

The Authority to Empower: Capacity Building Discourses Across UN Development Programming

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Introduction:

Since its inception, the United Nations (UN) has asserted itself as the premier authority on international development given its commitment to peace and prosperity by focusing on empowering target populations to achieve democracy and economic stability. I am invested in understanding how the idea of ‘capacity building’ has become integral to its developmental project. The UN defines capacity building 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.’ In this paper, I ask how does the UN’s capacity building discourse shape its approach to development? This question is important given a substantial gap in the literature exploring the production and impact of capacity building as a discourse - as an international actor, the UN’s authority has material consequences for how action is undertaken by the organization and its member states. Additionally, understanding how capacity building functions as a discourse offers valuable insight into the design and implementation of development programming, including who is recipient of development and what development entails. These are fundamentally political questions: they undergird the heart of the international system’s assumptions about legitimate governance and appropriate subjects. Interrogating these assumptions offers the opportunity to reinterpret or reimagine such dynamics of development to grant greater agency and authority to peoples determined to be “lacking in capacity” to shape their own futures.

To explore this, I engage with official texts addressing the UN's approach to capacity building from the early 2000s to present. Across these sources, I trace the construction of capacity building as a discourse, attending to neocolonial and neoliberal logics. Through this analysis, I argue the UN's capacity building discourse is reliant on a neoliberal and neocolonial ideologies, wherein viable capacity for governance is evaluated through standards rooted in these systems. Despite calling for a vision of capacity building which empowers target populations through development, I posit the UN's capacity building discourse produces a limited framing of development that restricts any form of empowerment which would undermine hegemonic, UN-approved structures of international governance. In the following sections, I review the relevant literature on capacity building, development, neoliberalism, and neocolonialism. I then undertake a discursive analysis of UN documents, tracing the presence of such logics in the construction of UN capacity building policy. Finally, I reflect on the significance of this analysis relative to international development. Importantly, I find that the UN's capacity building discourse extends the dichotomy between viable and non-viable governance developed in earlier democratization efforts, and despite acknowledging the tension between the possibility for empowerment outside of this paradigm, shapes the UN's development agenda in the interest of retaining authority over the standards and practices for capacity building as international development.

Literature Review:

The following section conducts a review of the relevant literature. I synthesize across the relevant literature to argue that the UN's discourse on capacity building is imbued with neoliberal and neocolonial logics. Ultimately, I posit this discourse is designed to legitimate

interventionism in the interest of using development as a technology of governance to shape an appropriate vision of statehood.

Capacity Building

To begin, it is necessary to contextualize capacity building as an element of development. This concept has seemingly become ubiquitous across international development programming, beginning in the early 2000s. Initially, “capacity development refer[ed] to the approaches, strategies and methodologies used by developing country, and/or external stakeholders, to improve performance at the individual, organizational, network/sector or broader system levels,” (Bolger 2000, 1). Capacity building originated in public administration scholarship before transference into the domain of governance in the political and development space. Most efforts to address capacity building come from the “applied” world of political science rather than the theoretical literature. Interestingly, there is not a substantial literature which addresses the evolution and usage of capacity building as a discursive tool. Nina Wilén’s (2009) work attempts to fill this gap in arguing that capacity building “suffers from a lack of structure and definition, contradiction in the actual implementation and an unrealistic time perspective,” (348).

While there is the aforementioned definition, alternative UN documents define capacity building as ‘an intervention or an activity in one country to help those in another to improve their ability to carry out certain functions or achieve certain objectives,’ or explicitly reference a countries’ capabilities for governance as a ‘core capacity’ (Wilén, 340). In this sense, the idea of “core capacity” initially used in the late 1990s and early 2000’s by the development world contains the “abilities, skills, understandings, attitudes, values, relationships, behaviours, motivations, resources and conditions that enable individuals, organizations, networks/sectors and broader social systems to carry out functions and achieve their development objectives over time’,” (Morgan, quoted in Bolger, 2000). Across the literature engaging capacity building in

questions of sustainable development, the notion of capacity building is something that is fully externalized from the West and placed into a non-Western context (see Bloomfield et.al 2018). As capacity building was transmuted from the realm of public administration to development, some scholars have identified its ubiquitous status as a buzzword necessary across all projects. In her critique of this phenomenon in the world of NGOs, Deborah Eade (2007) writes of development objectives:

When they become fashion accessories, or mere buzzwords invoked in order to negotiate bureaucratic mazes, the use of concepts such as ‘gender’, or ‘empowerment’, or ‘capacity building’ is not only drained of any remaining political content, but may actually end up crushing local capacities rather than releasing their potential. (630).

Here, she effectively critiques the ambiguity surrounding capacity building as a development concept. I extend both Wilén’s and Eade’s critiques regarding the purposeful ambiguity of capacity building to the context of UN development work to better explore how its discursive power shapes outcomes and technologies of governance for target populations, and how this discourse is entangled with what Eade characterizes as “assumed” priorities and necessities which color Western approaches to development.

Neoliberalism and Development

Extending the previous analysis, I draw upon the relevant literature to show how neoliberal ideologies inform the UN’s capacity building discourse and approach to development. I embrace Jessica Whyte’s definition of neoliberalism, which she characterizes as an ideology where “the competitive market was not simply a more efficient technology for the distribution of goods and services; it was the guarantor of individual freedom and rights, and the necessary condition of social peace,” (2019, 24). Several scholars have worked to trace the imposition of this logic into the international development agenda (see Carrol and Jarvis 2015; Chandler 2014; Fine 2009; O’Reilly 2010; Mosse and Lewis 2005; among others). I focus here on the translation of

neoliberalism into development policies which affect governance, as capacity building is implicitly tied to the ability of the state to govern itself. Instead of embracing the inherent connections across the ability for politics to regulate the economy or the economy to inform policy, neoliberal logic is grounded in the fallacy that political and economic realms are fundamentally distinct (Whyte, 94). Separating politics and economics laid the groundwork for statebuilding, wherein acceptable statehood was committed to prioritizing economic optimization and market liberalization, dictated by the Washington Consensus and executed by international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank (Carroll and Jarvis 2015; Rankin 2001).

As Antony Anghie writes, the qualifications for viable statehood are “good governance,” or compliance with hegemonic peace and security regimes. Failure to comply with this vision is understood to be deviance, which necessitates a corrective or disciplinary intervention to manufacture good governance (2005, 198). Statebuilding and development programming thus reshape states, particularly those deemed deviant or aberrant from global norms, as a form of disciplinization in the interest of the dominant neoliberal logic (Abrahamsen 2000; Zanotti 2011). This logic of optimization and rationality became evident in the emergence of development as an opportunity to impose market rationality (Whyte 2019). Ultimately, in this framing, acceptable statehood includes a necessary transformation to free-market economy and coherence with such projects which required reshaping financial and political systems, transformed into a process of technical monitoring and oversight in the interest of optimization (Fine 2009, 890).

In the neoliberal conceptualization, human rights and freedoms are constructed for rational subjects as the right to exist as a free-market actor and can be promoted and protected so long as they do not interfere with the sanctity of the free market (Prügl 2015; Whyte 2019).

Neoliberal human rights are reflected in development operations which promote and maintain the artificial division of political and economic rights as a form of discipline and optimization, both for the market and the state itself (Carroll and Jarvis 2015). In this sense, the neoliberal vision of individualistic, market-oriented “human rights” undermines the possibility for an alternative global structure of solidaristic support which acknowledges and redresses the connections between political and economic vulnerability, undermining many NGOs and development efforts (Wilén 2009; Whyte 2019). The disciplinary form of neoliberal development is fundamentally linked to a vision of capacity by reshaping states to conform to an optimal statehood. As Wilén identifies, the conceptual ambiguity of capacity building serves to legitimize the expansionist agenda of reshaping and optimizing states to better prioritize market rationality in the interest of human rights. Thus, I argue neoliberal ideologies explicitly shape the UN’s approach to development by informing its vision of acceptable state capacity for governance.

Neocolonialism Across UN Agendas

I also explore how neocolonialism is present within UN development discourses. I frame neocolonialism similarly to Adom Getachaw, who traces the vestiges of colonial logics and inheritances across contemporary international relations through dependency and domination (2019, 138). In colonial renderings, “civilization” is central to the threshold of good governance. In the context of capacity building, capacity serves a similar discursive function to civilization in colonial history as demarcating a viable statehood through overcoming barbarity and mimicking Western ideology and institutions (Tzouvala 2020, 45). This is underscored by an implicit, and often racialized, assumption that non-Western peoples are uncivilized relative to their Western counterparts. They thus require the influence of the West to “progress” towards civilization, or mimic “correct” Western ideologies, institutions, and practices (Getachew 2019; Lowe 2015; Tzouvala 2020). Several authors have attempted to disentangle the connection between

neocolonialism and development (see Abrahamsen 2001; Chesterman 2007; Lenardson and Rudd 2015). In this vein, despite the emphasis on local ownership as central to the UN's peacebuilding efforts, the question of "whose peace?" is still fundamentally dictated relative to UN expectations and practices and characterized by the tautology of the organization's operational mandate and its normative commitments to sustainable peacebuilding (von Billerbeck 2016, 150). Eade places these insights into the frame of capacity building - in asking "who builds whose capacity?" she posits NGOs and other development institutions do not aim to empower the communities they work with, instead they maintain power by shaping these populations to be reliant on them (2007, 1). This is useful when placed in conversation with Tzouvala's work on the standard of civilization. The neocolonial rendering of the non-West as uncivilized and chaotic make it simultaneously 'require' the peaceful, stabilizing influence of the West as the purveyor of civilization to determine the standards of peace and whom it benefits.

This question is also echoed in Wilén's work exploring how the connection between capacity building and local ownership justifies the UN's perpetual presence in developing states. A paradox emerges between the purported goals of capacity building and its discursive functionality - by being made ambiguous across different operations, such concepts "have legitimizing and 'value adding' effects that explain their popularity in discourses...[they] increase the operations' legitimacy without containing a precise substance," (Wilén 2009, 338). In this way, the UN's interventionist development agenda can be understood as an effort to instill a viable civilizational standard, legitimated as an empowerment effort for local communities. Simon Chesterman's work also stresses the dynamic of legitimization across UN discourses, where "ownership" across statebuilding practices assumes a similar ambiguity, ultimately reinforcing the viability of statebuilding missions despite clear tensions and shortcomings in

empowering local communities to have full autonomy over judicial practices (2007, 18). Abrahamsen too addresses this tension, where good governance and democratization serve as ambiguous discursive formations designed to reinforce hegemonic governance structures (2001, 143). These efforts are emblematic of the “organized hypocrisy” of peacekeeping wherein “organizations respond to conflicting pressures in external environments through contradictory actions and statements,” (Lipson 2007, 1). David Chandler too acknowledges the dynamic of hypocrisy in “informal trusteeship,” highlighting how asymmetric dynamics of power are obscured through legal formalism designed to legitimate intervention and governing practices which deny full sovereignty to states deemed incapable of governing (2006, 22). In this way, organizations work to maintain power and authority over their agenda even if they are actively undercutting it. By portraying capacity building efforts as something which is undertaken at the behest of target states, the UN replicates this dynamic by obscuring its organizational power to deny sovereignty in the interest of an amorphous development standard. Thus, discursive efforts to legitimize interventionism allow for the UN’s disciplinary reshaping of states it perceives to deviate from the norms of viable governance determined by the organization, even if doing so actually disempowers the populations whose capacity it aims to build.

Methodology:

To answer my research question, I employ discursive analysis. Following in the Foucauldian tradition, I assert power is fundamentally productive and generates discourses which govern legitimate conduct, speech, and ideology (Foucault 1984, 54). Like many other critical international relations scholars, (see Abrahamsen 2001; Prügl 2014; Tzouvala 2020; Zanotti 2011; among others) I employ Foucauldian heuristics focused on the production of discourse as an element of governmentality. Within this work, I engage capacity building as a productive discourse integral to the UN’s governmental agenda. This work offers an innovative approach by

undertaking a direct textual analysis across several elements of the UN's organizational system to trace the construction of capacity building discourses as a comprehensive element of its development agenda. I extend on the scholarship examining the role of capacity building, democratization, and local ownership in order to expand on the tension and discontinuity between the UN's organizational objectives and its facilitation efforts relative to its own international authority. To better understand its significance relative to the technologies of governance deployed to facilitate capacity building, I analyze how dynamics of power inform its discursive construction across UN documents. I identify patterns which highlight how capacity is understood, where in the world it is located, who is deemed to possess it, how it applies to both individuals and states, and why it is understood as significant to the governmental project of the UN.

I engage with five key texts elaborating upon the UN's approach to capacity building from the early 2000s to present obtained through the UN's digital archives. This period represents the most concerted effort to integrate capacity-building into development efforts, and as such it is also useful to evaluate the impact of the past two decades on contemporary efforts. These texts represent the temporal evolution of the UN's capacity building discourse and its dissemination across different elements of the organization, from administrative reports to action taken by the General Assembly. I begin with the Report of the Secretary-General on United Nations system support for capacity-building (the Report). This Report was submitted to the Economic and Social Council, an organ tasked with overseeing development operations, in 2002. Subsequently, I analyze the Frequently Asked Questions: The UNDP Approach to Supporting Capacity Development (the FAQ), an internal guideline published in 2009 by the Capacity Development Group, Bureau for Development Policy in the United Nations Development

Programme, a specialized subgroup tasked with initiating and overseeing capacity development efforts. I also explore General Assembly Resolution 69/237, Building capacity for the evaluation of development activities at the country level, passed in 2014 to engage how member states approached capacity building. I then engage the Capacity Development Delivery Model, published by the Department for Economic and Social Affairs, published in 2017. Finally, I turn to the UN Development Account Project Evaluation Guidelines (the Guidelines). The UN Development Account is a specialized subsidiary of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs governed by the Secretariat tasked with implementing development projects. This 2019 guide for evaluation is an important indicator as to how the UN understands and evaluates capacity building projects, implicitly highlighting what constitutes viable and effective capacity building to the UN. In tracing the production of capacity building discourses, I aim to understand how such discourses shape the UN's approach to development.

While this is obviously not a comprehensive overview of every relevant UN document, the selection of these texts are illustrative of the production and evolution of the elite-level discourse on capacity building. Finally, I wish to highlight my own positionality as a white scholar from the Global North. Addressing development necessarily concerns divisions between the Global North and South, and I wish to reinforce that I cannot and do not wish to speak for any populations who experienced capacity building efforts. Instead, I aim to highlight how these discourses shape capacity building and advocate for a more bottom-up approach to development outside of hegemonic understandings of such practices.

Analysis:

Analysis:

To begin my analysis, I first turn to the Report, which offers a useful baseline to early capacity building efforts within the UN. The Report consists of notes and recommendations to the

Secretary-General on how to refine and expand the organization's capacity building efforts. Of particular interest is how the UN presents itself relative to its international development agenda. Referencing the Millennium Development Goals, it "implies that all countries should have or acquire the capacity to achieve the development goals contained in it" (2002, 3). Additionally, it acknowledges the UN's prominent role in shaping international development: "the United Nations development system assisted numerous countries in creating and building or strengthening and upgrading the basic institutions and organizations required for running a modern and growing society," noting "modernizing societies are by definition in a process of continuous transformation, so that many of their institutions and organizations must change," (1992, 4). Here, the UN frames itself as a primary driver of international capacity building. Crucially, it embraces a neocolonial language relative to "modern/izing" societies, implying a scale of graduated civilization linked to capability. As Arturo Escobar notes, this framing of modernity as integral to development is tied to a vision of "the modern" informed by orientalist and reductive renderings of the non-West by the West, implicitly structuring the Western world as having achieved modernization (2011, 11). By doing so, the UN posits itself as responsible for facilitating modernization, embracing a vision of development-as-correction wherein the goal of developing capacity becomes a way to achieve modernity. This framing mimics the colonial framing of the non-West as deficient due to its incapacity for proper cultivation and civilization (Tzouvala 2020). Thus, the idea of a progressive teleology of modernized statehood is imbued with a neocolonial logic that creates a stratified hierarchy of viable governance, where UN-sanctioned approaches have the most capacity to govern which must be emulated in the interest of "advancement."

Additionally, there are two parallel emphases on monitoring and oversight and local ownership that are consistent across the Report, making capacity building an amorphous process happening both on the ground and within UN administration. The Report consistently references the need for monitoring, tracking, and information sharing to maximize effectiveness across capacity building efforts. A series of guidelines stress the necessity of “mainstreaming” capacity building by integrating across all organizational efforts (2002, 5). More so, the Report states “it is no longer enough for the United Nations system to provide support just to help create or strengthen an organization or groups of organizations. Those institutions need to be capable of learning and changing to transform themselves, as necessary, in response to changing situations and requirements,” (2002, 4). These suggestions are deeply implicated with a neoliberal logic of disciplination and optimization of the countries the UN intervenes in (Whyte 2019; Zanotti 2011). The capacity building discourse is shaped around transforming all states into self-sufficient actors who comply with UN governmental visions and regulatory schemes. As such, capacity building denotes an effort to reshape these states towards modernity through monitoring, oversight and subsequently reshaping institutions to independently achieve a viable capacity to govern.

The UN’s capacity discourse’s emphasis on independent optimization is seemingly placed in tension with a larger, more neocolonial desire to maintain control through facilitating the development process. The report writes states while “developing countries have the primary responsibility for their own development”, the entire UN system is responsible for development:

“The General Assembly called upon the entire United Nations system to play an important role in supporting Member States in the implementation of the Millennium Declaration. Therefore, the international consensus that underlies the acceptance of the goals agreed in the Millennium Summit places a particular obligation on the whole United Nations development system to

support the efforts of Member States that desire to acquire or strengthen the capacities which they consider necessary in order to pursue the goals that they collectively identified. (2002, 7)”

Here, as in von Billerbeck’s work, optimized local ownership is placed in tension with the image of the UN as the primary goal of capacity building first presented in the Report. For developing countries, as the report states, the UN is principally tasked with facilitating capacity building as development in the interest of meeting such a goal. This is then undertaken through the imposition of the monitoring and compliance schemes, despite the consistent emphasis on national ownership. There is an entire subsection dedicated to national ownership, with the Report highlighting “capacity-building required to pursue those objectives is linked to national ownership, because only if there is adequate domestic capacity can those development objectives be achieved,” (2002, 7). As such, much like early developmental discourses on democratization and good governance, the organization’s capacity building discourse is imbued with a paradox (Abrahamsen 2001; Chesterman 2007; Zanotti 2011). The goal of ownership and independence can only be achieved through the imposition and monitoring oversight of programs deemed acceptable to the UN as the principal authority on effective capacity building. As such, the Report’s discourse on capacity building is informed by neoliberal and neocolonial framings of development.

The UN’s capacity building discourse is further developed in the FAQ, published in 2009. It addresses questions about capacity building to offer better insight into the UN’s programming. To begin, it highlights the differences between capacity building and capacity development, the latter of which is understood to be improving existing capacities. In contrast, “capacity building commonly refers to a process that supports only the initial stages of building or creating capacities and is based on an assumption that there are no existing capacities to start from,”

(2009, 3). This echoes the themes of modernization and capability within the Report by constructing there exist states with absolutely no capacity to govern whatsoever. The FAQ's framing posits that there exist a range of state capacities that constitute an embryonic phase of governance, with some states below even this threshold, an argument historically used to underscore colonial conquest (Getachew 2019). Capacity building can therefore encompass anything under the development umbrella to move towards this threshold, a rendering which discursively constructs the UN as the agent who is responsible for transforming a state into possessing adequate capacity. This mimics the progress teleology highlighted in the colonial effort to reshape the non-West from "nothing", or an incorrect usage of statehood, into an acceptable one (Getachew 2019; Tzouvala 2020). The underlying force of neocolonial logic is present in the discursive construction of states inherently devoid of the capacity to govern, therefore necessitating the intervention and correction of the UN.

Across the FAQ, neoliberal ideologies frame capacity building as a process designed to produce rational subjects. It states capacity building "focuses on improving their [citizens] overall well-being...Conversely, improved human development (e.g. functional literacy, a healthy workforce) is conducive to capacity development)" (2009, 3). Such focus on well-being and human rights is directly intertwined with the ability of the target populations to enter the labor market. As Whyte (2019) argues, this vision of well-being echoes the construction of human rights as both an individualistic phenomenon and one directly linked with the ability to promote citizens as rational market actors. Thus, this discourse reinforces neoliberal ideologies, suggesting that producing optimized subjects and reinforcing the hegemony of neoliberal economic and social rationales is integral to the capacity building agenda. Like the Report, the FAQ emphasizes optimization, information sharing, and monitoring schemes within

development programming. The cost of programming is also mentioned here for the first time - the idea that capacity building should be undertaken in a way that minimizes the financial expenditure to maximize outcomes is fundamentally neoliberal, both in its ideology and in its effort to reshape the state through ensuring compliance through a monitoring regime (2009, 4).

Interestingly, the FAQ does attempt to address the critique of neocolonial expansionism through intervention. In answering a question about what is “new” about capacity development, it writes:

External support is no longer seen as the sole vehicle through which capacity development takes place. Instead, capacity development is seen as a long-term effort that needs to be embedded in broader change processes that are owned and driven by those involved, that are context-specific and that are as much about changing values and mindsets through incentives, as they are about acquiring new skills and knowledge... External actors may pay careful attention to play a more facilitative role related to the management of change processes, rather than a more interventionist role that has been played in the past (2009, 4).

This represents a genuine effort to posit capacity building to empower communities to drive their own development, outside of the imposition of external forces. However, despite this disclaimer, the UN’s capacity building discourse is still imbued with neocolonial and neoliberal logics and replicate the earlier tension of the Report, indicating a key disconnect between objectives and facilitation indicative of capacity building as “organized hypocrisy,” (Lipson 2007,1). These efforts fundamentally dictate the UN’s development agenda by informing the idea of acceptable governance and reinforcing the need to reshape states to conform to acceptable guidelines through development intervention. This embodies the tension identified in Wilén’s, Eade’s, and Chesterman’s scholarship – capacity building’s ambiguity and applicability to a wide range of development efforts legitimates the UN’s expansionism under the guise of empowerment and promoting autonomy. This effort, however, is undermined by the fact that “empowering”

communities is undertaken by configuring target states as lacking in capacity altogether, transforming the state to promote and develop capacity shaped by neoliberal rationalities to attain viable statehood. In this sense, the vision for empowerment promoted through capacity building legitimates the intervention of capacity building efforts, even while disavowing the interventionism necessary to produce such outcomes.

I also evaluate the Model, which addresses the vision and goals of capacity building efforts relative to sustainable development. Describing its objectives, it stipulates “Member States, especially developing countries, have asked the UN system to help them build the capacities necessary to transform this vision into national realities,” (2014, 1). Like in the earlier documents, UN constructions of capacity building are reliant on centering the ability of the organization to facilitate change for the developing world at its behest, illustrating a disjointedness between the paternal oversight of neocolonialism and the neoliberal drive for optimized independence. However, this tension is seemingly supplanted by the fact that the interventionist element of the capacity building is framed as a “people-centered approach... that leaves no one behind,” (2014, 1). Like in previous peacekeeping and development discourses, the UN’s capacity building discourse again uses the focus on local ownership and the all encompassing nature of capacity building for development to reconcile the neocolonial drive to reshape developing states by portraying doing so as a form of empowerment (Abrahamsen 2001; Chesterman 2007).

Neoliberal ideologies are prominent across the Model, particularly given the emphasis on knowledge transfer, monitoring, and compliance (2017, 3). It prioritizes policy coherence across capacity building measures, reinforcing the broad domain of capacity building programming and the desire to use it to reshape states through UN- approved measures (2017, 2). Similarly, it

highlights the need for “evidence-based policy” to do so most effectively “by building regional and national capacities for data production, collection, disaggregation, and analysis, and by modernizing and strengthening national statistical systems to support evidence-based policy-making, monitoring, assessment, and reporting related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),” (2017, 2). Here, the Model clearly cultivates a capacity building discourse which stresses the use of monitoring regimes in the interest of development. Like other documents, it reaffirms modernization as integral to capacity building. Despite failing to clearly specify capacity building efforts, the Model reinforces the UN as the preeminent development authority and repackages the colonial discourse of modernization as progressive and people-focused. While this represents an effort to utilize capacity building to empower the most vulnerable or marginalized communities within the developing world, the need for “evidence-based policy” to achieve these objectives in alignment with the SDGs produces an impossible standard of civilization and capacity to reach (2017, 2). The discourse of efficiency reaffirms the neoliberal logic that there will always be a more optimal approach to capable governance that does more to achieve the UN’s objectives with less. As such, the neoliberal effort to monitor and discipline through evaluative criteria offers the opportunity for the UN to restate its authority and retain perpetual control over the development process by continually setting new standards for the threshold of capable governance under the auspices that no one is “left behind” (2017, 1).

To identify the translation of these discourses into development programming, I engage General Assembly Resolution 69/237. Though non-binding given the power afforded to the GA, it is an important indication of how member states engage with the UN’s administrative development agenda. It “reaffirm[s] that national capacity for the evaluation of development activities may be further strengthened by the entities of the United Nations development system

upon request and in accordance with the principle of national ownership and with the national policies and priorities defined by Member States,” (2014, 1). Here again, the emphasis on local ownership is portrayed as the defining element of capacity building undertaken at the behest of developing states. More so, the Resolution “notes that international cooperation in building national capacity for evaluation at the country level should be voluntary and carried out upon request by Member States,” (2014, 1). Centrally, the Resolution reinforces this by “invit[ing] the entities of the United Nations development system, with the collaboration of national and international stakeholders, to support, upon request, efforts to further strengthen the capacity of Member States for evaluation, in accordance with their national policies and priorities,” (2014, 1). The Resolution portrays capacity building as driven by developing states, yet this dynamic is fundamentally undercut by the standards of capable governance and extensive monitoring and compliance regimes the UN utilizes for such programming. Here, capacity building is left to be exceedingly vague, thus potentially allowing a broad range of activities to be undertaken in the interest of development and for the UN to retain authority for any such programming through monitoring and corrective technologies of governance (Agnhie 2005; Zanotti 2011). This illustrates the UN’s capacity building discourse is explicitly linked to its ability to reassert and shape states in accordance with its standards for governance.

Finally, I turn to the 2019 Guidelines, published by the Development Account (DA) to provide technical instructions for evaluating capacity building projects within the UN development agenda. Across the Guidelines, the UN reinforces its authority by referencing human rights as a central component of effective capacity building projects. For example, it highlights “evaluation needs to make explicit the human rights related aspects of the DA project. This can include human rights related issues that the DA project relates to, and its contribution to

equity and the principle of ‘leaving no one behind,’” (2019, 8). Here, the UN’s discursive production of capacity building as development is reliant upon the expansion of human rights as central to this mission, as a criterion of capable governance (Whyte 2019). Returning to the argument of neocolonialism and the standard of civilization, the emphasis on monitoring and evaluating human rights within these projects allows the UN to demarcate a standard of capacity dictated by adherence to rights-based criteria (Getachew 2019; Tzouvala 2020). Across the capacity building discourse, human rights reflect neocolonial and neoliberal logics: their need for monitoring and improvement simultaneously indicates a deficiency which requires the intervention of the UN to be corrected (Whyte 2019).

Neoliberal logics are also present across the UN’s discourse on efficiency relative to capacity building programming. Despite other instances across the UN’s discourse on capacity building which stress the desire for empowerment, the Guidelines instead focus on identifying the “efficiency” of such programs in maximizing cost returns (there are only two references to empowerment, both focused on women). It defines efficiency as a “measure of how economically resources/inputs (funds, expertise, time, etc.) are converted to results,” (2019, 9). Though it notes “efficiency is useful in its focus on economic efficiency and timeliness of the process through which activities are transformed into output level results...however, [efficiency] misses out on other important process issues of DA projects, including partnerships, human rights and gender equality issues,” (2019, 10). Thus, an interesting tension emerges between the Guidelines’ prioritization of efficiency as a measure of viable capacity building programming and acknowledgment that efficiency does not fully encapsulate the complexity of development. Within the UN’s development agenda, neoliberal optimization logic wins out – despite the lack

of nuance that comes from evaluating efficiency, it is deemed necessary to reinforce capacity building as a viable development scheme.

Within the Guidelines, questions for evaluators about development projects are a useful place to investigate how capacity building informs development. These include: “to what extent was the project objective aligned with international conventions and intergovernmental processes?” (2019, 12). The idea of alignment suggests that effective capacity building endeavors must contribute to hegemonic governance practices, particularly that of economic stabilization and securitization. This is achieved by advancing norms which reinforce the UN’s governmental objectives, guided by the promotion of democracy and open markets (Whyte 2019; Zanotti 2011). This idea is tied to the colonial orientation towards reinforcing the hegemonic world order, characterized by the dominance of Western institutions and ideologies (Chandler 2006; Tzouvala 2020). This is made clear in later questions which ask “To what extent and in what ways have training, workshops and study tours contributed to learning of participants? To what extent have participants been able to make use of learnings through training, workshops and study tours and changed the way in which they conduct their work, in order to enhance results?” (2019; 12). Here, the idea of cultivating the rational subject through building capacity is made explicit. The goal of capacity building is optimized development, including through reshaping subjects by offering new expertise and training in the interest of producing more competitive market actors to further integrate the state into global markets. While it could be argued that teaching new skills and improving knowledge is empowering, the outright idea of “enhancing results” belies the previous idea of efficiency in such capacity building efforts. The UN’s capacity discourse building is fundamentally tied to the parallel logics of optimization and civilizational improvement.

Across these texts, several patterns illustrate how the UN's capacity building discourse informs its approach to development. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the UN consistently positions itself as the primary authority on development and the preeminent actor to undertake capacity building efforts. By doing so, the UN legitimizes its efforts to promote capacity building as an empowerment agenda, rather than an overreach of its authority. Secondly, the UN's capacity building discourse produces neocolonial renderings of states which lack viable governance capacities. The standard of civilization discourse initially employed during the colonial era has been transmuted onto capacity building to inform the UN's approach to development. The very concept of a state possessing the capacity to govern "correctly" is rooted in this standard and informs the UN's capacity building discourse to cultivate appropriate governance practices through empowering target populations. However, this empowerment can only be achieved through capacity building which reshapes states to better contribute to dominant approaches to global governance and allow the UN to retain authority over such processes.

Thirdly, UN approaches to capacity building for acceptable governance are inherently neoliberal: they necessitate logics and practices of optimization of state function and free market mechanisms as the embodiment of "good governance", achieved via perpetual monitoring and oversight. Regulatory and monitoring schemes represent the UN's efforts to cultivate capacity through transforming subjects into rational market actors, and the idea of developing the states' overall capacity to govern as one which is reliant on the production of optimized subjects. This neoliberal approach simultaneously produces a narrow vision of acceptable state capacity and ensures the UN oversees the implementation of capacity building measures tied to maintaining such standards in order to ensure that the cultivation of optimized governance conforms with the

organizational vision. As such, it is evident that the UN's capacity building discourse is imbued with neoliberal and neocolonial logics designed to legitimize and reinforce the organization's development agenda in the interest of producing a viable and acceptable vision of statehood. Additionally, there are several moments throughout the UN's discursive production of capacity building which offer the potential for an alternative vision of empowerment that would prioritize the needs of target states. However, this potential is undercut by the very presence of the normative criteria and monitoring systems embedded in the organization's own development agenda. Despite efforts to evade neocolonial and neoliberal tendencies, the UN's approach to development is shaped by a capacity building discourse that produces a vision of statehood informed by ideals of modernization and market rationality.

Conclusion

The UN's capacity building discourse is imbued with neocolonial and neoliberal logics. These inform the UN's development agenda to reshape states in the interest of capable governance, which exists in tension with the objectives of empowerment and ownership which allegedly underscore such efforts. Together, these logics promote a neocolonial vision of capacity building by framing target states as requiring reform and transformation to govern correctly, while simultaneously needing perpetual neoliberal oversight in the process to do so "correctly," reinforcing the UN's legitimate authority. This transformation to viable capacity requires the imposition of market rationality as the predominant ideology at both the level of the state and the individual, reinforcing the hegemony of the international capitalist order as a prerequisite for statehood. What is most evident is that the adoption of capacity building across the UN's development agenda is the duality of its approach – reaffirming hegemony while promoting ownership – is incredibly dynamic. To maintain hegemony over international development

practices, the UN must consistently reposition itself as a progressive force working in the interest of target populations, even in moments where these are seemingly contradictory efforts. In this way, by stressing both elements of the discourse, the UN's subversion of empowerment efforts is not seen as undercutting them, but as a necessary element of implementation. The tension between emphasizing the UN's legitimacy and stressing local ownership is a central component of the capacity building discourse which ultimately contributes to the ambiguity of capacity as a development practice. In so doing, it further reinforces the UN's authority over the development agenda as natural given its expertise over a substantially complex development effort.

This is particularly evident in the efforts embedded in several documents to address the need for sustainable local ownership in development – yet despite these claims, the UN's development agenda replicates the need for corrective statebuilding previously justified under the banner of democratization or good governance. Despite changing the framing rhetoric of intervention from developing deviant anti-democratic regimes to improving governmental capacity of the developing world, the UN's technique of reshaping states remains fundamentally reliant on the dual logic of neoliberalism and neocolonialism. There are moments of tension across the texts – while the standard of statehood is necessary to justify the intervention of neoliberal development measures, the very idea of local ownership is neoliberal, as it aims to empower states to be rational, market-oriented actors. However, embedded in the standard of capacity is the implicit assumption that this level of complete agency can never be achieved, or that there will always be a new standard of capacity for states to aspire to. The UN's capacity building discourse is fundamentally one of self-preservation – despite the tensions embattled between the most fundamental vision of neoliberal hyperindependence and neocolonial paternalism, it adopts each of these logics to reaffirm its authority in shaping the international system.

By promoting a capacity building discourse informed by these configurations, the UN produces a dynamic where member states are reliant on the expertise and material resources of the organization are increasingly developed in the interest of meeting its goals. However, and most importantly, capacity building discourse is different because it is self-aware – within the FAQ for example, the UN acknowledges critiques of interventionist expansionism, thus the desire to center empowerment and local ownership within capacity building efforts serves to mitigate these charges. This effort is undermined, however, by the limited range of capacities deemed viable or within the range of acceptable governance for developing countries to achieve. Ultimately, capacity building represents a genuine centering of the desire to empower target populations within one element of the discourse, but the material reality of the organization's development agenda remains committed to reaffirming UN hegemony over international standards and practices of governance.

This is significant because it implies a fundamental misalignment between the discursive objectives of capacity building and the material impact of the UN's programming. Across these texts, thinking of capacity within the boundaries of acceptability determined by the UN is fundamentally limiting, both in terms of conceptualizing capacity itself and in instituting programming to cultivate it among target populations. Capable governance could fundamentally take the shape of a more communitarian, solidaristic form of development – for example, policies which engage market intervention to produce and maintain social well-being through wealth redistribution and social services, engage indigenous practices and lifeways outside of commodified relations, or prioritize a vision of peace and stability developed by those who experience deprivation and vulnerability. In a positive step forward, some of these ideas have been included in the UNDP's 2020 Human Development Report. The UNDP has stressed the

complex relationships between nature, society, and culture which drive development and has offered a robust vision on strengthening human development through localized, sustainable change (2020, 27). However, despite acknowledging the viability of a broader conceptualization of development and the production of a highly inequal world through existing governance systems, the UNDP Report fails to condemn the role of global capitalism and continues to encourage a vision of international governance reliant on democratic, broadly individualistic human rights-based norms (2020, 69). This vision of statehood limits the imagination of a truly capable society outside the bounds of neocolonial “progress” and market rationality.

Fundamentally, in working to develop a more communitarian and progressive vision of capacity building, the UN and future scholars should seek to imagine capacity outside the realms of acceptability it has determined. In answering “who builds whose capacity?” the UN must decenter its organizational authority to center the needs and experiences of those it claims to empower and imagine a vision of acceptable, capable governance outside the model dictated by neocolonial and neoliberal logics.

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