial supervision. As Venner (2015, p. 89) observes, capacity building in its modern form – in the sense of activities aimed at strengthening individual skills and institutional competence in target ogranizations – has its origins in US local government reforms of the 1970s. Capacity building in this respect has a number of characteristics. It implies that the responsibility for the achievement of development goals lies primarily at the local level, in the state, organization, or community concerned. The primary obstacle to achieving these goals is a lack of "capacity" on the part of these actors, in the sense of the human and physical resources required to deliver the desired outcomes. International capacity builders are cast in the role of sponsors and tutors. Their role is to assist and support local actors in developing their own competencies in the field at hand. They are in a position to do so thanks to their own practical experiences, resources and technical expertise, which are assumed to outstrip those of the recipients (Bernstein & van der Ven, 2017, p. 527). As such, capacity building is presented as an objective and apolitical activity. It is about providing appropriate ideational and material tools to enable and empower local actors to meet the real-world challenges they face.

Capacity building approaches have become increasingly prominent in peacebuilding in recent years for four main reasons (Bueger & Tholens, forthcoming). First, their rise is in part a consequence of a retreat from the more expansive and costly military interventions of the initial post-cold war period, particularly the perceived failure of such interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, they emerge from the increasing tendency to see security and development as mutually reinforcing. International security actors have embraced core ideas from development practitioners in their own activities, including themes such as capacity building and resilience (Chandler, 2015, p. 2), in order to address the root causes of insecurity. Third, the international security discourse has shifted from a focus on civil war and humanitarian issues to concerns over transnational threats. Such threats are seen to require transnational solutions, including contributions from countries in the regions in which they manifest. Finally, capacity building appears to offer an alternative to so-called liberal peacebuilding; the ambitious, deeply politicized and largely unsuccessful attempt to address state fragility and conflict by the emulative modelling of western liberal democracies. In principle, capacity building approaches take a more bottom up approach to developing local capacities in contrast to the "liberal peace" focus on top-down institution building (Haldrup & Rosén, 2013, p. 130). Hence, the emphasis on "local ownership".

Capacity building has been embraced by a range of international security actors, including the EU. For example, the European Commission's section for International Cooperation and Development states that capacity building:

> is an essential factor for the quality of our projects and programmes. The development of capacity in partner countries is recognized as a key factor for improving aid effectiveness. Delivering sustainable results and increasing the impact of EU development policy is only possible if there is effective capacity in partner countries. (EC, 2018)

Similar rationales are visible amongst other key capacity-building donors too (HMG, 2014, p. 12; US Department of State, 2010, p. 1). Such approaches are noteworthy in that they are concerned not just with the strengthening of specific capacities in a purely operational sense, but also with questions about how such capacities should best be employed, managed and governed against a wider canvas of good governance, state-building and reform. They also imply it is international actors who are the repositories of expertise and best practice on how these things should be done (Bernstein & van der Ven, 2017, p. 535). Thus, while such capacity building efforts may lack the overt politicization of liberal peacebuilding approaches, they remain ambitious and normative in nature.

The concept of capacity building also places the responsibility for delivering outcomes on the recipient states themselves. While international actors play an important role in "empowering" them to do so, such processes are understood to be fundamentally endogenous in nature (Kuhl, 2009, p. 560). In consequence, the rise of capacity building as a practice of international security has been accompanied by a similar rise in the discourse of "local ownership"; that is, the notion that such activities will only be effective and sustainable if local actors – individuals, organizations and institutions – embrace fully the capacity building endeavour themselves (Donais, 2012, p. 1). It also follows from this that the success (or failure) of the EU's local ownership and capacity building efforts relies at least to an extent on the situation in a given third country, as opposed to the efficacy of the EU's policies themselves. This has in turn encouraged further attempts by the EU and other international institutions to promote local ownership.

The rhetoric of local ownership has become increasingly prominent in international capacity building and SSR activities in recent years, including for the EU (see Ejdus & Juncos, 2018). Thus, the EU's *Toolkit for Capacity Development* states that that projects must be owned by those who seek to develop their capacity "otherwise it simply does not happen". Accordingly, local partners should be in the driving seat in the design of projects "to such a degree that their ownership and commitment remains intact or even boosted" (EC, 2011, p. 9). Similarly, the EU's strategic framework for supporting security sector reform notes that to be "'applicable and effective', programmes should be developed on the basis of national owned processes", and that "[r]eform efforts will be effective and sustainable only if they are rooted in a country's institutions […] owned by national security and justice actors, and considered legitimate by society as a whole" (EC and HR, 2016, p. 5, 7).

The requirement for local ownership is articulated around three justifications. The first of these is effectiveness: international capacity building activities need the engagement and commitment of local partners if they are to succeed. The second is sustainability: such initiatives require local ownership if they are to endure, and if donors are to be able to decrease their own commitments and eventually withdraw. The final justification is legitimacy. Legitimacy underpins effectiveness and sustainability and, in many respects, lies at the heart of the local ownership challenge. It implies that donor activities should be planned and implemented in a way that is understood to be appropriate and desirable by the actors, organizations and communities at whom they are targeted, generally in the context of democratic principles and politics (Edmunds, 2017, p. 4). Hence, one might expect that where local ownership is missing, the effectiveness, sustainability and legitimacy of capacity building activities will be jeopardized. In the rest of this article, we examine EU capacity building activities in order to determine whether and to what extent the EU has been able to foster local ownership and the impact this has had on the effectiveness, sustainability and legitimacy of its efforts in the Western Balkans and the Horn of Africa.

EU local capacity building: the record so far

EU security capacity building efforts have been particularly prominent in the Western Balkans and the Horn of Africa. These regions, which face a diverse range of political, economic and security challenges, have witnessed the deployment of multiple EU missions and operations, working in a variety of security domains, including military reform and training, police reform, justice and prison sector reform, maritime security, and border security, amongst others.

Effectiveness and sustainability

Capacity building addresses not only the operational capacities of security forces, but also the wider administrative, governance and judicial systems in which they sit and on which they are dependent. Hence, these activities are, in conception, holistic in nature and suggest the need for a comprehensive approach (EC and HR, 2013) or, even a more ambitious, integrated approach (European Union, 2016). As stated in the EU Global Strategy, "implementing a multi-dimensional approach through the use of all available policies and instruments aimed at conflict prevention, management and resolution is essential" (European Union, 2016, p. 29). The rationale for such an approach appears sound. For instance, in the area of police reform, an effective police force will be of limited utility if the suspects they arrest cannot be processed and tried by an ineffective judicial system, or if their staff are not paid due to a dysfunctional human resource management system (Hills, 2000, pp. 53–54).

In practice, the EU and other donor programmes have often been overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge presented by an integrated approach to capacity building and the nature of the local context in which these activities have taken place. Such environments commonly face acute shortages of skills, equipment and resources, that capacity building programmes alone may struggle to fill. At the same time, whatever the success or failure of individual initiatives, these programmes are likely to ultimately be dependent on wider governance challenges that lie beyond the specific remit of the initiative or organization at hand. In Somalia, for example, the conditions for capacity building are heavily influenced by the wider political environment of the state itself, including its fundamentally contested nature, the persistence of clan-based power structures which often determine appointments and promotions within organizations, and the wider challenges of political and economic development it faces in the aftermath of its civil war (Interview HA01).

Assessment of the effectiveness of EU capacity building activities thus needs to be set in context. In many cases, they have simply not yet taken place on the scale nor over timescales necessary to inculcate transformative change in what are often very weak states that are attempting to build these capacities from scratch. This is not to say that there have been no success stories, at least in relation to building pockets of capacity in specific organizations or security domains. A case in point is the establishment of the Peace Support Operations Training Centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina (PSOTC), an international project consisting of 12 countries helping Bosnia and Herzegovina to develop capacity for training its own personnel before being deployed to peace support operations. In the past five years, the PSOTC has become self-sustaining and now hosts international officers from several countries. The centre has been given NATO certification, there are two courses which are EU and UN certified, and, at the end of 2016, it hosted a major international conference with 65 participating countries (Interview BH02).

However, and despite these individual success stories, such initiatives have tended to be limited to the specific cohort or project concerned, rather than in the holistic manner envisaged by the EU's integrated approach. These challenges have been further complicated by the multiple number of donors involved in a particular country, sector, or policy sphere. Thus, the EU alone currently runs three major capacity building programmes in the Western Indian Ocean region, all of which were initially developed as responses to the problem of piracy off the coast of Somalia: EUCAP Somalia, which focuses on building Somali maritime security capacities; the Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean programme (CRIMARIO), which works to build maritime situation awareness capacities amongst states in the region; and the Programme to Promote Maritime Security (MASE), which aims to promote maritime security capacities in East and Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean. This is in addition to the plethora of other international actors working in similar areas in the same region and various bilateral donors, many of which are themselves EU members.

The maritime domain is not unique in this regard, and similarly crowded environments for capacity building are visible elsewhere too, including in the Balkans, and across a wide range of policy areas (Algar-Faria et al., 2018). This proliferation of programmes has often led to problems of coordination, duplication, and sometimes even competition between actors and initiatives. Very often, donors earmark resources for the same activity and then compete over delivery, as was the case between Axiom International and EUCAP Nestor in training the Somaliland Coastguard on how to use their newly built headquarters in Hargeisa (Interview HA15; see also BH10 and BH11). This lack of coordination has led to frustration among local stakeholders. An official in the Somaliland Ministry of Interior noted that the "key challenge" in implementing programmes has been overlap between them and lack of coordination between donors (Interview HA03; also HA01). Many of the interviewees expressed frustration about having to integrate and accommodate varying international approaches: "Training the national army is very challenging, particularly when different countries are trying to help, all with different military training approaches" (HA03). These problems risk "capacity building fatigue" amongst recipient actors, and can lead to overstretch in already weak partner organizations as they struggle to engage with international initiatives at the same time as meeting their day to day organizational responsibilities (Bueger & Edmunds, 2018, p. 19).

EU capacity building activities have also struggled to be sustainable. They have commonly experienced two elements of vulnerability in this respect. The first concerns the general time-limited nature of donor projects, budgets and personnel appointments. Such initiatives are often self-contained, in the sense that they are conceived and implemented based on producing a specific deliverable, whether that is the delivery of strategic advice, a training programme or equipment donation. Even if these activities are successful on their own terms, they may founder over time if they are not sustained by appropriate follow-on support, or if they create islands of capacity in otherwise unreformed organizations (Interview BH03). Second, wider structural impediments may blunt the impact of individual projects. Specific successes in training personnel will only have a limited influence if those same personnel are not then employed in the positions for which they have been trained, for reasons of organizational politics or simply a lack of communication, awareness, or understanding in the institution concerned. For instance, some of the respondents noted that the donation of equipment, such as vehicles, boats or computers, would have little impact if subsequent training were not provided for how these should be used. Conversely, some training programmes provided skills, but not equipment, while the resources to maintain and sustain equipment once in service were often absent (Interviews HA02 and HA16).

These difficulties are indicative of the wider tension, discussed above, between EU programmes' holistic ambitions for reform, on the one hand, and the narrow, specialist or organizationally specific demands of capacity building projects which neglect local circumstance, on the other. They also illustrate the pitfalls of assuming that individual reforms will be sustained by formalized principles of organizational effectiveness, in societies that may operate in very different ways in practice.

Ownership and legitimacy

Underpinning many of the above challenges is the sometimes difficult relationship between the international – in the sense of the EU as a capacity building donor – and the local – i.e. the countries at which its various initiatives are targeted – generally framed in terms of "local ownership".

In practice, and with some exceptions in the Balkans particularly, the EU has struggled to achieve local ownership in its capacity building programmes. Despite its positive rhetoric, programmes tend to be planned, funded and evaluated from Brussels, and implemented on the ground by international staff. While programme development mainly takes place on the basis of (externally driven) local needs assessments, the depth and thoroughness of such processes can be highly variable. For example, the technical assessment mission that underpinned the first phase of the €28.8 million per annum EUCAP-Nestor programme took place over only one month, incorporated five countries (Djibouti, Kenya, Seychelles, Somalia and Tanzania), and was conducted by external experts with little local knowledge of the states concerned. Indeed, as mentioned by an EU diplomat, in its first iteration, "Nestor was spectacularly ill-conceived" (quoted in Ejdus, 2017, p. 472).

As it has matured, the EUCAP-Nestor (now EUCAP-Somalia) mission has worked to address some of these problems. However, they remain a common feature of many programmes, and are, in some ways, inherent to the "project logic" that tends to drive them. Programmes are conceived and funded around specific goals and often rather rigid and time-limited criteria for judging success. Moreover, the staff responsible for their implementation tend to be employed on short-term contracts, fixed to the specific project timescales, which in turn limit opportunities for developing local knowledge and relationships, and sustaining these over time. For example, with only two years between each mission mandate renewal period, EULEX personnel had relatively little time to focus on their work. As stated by one EULEX representative: "The mandate change occurs in June and then the reconfiguration is completed in November. So we have only a 20-month cycle before the next change" (Interview KS13). Interviewees in Bosnia and Herzegovina also complained about the high turnaround of international staff and their lack of local knowledge, including local language skills (Interviews BH03, BH10, BH11 and BH12).

There are also deeper challenges that EU capacity builders have faced in transferring their rhetorical commitments to local ownership into meaningful practice. Perhaps the most basic of these relates to the contested meaning of the term "ownership". At its crudest, it can imply persuading, incentivising, or pressurizing local stakeholders to come around to the donor's way of thinking and support its programmes on these terms. The degree to which ownership can be considered meaningfully local under such circumstances is questionable. In practice, such approaches may encourage only the superficial or short-lived engagement by the locals concerned, with many local stakeholders complaining of not being involved in the formulation and implementation of projects (Interviews BH03, BH07, BH11 and BH15).

Such challenges have been most pronounced in contexts such as Somalia where even basic local capacities are absent. This may be due to profound institutional dysfunction or severe local resource constraints, or because the issue area concerned is particularly technical and specialized in nature. In these cases, establishing local ownership can be more challenging, with donors facing a "chicken and egg" dilemma: they desire local engagement in capacity building for the reasons discussed above, but capacity building itself is necessary before that engagement can meaningfully occur. Thus, for example, even a local needs assessment requires some specialist knowledge in order to identify what capacities need to be strengthened and why. In the Somali case, decades of war and state weakness – and indeed the very fact that so many institutions are being built from scratch – means that local actors are often dependent on donors to provide the very competencies that are necessary for local ownership to be meaningful (Interviews HA02 and HA05). Similarly, a lack of financial resources can create a dependency of local actors on donor contributions simply in order to function, let alone assert ownership over a programme or initiative. In essence, locals may know that they should be coordinating and leading activities, but simply lack the capacity to do so (Interview HA04). Such problems can create frustration for donors anxious to get things done and achieve their goals within project timescales, and might also lead to the distrust of local actors (Bueger, 2012, p. 10).

Capacity building in such cases will likely require investment in the development of basic skills and human resources, prior to, or in parallel with, other activities. In these and other contexts, the practice of "ownership" is likely to involve an iterative process of engagement and dialogue between international capacity builders and local actors. This suggests difficulties with the notion of "local ownership" more widely. Where political authority is fragmented or contested, identifying whose ownership counts, and whose ownership should count, can be difficult. As one EUCAP Nestor official explained:

> There is no middle in their [the Somali] bureaucracy. In my home country you engage civil servants because with politicians you don't have the continuity [...] In Somalia you don't have that. All the people that work now might disappear after the next elections. (Interview HA07)

Under these circumstances, establishing local ownership can be considerably more challenging as EU donors face basic questions of where political authority lies for particular policy sectors. They may also face accusations of bias by appearing to favour one organization or faction over another, or find themselves frozen out when power shifts occur. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the complex institutional set-up of the country as a result of the Dayton Agreement complicates the nature of capacity building in the security sector and attempts to build the capacities at the state level have often been rejected at the entity level, in particular by Bosnian Serbs (Interviews BH02, BH05, BH06 and BH12).

Establishing local engagement in a project may be more straightforward in states where institutions are settled, divisions of responsibility and chains of command are clear, and where there is broad consensus on the political direction of travel and the role of capacity building within this. Such was the case with regard to earlier EU capacity building and security sector reform initiatives in parts of the Western Balkans such as Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro (Edmunds, 2007, pp. 253–254). Either way, it is clear that local environments are themselves heterogeneous rather than monolithic. They may incorporate both supporters and opponents of reform, and support or opposition may manifest differently across or even within different capacity building initiatives. For example, in Somalia, EU capacity building activities have often been broadly welcomed at the operational level because they bring new resources, both human and financial, into the often chronically under-funded institutions and organizations concerned (Interviews HA01, HA02, HA03, HA04 and HA06). However, they have also sometimes been resisted for not fitting closely enough with local political priorities or needs, or for bypassing established patterns of organizational hierarchy and command (Ejdus, 2017, p. 474).

In practice, programmes have rarely been static or linear in terms of the way they impact on the local environments in which they take place (Schroeder & Chappuis, 2014, p. 134). Instead, they evolve in dialogue with circumstance, and in ways that are shaped by the push and pull of both local and international actors (Zimmerman, 2016, p. 103). In consequence, the international-local nexus in most EU capacity building programmes has often manifested as a dynamic process of exchange and negotiation between actors, rather than a zero-sum game with a rigidly fixed end point. Thus, the pertinent question is often less about "ownership" per se, and more about how to faciliate and enable the variety of agents engaged in any given project to achieve objectives that are of mutually agreed benefit to both donors and locals.

What does this messy dynamism mean for the local legitimacy of EU capacity building programmes? As the discussion above suggests, EU capacity building has often been welcomed as a sign of international engagement and interest, and as a new source of resources. However, an embedded sense of local agency in these programmes is largely absent (Interviews HA01, HA02, HA03, HA04 and HA06). Accordingly, it might be said that EU capacity building programmes in the region have acquired a "thin" legitimacy – in the sense that they have been broadly accepted and often welcomed by a small section of elite local actors, even if they are not always seen to be successful in practice, nor particularly cognizant of local needs.[1] However, it is also clear that such initiatives have yet to be fully internalized and adopted by local actors on their own terms, and have little buy-in from the wider society. In most cases, locals do not decide what programmes are needed and why, and they have little to no role in driving their implementation and assessment. In this way, and to date at least, such activities lack the "thick" legitimacy – in the sense of the capacity building agenda being accepted and understood in its entirety – that would make them self-sustaining and enduringly effective over time in the absence of external tutelage and funding.

Conclusion

If EU capacity building is to succeed and to endure in the absence of external support then the question of local ownership needs to be taken seriously. Part of this consideration is technical and, at least on the surface, relatively straightforward to accomplish. It is about doing capacity building better and, in particular, striving to make programmes more responsive, adaptive, and sensitive to local circumstances, by engaging local partners more substantively in planning, implementation, coordination and evaluation. However, if such engagement is to be meaningful over the long term it also requires a much bolder and more flexible understanding of what local ownership in capacity building actually entails and how this should be encouraged in practice.

A first step might be to move away from the somewhat tokenistic status of the "local ownership" concept in the first place. Its aspirations are significant, and in many ways admirable, in that it points towards the undoubted need for greater partnership and legitimacy in capacity building activities. Yet, the concept obscures as much as it reveals. In practice, the "local" is a diverse and heterogeneous space; one in which a variety of different local actors interact, many of whom have quite different political priorities and agendas, and different predications, capacities or skills with which to engage international donors. At the same time, capacity building on the ground is a dynamic and evolving activity. Programmes themselves take shape and produce outcomes in an iterative dialogue with both political and strategic circumstances, but also with the actors – both local and international – through which the programmes take place. For these reasons, it is often neither clear that the notion of the "local" captures the complexity and diversity of the political and organizational communities in which capacity building takes place; nor what the outcome to be "owned" at the end of this process is or should be.

These dilemmas have contributed to the legitimacy deficit experienced by many EU capacity building activities to date. If this deficit is to be addressed, the EU has to take seriously the need to support local actors in taking meaningful control of the organizational spaces at which capacity building is targeted. Doing so in practice is often less about the rhetorical transfer of "ownership" to "locals". In reality it is more about fostering environments in which the various agencies of the international and local actors concerned – all with their own respective strengths and weaknesses – can work productively together to achieve mutually beneficial ends. Doing so will necessarily entail relinquishing a degree of control on the part of donors in order to create the space and time for programmes to develop in their own dynamic and sometimes rather messy way. Such an approach would better reflect the reality of such activities on the ground. It would also give meaning to the aspirations for local empowerment on which the capacity building endeavour is, in concept at least, based.

Note

1. This conceptualization of thick and thin legitimacy is draws on Walzer (1994) and related literatures. See Gilley (2007) for a review.

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