Research Note

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How to Leverage Action Research to Develop Context-specific Capacity Building for Civil Society Organizations

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Abstract: In recent decades, increased attention has been given to the hierarchical nature and intrinsic power dynamics of CSO capacity building programs. In a global context, international donors tend to design and implement capacity building programs, which then prioritize donors’ objectives and employ Western concepts in the Global South. This research note aims to reframe capacity building around inclusive and equal partnerships centered on civil society leaders who participate in designing and delivering capacity building programs. We propose action research as a process for co-creating contextually appropriate models that enable local ownership for capacity building and thus equip civil society to improve the lives of people in

Authorship note: This article is part of a long-term, multi-stage research project. We distinguish here between co-authors and co-researchers to clarify that this article in “making the case for” action research in nonprofit studies is the product of the co-authors, while relying on the co-researchers’ insights for the specific example. In the acknowledgments, we recognize the role of the co-researchers by listing the participating Liberian CSOs. As the project engages with the successive research phases, the Liberian CSOs identified here will continue to serve as core co-researchers in all phases of the project, co-develop and co-implement the curriculum, and co-author the next research outputs fully based on the focus groups and curriculum development effort.

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communities. We apply this approach to the Liberian case to develop a process to engage local civil society organizations in developing participatory capacity building programs that address place-based needs in non-Western contexts.

**Keywords:** action research; capacity building; civil society; decolonization; Liberia; nonprofit management education

# 1 Introduction

This research note introduces action research to nonprofit studies. We contribute to the current debates on power and equity in capacity building by proposing how the systemic and adaptive processes of inquiry associated with action research can be harnessed to develop locally embedded capacity development programs that are contextually relevant and responsive to the capacity needs of local civil society organizations (CSOs). We use the country case of Liberia to demonstrate how action research centers the voices and experiences of local CSO leaders as “experts” and “co-researchers” in identifying the capacity building realities of their own organizations, and how this local knowledge can be used to address the needs of CSOs, giving voice to those who are bypassed in the development process. This research note encourages nonprofit scholars to embrace action research as a collaborative and participatory approach to inquiry and action, and as a relevant approach for investigating and investing in capacity development. The research note illustrates the action research approach and process used in our study, to provide an illustrative example of how to implement this methodological approach.¹

We apply this methodological approach to the Liberian case, which exemplifies the capacity building challenges of the civil society sector in many developing countries. The initial phase of our action research process reveals that capacity building programs for CSO leaders in Liberia are designed and delivered mostly by international donors (although some local programs exist), yet these opportunities are few and far between, and remain difficult to access due to cost barriers and selection processes for participation. Our preliminary analysis shows that local CSO leaders are interested in more stable and institutionalized capacity building programs, which take the form of what in the Western context is known as nonprofit management education (NME). Through this case study, the research note demonstrates how action research – the methodology we propose here – is particularly

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¹ The focus of action research is to work with research participants to apply the knowledge gained through the continuous action research process to resolve shared issues, using the iterative process until an effective outcome emerges (Stringer and Aragón 2020, p. 49). Thus, we focus on this iterative process in our research note, versus focusing on interpretive analysis of our qualitative data.
suited to address the shortcomings scholars identify in traditional approaches to capacity building.

Our study is of interest to both nonprofit management educators and practitioners. It aims to increase awareness of the value of linking capacity building and educational practices to local communities’ practical needs. Both in the United States and globally, scholars critique the intrinsic power dynamics of capacity building. Traditional models of capacity building center on practices developed by and for a sector that is overwhelmingly white and Western (GEO 2021) and thus negating, if not canceling, knowledge and traditions of local communities, nationally and internationally (Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022). These critiques call for reframing capacity building in both theory and practice (Nishimura et al. 2020), calls that in the context of NME are mirrored in the demand for a more explicitly “critical pedagogy” (Feit and Sandberg 2022). We contribute to these debates by advocating for a participatory approach to engage local CSO leaders in co-creating capacity building programs that address the actual needs of local CSOs in non-Western contexts, and utilize action research to do so.

This research note is organized as follows. First, we discuss the roles of civil society in facilitating democracy and development, and we outline existing capacity gaps that prevent civil society from effectively carrying out these roles. Next, we develop a typology of capacity building. We then highlight capacity building challenges, including how prioritization of donors’ objectives undermines the ability of grassroots CSOs to foster development and democratization. Further, the extant literature on capacity building in non-Western contexts, and NME as one specific capacity building strategy, shows that the disconnect between Western practices and local needs limits these programs. To address these challenges, the methodological section introduces action research as an approach to incorporate multiple stakeholders in the development of capacity building programs. We apply the approach to the Liberian case, as extreme poverty, lack of formal capacity building and NME, and donor-controlled capacity building programs characterize Liberian civil society.

2 Civil Society and Sustainable Development

In Africa, CSOs fulfill important roles in advancing democratization and poverty alleviation, combining advocacy and service provision (Lewis 2014). In terms of advocacy and democracy provision, CSOs contribute to fighting dictatorships, advocating for peace, demanding accountability in governance, and participating in relief and rehabilitation activities (Teshome-Bahiru 2009; Yeshanew 2012). At the same time, CSOs also engage in service delivery and other development programs that reflect the needs of local communities (Krawczyk 2018). They perform these
service provision roles more effectively because of higher grassroots linkages (Banks and Hulme 2012). The roles CSOs play in different African countries varies based on the political and institutional constraints inherent in each country. In Ethiopia, for example, CSOs are more focused on service delivery due to government restrictions placed on rights-advocacy CSOs (Yeshanew 2012).

Yet, evidence indicates that low credibility and legitimacy, limited resources, and lack of organizational capacity constrain the important roles CSOs play in facilitating democracy and development in Africa (Chaplowe and Engo-Tjega 2007; Hayman 2016). Chaplowe and Engo-Tjega (2007), for example, find that insufficient human and organizational capacity is, in the African context, “a major constraint on CSO performance, impacting strategic planning, in-house and external training, monitoring and evaluation, and research and dissemination” (p. 262). Likewise, Ekirapa et al. (2012) found that most of the 952 CSOs surveyed in Nairobi, Kenya, lacked the capacity to effectively deliver services that would have a demonstrable impact. These constraints affect the performance of CSOs, and negatively impact their ability as agents of development.

International donors increasingly invest in the capacity of civil society in Africa because of these documented gaps. Scholars and development agencies thus link building capacity to achieving development goals. Civil society is identified as one of the key capacity deficiencies (Hope 2011), in the hopes that a better-equipped civil society will contribute to sustainable development outcomes (Bryan et al. 2016; Walker 2016). In the next section, we provide a typology of capacity building, and outline various capacity building strategies for civil society in Africa, including NME.

2.1 Conceptualizing Civil Society Capacity Building Strategies

Capacity building is defined as “the competency of individuals, public sector institutions, private sector entities, civil society organisations and local communities to engage in activities in a sustainable manner for positive development impacts such as poverty reduction, improvements in governance quality or meeting the MDGs” (Hope 2011, p. 60). Scholars differentiate between three capacity building levels: individual, organizational, and institutional (Hope 2011; Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022). At the individual level, the emphasis is on technical and analytical abilities, skills, competencies, and knowledge. At the organizational level, capacity building is accomplished by strengthening processes and policies that address groups, teams, or units. Institutional capacity refers to the ability of individuals, organizations, communities, states, and societies to address collective problems and create long-term benefits for citizens (Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022, p. 222). These three levels are deeply intertwined: organizational capacity builds on the capacity of individuals, and institutional capacity supports (or the lack of it hinders) the capacity
of the other two levels (Balboa 2014; Brinkerhoff 2010; Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022). Scholars thus emphasize capacity building’s systemic nature with a set of capacity targets (resources; skills and knowledge; organization; politics and power; incentives) that can be distinguished relative to each of these three levels, while also overlapping (Brinkerhoff 2010; Brinkerhoff and Morgan 2010).

Balboa (2014) proposes a typology of capacity building that is relevant to this research note, as it addresses CSOs that are active at the intersection of local, regional, and global spheres. She distinguishes between three overlapping capacity categories: (1) political (politics as contestation of ideas), (2) technical (ability to access information and work toward the mission), and (3) administrative (internal managerial skills). Additionally, by mapping these three categories against three spheres of influence (local, national, and global), Balboa (2014) highlights “bridging capacity” as a fourth category, which is the capacity to negotiate the tensions that emerge from operating across the three spheres. Balboa’s typology helps differentiate between the different approaches to capacity development at the individual and organizational level.

Figure 1 conceptually maps capacity building in a development context. The two-by-two matrix includes the axis of course credit versus non-credit and the axis of ad hoc versus institutionalized capacity building programs. The first dimension,
course credits, focuses on the perceived legitimacy of completing a course/program. At one extreme, we place programs that either offer university credits or officially recognized certifications (credit), whereas at the other extreme are programs that do not award this type of recognition (non-credit) and are thus perceived being less credible (Gartner 2021; Lee 2002). The second dimension concerns programs/courses offered either as a one-off training (ad hoc) or as a standardized program (institutionalized). The four resulting quadrants identify ideal types of capacity building.

- **Institutionalized, credit-based programs (top right quadrant):** These programs are typically university-based and align with what the literature identifies as nonprofit management education. These curricula typically emphasize what Balboa (2014) categorizes as political and administrative capacity, and their higher-level standardization favors capacity categories across a range of fields rather than technical, field-specific capacity. These programs distinguish between outside function (e.g. developing resources and marketing in relation to external stakeholders), boundary spanning (functions that bridge internal and external management), and inside function (internal management skills) (Mirabella and Wish 2000). A good example of an institutionalized, credit-based program is the Centre on African Philanthropy & Social Impact at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, South Africa), which emphasizes nonprofit management while highlighting pan-African philanthropic traditions.

- **Institutionalized, non-credit-based programs (bottom right quadrant):** These programs are implemented via university-based outreach (not university academic programs), or by organizations such as public agencies. Such programs are more than one-off trainings, but less than full degree programs, typically emphasizing technical capacity and, to a lesser degree, administrative capacity (see Balboa 2014). An example is the Liberia Institute of Public Administration (LIPA), a quasi-public agency that provides capacity building for the public, private, and civil society sectors in topic areas such as public procurement and financial management.

- **Ad hoc, non-credit-based programs (bottom left quadrant):** These capacity building programs are one-off trainings that international funding agencies typically offer as part of grant programs or through local umbrella CSOs. They are the most common programs in the development context. They focus on administrative capacity, as they aim to strengthen grantees’ internal managerial practices, and on political capacity through advocacy training (see Balboa 2014). The European Union Agents for Citizen-Driven Transformation Programme (https://www.justice-security.ng/agents-citizen-driven-transformation-act-august-2019-january-2020) is a good example as it strengthens the capacity of EU direct and indirect non-profit grantees to improve their institutional mechanisms and programmatic competence in selected states across Nigeria.
Ad hoc, credit-based programs (top left quadrant): These programs are one-off trainings that can be offered by both domestic and international providers. They are not part of ongoing funding programs, but participants receive certification for completing the program (a certificate of completion rather than a degree). These programs can be either field specific, emphasizing technical capacity, or more broadly conceived around administrative capacity. Good examples include the Cloneshouse Nigeria Result-based M&E Training (https://www.cloneshouse.com/) and the Tom Associates Nigeria (https://www.tomassociatesng.com/) training across a range of administrative and technical capacity areas.

While capacity building’s evolution can be traced back to the 1950s–1960s, and the need to build the capacity of newly independent countries (Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022), NME (top right quadrant in Figure 1) as one strategy for building the capacity of civil society is a more recent development, particularly in the international context. NME has received increased attention from scholars over the past two decades because of a growing educational field and the devolution of social services (Weber 2022). At the same time, the global associational revolution (Salamon 1994), and the role of nongovernmental organizations in supporting SDGs has increased the interest in NME as a capacity building strategy beyond the Western World to strengthen organizations to improve the impact of foreign aid (Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022). Yet, research on capacity building and NME in an international context operates in silos, and most research on NME focuses on credit-based, institutionalized, university-based offerings, failing to capture the field’s complexity that also includes ad hoc and non-credit based offerings.

While non-credit based education programs are often perceived as lower quality and less effective (Gartner 2021; Lee 2002), non-credit based offerings are particularly important in the international context, and especially in Africa, where credit-based, university NME is the exception rather than the norm. These non-credit based programs with a strong emphasis on practice dominate capacity building because of the relatively limited offering of university-based curricula on nonprofit management (Mirabella et al. 2007).

Despite the overall emphasis on capacity building and the variety of strategies adopted, most capacity building programs for CSOs fail to produce their intended benefits (Ika and Donnelly 2017, 2019). In the next section, we discuss the reasons for this lack of impact, and introduce our process for surmounting these challenges.

2.2 Capacity Building Challenges in Africa

Over the past several decades, donors have made significant investments in building civil society capacity in Africa, in the hopes that the sector can contribute to
sustainable development outcomes. Yet, these attempts at capacity building have largely failed, and in extreme cases took the form of transforming, and even undermining, local knowledge in favor of Western rationality (Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022, p. 221). For example, donor-driven capacity building programs typically employ a supply-led model, or “intentional development” (Bebbington 2004), which is a one-way relationship with aid being channeled to programs that have specific goals set by donors. This contrasts with a demand-led model where CSOs have the autonomy to develop and implement programs best-suited to solve community challenges (Edwards, Hulme, and Wallace 1999). The proliferation of a supply-led approach leads to: CSOs aligning their goals with donor interests; mission drift on the part of CSOs as they respond to donor priorities versus local needs; upwards accountability to funders as CSOs focus on the objectives of those who control resources; and lack of effectiveness as CSOs function merely as “subcontractors” that deliver programs for aid agencies (AbouAssi 2013; Ebrahim 2016), which stymies the growth of locally embedded CSOs able to contribute to systemic social and political change (Ebriahim 2016; Krawczyk 2018, 2021).

Reliance on Western practices means capacity building programs in Africa reflect some of the common critiques associated with such models. For example, CSOs have become increasingly more commercialized and professionalized, due to neo-liberal discourses and increased competition for funding (Eikenberry 2009; Mirabella and Nguyen 2019), which results in a shift of emphasis from democratic values towards business-like approaches (Mirabella and Nguyen 2019). Indeed, Western managerial culture (Jordan Smith 2003; Roberts, Jones, and Fröhling 2005) and a disconnect between the capacity of INGOs and local grassroots organizations (Appe and Schnable 2019; Eade 2007) characterize current capacity building practices. To address these issues, scholars suggest a “counter-discourse” that includes more space for participation and collective problem-solving (Mirabella and Nyugen 2019; Eikenberry 2009).

Scholars highlight capacity building deficiencies, pointing to the need for endogenous rather than donor-driven capacity building programs, while simultaneously questioning the imposition of best practices and emphasizing fit with local contexts (Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022). At a more profound level, scholars have questioned capacity building at it roots, its effectiveness, and its impact on local knowledge and ideas, both internationally and in the United States (e.g. EchoHawk 2019; Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022; Littles 2022). This more radical critique thus highlights how capacity building is not a neutral concept, but rather a top-down approach emphasizing the expertise of the “builder” and undermining local, endogenous knowledge (Eade 2007; Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022; Littles 2022).

Reflecting broader critiques of capacity building, scholarship increasingly highlights the need to rethink the role of higher education in the African context.
Indeed, higher education in Africa historically aimed to form African civil servants serving colonial interests (Abrokwa 2017, p. 201). The colonial roots of African institutions of higher education suggests these institutions are rooted in Western practices with curricula that reflect foreign knowledge and values. Furthermore, Western education continues to promote and reinforce neocolonialism in Africa (Mawere and Awuah-Nyamekye 2015; Shizha and Makuvaza 2017). Likewise, scholars caution against applying Western-based NME models to the Global South as they are not locally owned (Mirabella et al. 2007; Mirabella, Hvenmark, and Larsson 2015). Indeed, with few exceptions, NME in Africa, as a credit-based capacity building program, is based on white American and Eurocentric values that downplay the histories of people of color (Feit and Sandberg 2022). A “critical pedagogy” approach to NME in higher education should thus aim to facilitate participation from all stakeholders (teachers, students, community members, marginalized groups), allowing them to engage in reflection and discourse that acknowledges how societal problems are the products of historical, social, and political contexts (Eikenberry 2009; Mirabella and Nguyen 2019).

Overall, scholarship encourages more critical approaches toward capacity building programs in general (Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022) and institutionalized, university-based education in particular (Mirabella et al. 2015, 2019). Indeed, university-based programs do not always reflect the specific needs of practitioners ( Appe 2015). We show that nowhere is the disconnect more pronounced than in the international arena, where capacity building programs, including NME, mirror donor approaches prioritizing doing for and doing to rather than doing with. Given the challenges discussed in this section, and following the recommendations of Hope (2011), this research note draws on action research and proposes it as a methodological approach that facilitates bottom-up, participatory strategies to develop capacity-building programs that engage local CSO leaders in shaping need-driven curricula.

3 Action Research for Capacity Building

Nonprofit studies is interdisciplinary in nature (Ma and Konrath 2018). Yet, as Kim and Raggo (2022) argue, there is a need for greater diversity in approaches, research designs, and methodologies, especially those that are inclusive and participatory, engaging local people and community organizations to give them voice and agency in development efforts. Using the field’s interdisciplinary roots as a source of methodological and conceptual innovation, we draw on action research as an approach to facilitate capacity building for civil society, and to overcome the challenges associated with capacity building discussed in the previous section. Action research has a
rich tradition of being applied to different disciplines and contexts to give voice to non-dominant stakeholders and to address social issues in diverse social-cultural environments (Mertler 2019).

Action research is an action-oriented, systemic approach and reflective practice that enables people to find effective solutions to problems in their everyday lives (Stringer and Aragón 2020). Action research bridges research and practice and provides a model for enacting local, action-oriented approaches to inquiry, applying small scale theorizing to problems in specific situations (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). It addresses the recent critiques of capacity building and facilitates tenets of critical pedagogy in that it emphasizes social justice, endogenous efforts, local knowledge, and participation of all stakeholders. It is less about generalization because “people” are not being studied, rather the focus centers around social issues and problems that impact people. Ideally, action research engages participants as co-researchers and facilitates an equitable exchange of knowledge that empowers participants and builds a body of knowledge so to enhance community of practices by facilitating new processes and action. Yet, as several scholars have noted, this collaborative, iterative process is inherently complex (Herr and Anderson 2005; Hyma and Sen 2022; Tuck 2009).

Three iterative and heuristic processes, Look-Think-Act, characterize action research (Stringer and Aragón 2020). These three stages aim to assist research participants in maintaining focus during the participative inquiry process. This iterative process is important because it acknowledges that action research is an iterative process that may change directions in major or minor ways based on understandings that emerge along the way. Looking is the initial phase in the action research process. It allows researchers to step back from their default approach to search for novel ways of functioning that enable them to resolve the problematic issues that inhibit their ability to accomplish community, organizational, and professional goals. This stage of investigation does not seek solutions to issues or problems. The focus here is to determine the inquiry’s direction, identify participants, and generate/gather data.

In the Thinking phase, research participants interpret the problematic issues identified during the looking phase. Reflection and analysis expose the concepts and everyday theories that practitioner experts use to describe or explain their lived experiences and actions. The research task is to assist participants to reveal their “theories in use” and reformulate them into constructions that are improved, matured, expanded, and elaborated (Argyris and Schön 1996). These new ways of interpreting situations are then used to assist participants to shape actions and behaviors in ways that improve practice and empower all stakeholders.

In the third phase, Acting, research participants use the data collected during the Looking and Thinking phase to develop actions that facilitate desired change. This approach improves professional practice and identifies effective solutions as action
plans are developed and implemented into new operations to improve practice (Mertler 2019). At the same time, however, scholars emphasize that Acting should not be limited to the final stage of a project, but rather interwoven in all research stages: for instance, data collection through focus groups may not only aim to collect data but also focus on helping participants recognize “prior disempowering encounters, to collaboratively theorize the dysfunction, and to imagine solutions and reparation” (Tuck 2009, p. 53).

In the next section, the country case study of Liberia serves as an example of how the Looking and Thinking phases of action research were used to examine local level CSOs’ perceptions of capacity building efforts and to identify preferred actions and strategies for mitigating the shortcomings of existing capacity building efforts. The action research methodology allowed the team to engage staff and administrators from local CSOs as “experts,” giving them voice and agency in defining capacity development efforts.

4 Country Case Study: Liberia

We use Liberia as a country case study to outline how we adopt an action research approach that involved engaging CSO leaders to advocate for a bottom-up rather than top-down capacity-building strategy. We first discuss why Liberia was selected as a country case and then show how we use our approach to engage with local CSO leaders.

Liberia is a good case study for two main reasons. First, Liberian civil society exhibits the endemic challenges associated with civil society in developing countries as discussed in the preceding sections: the sector relies almost exclusively on international donors for financial resources, leading to mission drift and upwards accountability (Krawczyk 2018). CSOs often depend on a single donor for intermittent, project-based funds. Liberian CSOs with funding from more than one donor tend to receive it sequentially— that is, one project finishes, and the next is funded by a different donor. McKeown and Mulbah (2007) argue this funding approach implies organizations may be “finding money wherever they can” without being strategic, suggesting that organizations cannot access funding twice from the same organization, perhaps due to lack of capacity and/or inability to produce quality outputs. This challenge, coupled with the sector’s low capacity, results in a supply-side relationship between Liberian civil society and donors, in which Liberian CSOs simply implement projects funded by international donors (Krawczyk 2018).

Furthermore, and this is the second criteria for selecting Liberia as a case, Liberia’s small civil society relies heavily on international donors for capacity building programming that utilizes Western-based models and promotes donor
priorities. Liberian civil society is resource-poor, and suffers from a severe lack of human, financial, technological, and infrastructural capacity. From a human resource standpoint, most Liberian CSOs operate without permanent staff (Krawczyk 2021). Project-based donor funding allows organizations to hire staff only for the duration of funded projects, and staff salaries may be paid irregularly or not at all during periods without grants. Efforts to increase the capacity of the third sector are implemented mostly via international donor programs, which are Western-centric and reflect donor priorities (McKeown and Mulbah 2007).

4.1 Methodology Applied

We outline how an action research approach engages CSO leaders as co-researchers in developing capacity building programs. Involving CSO leaders acknowledges that the people who actively engage on the ground have deep levels of experience and understanding about their own situation and can and should be seen as “experts,” and be directly involved in addressing the challenges that affect their day-to-day lives and/or the lives of the people they work for or with. In this section, we describe how we apply action research to the Liberian case. We align our discussion with the three iterative, heuristic processes associated with action research: look, think, and act. Because data collection and analysis are already embedded into the action research process (Look: gathering data; Think: reflecting and analyzing data) (Stringer and Aragón 2020), we embed our own discussion of the methodology used to collect and analyze data into the Look-Think-Act phases of action research.

4.1.1 Look

The Looking phase aims to challenge and question default approaches. We partnered with local organizations to avoid implicit biases that we would bring to the process, as we recognize that we are embedded in our own racial and national identities, disciplinary fields, and institutions. The individual racial and national identities of the authors are: Black African (Nigerian) male, Caucasian American female, African American female, and Caucasian European (German) male. In our specific case, we had – for disciplinary background, research interests, and institutional home – an affinity for NME as a specific approach to capacity building. Partnering with the African Methodist Episcopal University (AMEU, Monrovia, Liberia) and one Liberian civil society organization, Hope Alliance Liberia (HAL, Johnsonville, Montserrado, Liberia), offered critical insights in terms of authentically recognizing local capacities and needs. While AMEU supervised communication with and mobilization of focus group participants, HAL connected the project with grassroots organizations,
communicating with and mobilizing CSO participants for focus groups. All research partners participated in the iterative research process. Further, our approach involved civil society leaders (besides our official partners) in focus groups, and thus as “co-researchers” to identify experiences and needs around capacity building from the perspective of the end users. The Looking phase thus questioned traditional capacity building strategies in the development context, identified problematic issues, and directed our inquiry.

We utilize two recognized methods to generate data for the Look phase of our action research project: desk review and focus groups (Stringer and Aragón 2020). First, we verify through a two-pronged desk review the insights from the literature in the Liberian context. We analyzed international donor projects focused on CSO capacity building on the Liberia Project Dashboard (LPD) (https://liberiaprojects.org/). After a review of 940 projects listed on the LPD, we identified 17 projects that were directly focused on CSO capacity building. Additionally, the review of capacity building projects by other providers (e.g. government-funded programs, institutions of higher education, and CSOs) led to two major additions: the Liberia Institute of Public Administration (LIPA) and the African Research and Development Agency (NARDA). This two-pronged desk review of capacity-building programs confirmed the insights gathered from the extant literature that most capacity building programs for Liberian civil society are designed and implemented by international donors, and reflect donor priorities (e.g. civic education and elections, gender and youth, and media and peacebuilding).

Second, through focus groups, we identify the capacity building needs of Liberian CSOs and engage in a bi-directional exchange with CSO leaders over capacity building needs for sustainable development. We conducted three in-person focus groups with local CSO leaders from three different counties in Liberia, Montserrado, Nimba, and Bong, to ensure representation of both urban and rural CSOs. The focus groups took place at AMEU in June 2022. We selected focus group participants through a purposive sample that was based on the expertise of the research facilitators and co-researchers and relied on the publicly available Liberia Revenue Authority (LRA) 2017-18 CSO Registration List of registered CSOs in Monrovia, Liberia. We sent recruitment letters to 45 CSOs selected from this list (fifteen from each county), and 22 CSO leaders participated, representing 15 different CSOs. Focus group participants worked in CSOs engaged in multiple sectors, including education, agriculture, transparency and accountability, women’s empowerment, health, and drug prevention.

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2 As there are no comprehensive lists of local capacity building programs, we are unable to verify if we missed some programs.
4.1.2 Think

In this phase, we interpret data collected during the looking phase. We utilize reflection and analysis in partnership with our co-researchers to expose the issues, concepts, and theories that practitioner experts use to describe or explain their lived experiences and actions related to capacity building for civil society in Liberia. Focus group recordings were transcribed before being coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Some initial themes emerged from a preliminary data analysis:

– Capacity building needs: participants discussed capacity building needs at two different levels. At a basic level, capacity building needs related to managerial expertise (administrative capacity). CSO leaders identified areas such as resource development, grant writing, leadership, governance, volunteer management and mobilization, financial management, and HR as core components of an effective capacity building program in Liberia. At a second level, however, participants identified technical needs related to the specific sector they worked in, e.g. the need for agricultural training (technical capacity).

– Capacity building availability: participants reported capacity building programs in leadership, network building, advocacy and community mobilization, data collection and assessment, and financial management. Capacity building was delivered mostly by international donors such as the United Nations and GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), INGOs like UNICEF, with limited offerings by Liberian NGOs and online (international) delivery methods.

– Capacity building access: participants, particularly from CSOs located in the more rural counties identified obstacles in accessing the global networks (paradoxically also of international donors’ capacity building programs) and regional/government networks.

– Institutionalizing capacity building within higher education: participants favored institutionalized NME as a capacity building strategy to systematize under one umbrella the various disconnected capacity-building offerings, and offer greater access to capacity building.

Focus groups presented a critical view of the general environment for Liberian civil society, including a severe lack of capacity and scant access to resources, as well as over-reliance on donors for funding and capacity building. Indeed, most of the capacity building available to Liberian CSOs comes from international organizations and INGOs, although we do find limited evidence of capacity building delivered by indigenous Liberian CSOs. There is no CSO capacity building program currently embedded in Liberian higher education institutions. Participants identified several endemic challenges to obtaining capacity building:
First, costs associated with capacity building workshops and trainings make attendance prohibitive.

Second, lack of information on available trainings makes them difficult to identify.

Third, and relatedly, even if members of civil society can identify them and afford to participate, capacity building trainings are often “closed” to broader civil society and instead, only select CSOs, pre-determined by development organizations, are invited to participate.

Focus groups findings confirmed results from the desk review. Focus group participants emphasized that most capacity building programs were funded by international donors. Secondly, focus groups indicated that capacity building programs focused on leadership and advocacy, leaving capacity gaps in areas such as resource mobilization and sector-specific capacity needs. However, contrary to findings from our desk review, local CSOs in Liberia appeared involved in building local capacity. Focus group participants discussed their own capacity building activities for internal staff, and sometimes external staff, using their internal organization’s resources. In sum, analysis of our focus groups revealed the following key issues:

1. Core components of effective capacity building include both broad managerial areas and issue/field specific technical assistance.
2. While capacity building programs are primarily offered by international providers, some evidence exists of a genuinely local capacity building field.
3. The major challenge related to capacity building appears to be more accessibility than availability.
4. Institutionalizing capacity building with Liberian higher education institutions emerged as a strategy to increase access to capacity building.

4.1.3 Act

This phase identifies actions that improve professional practice, knowledge, and effectiveness. However, as discussed in the methods sections, scholars suggest that action should not be limited to final phase but interwoven in all phases (Tuck 2009). The focus groups served to encourage participants to reflect on the unequal power relationships characterizing donor-funded capacity building programs. Several participants, particularly from more rural areas, noted the exclusive nature of most capacity building programs, where access appeared to be tied to existing networks centering around Monrovia with international developing agencies “inviting” specific organizations to participate in capacity building programs.

While focus groups helped CSO leaders to explicitly reflect on these exclusionary practices, they also revealed internalized perspectives around “best practice” in
capacity building. CSO leaders discussed how certain fields and sectors, in particular civil society and social work, were new in Liberia. They linked this novelty to a “real need for capacity building and support.” Participants described this need as a need to “catch up,” explicitly looking for outside models rather than local approaches.

Informed by the look and think phases (the initial phases are not yet completed as we will conduct additional focus groups), and in collaboration with our partners at AMEU, we aim to develop recommendations for how to best meet the capacity building needs of Liberian CSOs, and identify steps to align future capacity building with local needs. We will also co-develop a nonprofit management education capacity building curriculum with AMEU and CSO representatives (co-researchers recruited from those that participated in our focus groups), designed to meet the needs expressed by Liberian CSO leaders during our study.

5 Discussion

This research note proposes action research as methodology to develop capacity building programs, including NME, that are contextually appropriate. This approach is best positioned to address the growing critiques of traditional capacity building and NME. Both in theory and practice, action research engages local communities in the iterative process that is the essence of this research approach. In so doing, CSO leaders, in this case, are recognized as experts and become co-researchers so to co-develop and shape capacity building programs to reflect their specific needs. This is a crucial point as the growing critique of traditional capacity building programs emphasizes power asymmetries and how these programs negatively impact local knowledge. We use the example of Liberia for illustrative purposes to highlight the benefits of action research. In this section, we therefore discuss some surprising findings that emerged from the Liberia case and thus illustrate the benefits of our approach.

The desk review of capacity building programs available in Liberia and CSO leaders’ perspectives that emerged during the focus group confirm some of the critiques in the literature but are also surprising in other ways. The findings suggest a disconnect between available capacity building programs and the desires of CSO leaders, confirming previous findings (e.g. Appe 2015) and critiques (Kacou, Ika, and Munro 2022). The disconnect seems to primarily emphasize the importance, in the eyes of CSO leaders, of technical capacity and access to administrative capacity building. Most donor-funded capacity building trainings emphasize what Balboa (2014) categorizes as administrative capacity, in efforts to strengthen the internal managerial capacity of organizations, and political capacity in the form of advocacy training. However, access to these programs is limited and is identified as a major
challenge. By contrast, CSO leaders identified administrative and technical capacity as core capacity building components.

What is surprising is that CSO leaders suggest a preference for capacity building programs prioritizing what Mirabella and Wish (2000) referred to as “inside function” in NME. The more recent critical pedagogy in the field of NME criticized the emphasis on managerial functions of nonprofits (Mirabella and Nguyen 2019; for a similar critique of capacity building in an international context see, Jordan Smith 2003; Roberts, Jones, and Fröhling 2005), viewing it as part of the broader and worrisome commercialism trend (Eikenberry 2009), with nonprofits becoming more business-like both in rhetoric and practice (Dart 2004). Paradoxically, our desk review of current capacity building trainings in Liberia shows that they emphasize network building, advocacy, and community organizing – areas that have been found lacking in current NME curricula (Mirabella et al. 2015, 2019). This paradox raises two important questions. First, what do western INGOs know about capacity building that Western NME higher education institutions fail to consider?3 And, second, what explains the preference for administrative and technical capacity building of CSO leaders?

One possible set of answers directly emerges from our action research approach, specifically from our effort to embed action in all phases of the research process (see Tuck 2009). Focus group participants reflected on how certain fields are nascent in Liberia. This discussion led to a group perception that the newness of these fields in the country meant CSO leaders had to think about how to “catch up.” This perception of having to catch up, coupled with a preference for administrative capacity building (inside function), may suggest an internalized prioritization of outside models over local knowledge in what is a constant search for legitimacy in relation to international funders.4

At the same time, international donors’ emphasis on political capacity – in stark contrast to NME curricula – may reflect contextual factors and assumptions rather than express strategic insight. The discourse in scholarship and practice over the dual role of CSOs in both advocacy and service provision has traditionally been more pronounced in the international arena than in Western contexts, to a point that organizations expose themselves to criticism when conceiving service delivery as an

3 We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for framing the question so sharply and pushing us to engage with it.

4 Furthermore, it is important to note, as observed by one attentive reviewer, that the interest in NME programs expressed by community participants might be influenced by the partnership with AMEU. In the original joint faculty retreat in the fall of 2021 at AMEU, NME programs in the US and comparable programs in the African continent were briefly discussed to offer context and disciplinary backgrounds of the researchers listed here as co-authors. This discussion naturally sparked the interest of faculty at AMEU and may have been part of informal discussions preceding the focus groups.
Development agencies and donors have therefore consciously embedded democracy promotion and political capacity building in more traditional service delivery programs (e.g. BMZ 2013; Herrold 2020), frequently as a strategy to avoid the criticism intrinsic in explicit “democracy promotion” efforts (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). This emphasis on advocacy, even in the context of more traditional service delivery funding, may explain the attention of Western INGOs to advocacy.

The intertwining of what Balboa (2014) refers to as multiple spheres of influence (local, national, and global) requires then from CSOs a difficult balancing act, as they must navigate the pulls and pushes of various levels to effectively work across them. Balboa (2014) defined bridging capacity as the ability of being embedded in local networks to effectively provide services while at the same time successfully connect, engage with, and take advantage of national and/or global networks and resources. While CSO leaders mentioned that they successfully cooperated with governmental agencies while working with local communities, CSOs in the more rural counties struggled with accessing the global networks (paradoxically also accessing international donors’ capacity building programs) and regional/government networks.

6 Conclusions

The participatory nature of our action research process engaged local CSO leaders and gave them agency to guide subsequent direct action steps, in which these leaders participate as co-researchers. The Liberian case demonstrates the importance of endogenous rather than donor-driven capacity building programming, and thus aligns with the “critical pedagogy” approach to NME in higher education (Eikenberry 2009; Mirabella and Nyugen 2019). The research note thus illustrates how an action research methodology mitigates some of the critiques of traditional capacity building programs. It promotes a place-based capacity building program employing a demand-led model in which CSOs recommend priorities and design programs that best meet local needs.

As next steps, we aim to strengthen our findings with additional focus groups. Research with our co-researchers will explore preferences for delivery formats (in person, distance learning, hybrid) to ensure inclusive programming. As a needs assessment for the Chair in African Philanthropy at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, South Africa) stated, where one of the few nonprofit education programs deeply rooted in the local philanthropic culture exists, “The approach [to establish an academic program on philanthropy] has to be home grown, not as knee-jerk reaction to external dynamics, but as a well-considered and grounded body of understanding that stands on its own feet, so to speak” (Fowler 2017, p. 1).
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