A practical and systematic approach to capacity strengthening in the health sector in Africa

Imelda Bates[1], Alan Boyd[1], Helen Smith[1] and Donald C Cole[2]

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

[1] Capacity Strengthening Implementation Research Unit
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, UK

[2]Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto

LSTM
LIVERPOOL SCHOOL OF TROPICAL MEDICINE

Summary

• There is very little evidence to guide design and monitoring of health capacity strengthening (CS) efforts in LMICs
• Using published evidence we have developed and tested an innovative and systematic process for designing and monitoring CS projects in a variety of settings in Africa
• Our 5-stage pathway includes defining the desired CS outcomes, determining optimal capacity needed to achieve the outcomes and identifying capacity gaps through a needs assessment
• An action plan to fill the gaps, with measurable indicators allows progress to be monitored
•Strategies for promoting sustainability are incorporated from the outset.

Introduction

•**Capacity strengthening is the improvement of an organisation's systems, processes and structures**. It inevitably **involves individuals** in the organisation **and the context in which the organisation operates**. Researchers, policy-makers, funders and implementers all agree that better design and evaluation of CS programmes are needed.
•Devising a common approach for evaluating CS is difficult because **each project is unique** and rigorous published **studies are scarce**.
•**Starting with a 'needs assessment' to identify capacity gaps ignores two critical aspects of CS** – a definition of the desired outcomes and a description of the optimal capacity needed to achieve these outcomes.
•We have developed and tested an evidence-based, practical approach for designing and evaluating CS programmes in the health sector in Africa.

Methods and Results

Our 5 stage pathway for designing measurable and sustainable capacity strengthening programmes (figure 2) is based on a theory of change.
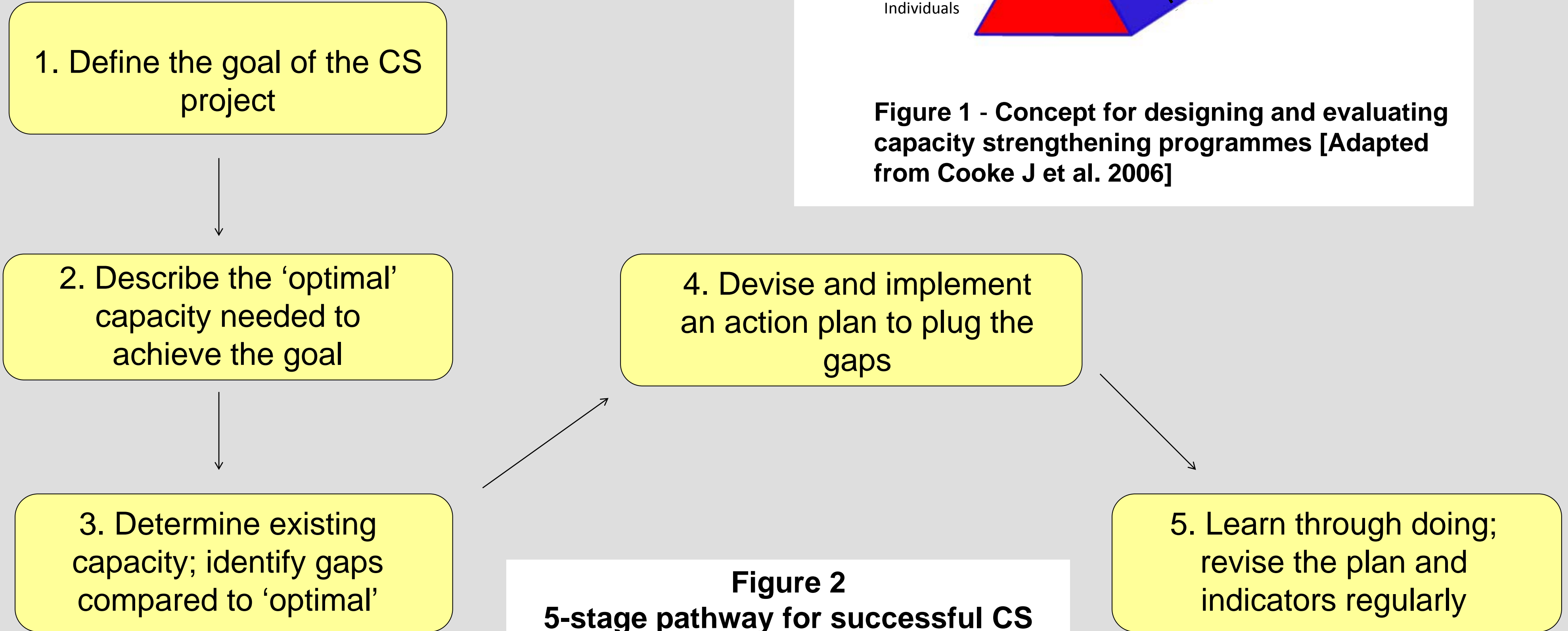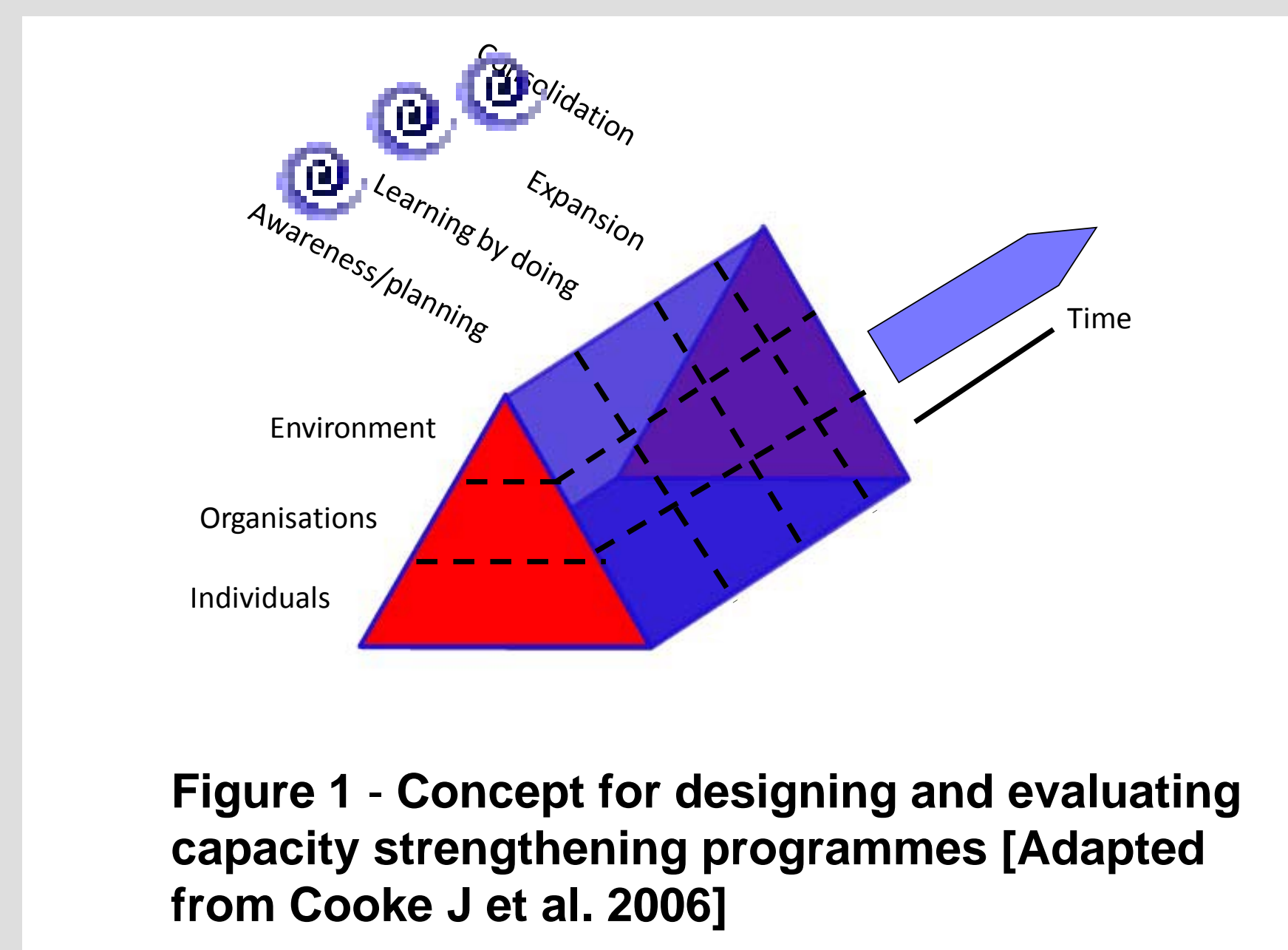

Figure 1 - Concept for designing and evaluating capacity strengthening programmes [Adapted from Cooke J et al. 2006]

1. Define the goal of the CS project

2. Describe the 'optimal' capacity needed to achieve the goal

3. Determine existing capacity; identify gaps compared to 'optimal'

4. Devise and implement an action plan to plug the gaps

5. Learn through doing; revise the plan and indicators regularly

**Figure 2
5-stage pathway for successful CS**

Discussion

•Our novel approach to CS – in which the needs assessment and capacity strengthening plan are preceded by defining the desired outcomes and optimal capacity - is open-minded and flexible.
•It depends on close collaboration between the CS support team and the African institution; stakeholders are involved at every stage
•The CS action plans have a realistic timeline and monitoring indicators that are not over-burdensome.
• Our approach has been tested in a variety of health settings in Africa and has proved to be adaptable and feasible