

Module 1:

Capacity & Capacity Development Explained

DRAFT - CONFIDENTIAL

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1. Capacity and Capacity Development Explained

Introduction

The key concepts, principles, and explanations of essential language in this module will help you to understand about capacity development. It introduces the core theories and models of levels, types, and stages of capacity development, and explores how capacity relates to change, including the influence of culture, context, and complexity. Together, these elements provide a conceptual framework that supports both the design and implementation of effective initiatives that will result in sustainable capacity development.

1.1 Defining Terms

The use of different terms reflects how thinking and practice in this field have evolved over time. Each term carries slightly different assumptions about how capacity is viewed; whether it is something to be created from scratch, something that already exists and needs support, or something that evolves organically.

In the biodiversity sector, where collaboration across diverse institutions, communities, and knowledge systems is essential, clarity of language will help you to ensure that you and everyone you work with share understanding of goals and approaches. If you are all aware of these terms and how they are used you will be better able to align efforts, interpret strategies, and communicate effectively with each other.

For this reason, the most commonly used terms and their meanings are clarified below, so you know what is meant by the specific terminology used throughout the guide.

1.1.1 Capacity

There are many different definitions of the word **capacity** in the development field, as different agencies have tailored its general meaning to suit their specific areas of work. In the context of biodiversity, the Long-term Strategic Framework for Capacity-Building and Development (LTSF) under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), provides a sector-specific interpretation. It defines capacity as:

The ability of people, organizations and societies as a whole to achieve the set biodiversity-related goals and action targets.¹



This definition reflects the collective ability needed to deliver on global biodiversity commitments. By referencing individuals, organizations, and societies as a whole, it acknowledges that capacity exists at multiple levels and depends on coordinated effort across sectors and stakeholders. It also links capacity directly to the achievement of biodiversity-related goals and action targets, emphasising that capacity development is not an end in itself, but a means to enable effective implementation. In doing so, the definition aligns with the systems-based and outcome-focused approach of the LTSF and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). **Whenever the term *capacity* is used in this guide, it refers to this LTSF-defined meaning.**



Practitioner tip:

Creating a context-specific definition of capacity

If you need to create a definition tailored to your country or a specific context, start by answering two key questions:

1. **Whose capacity?**
2. **Capacity for what?**

Next, combine these answers into a single, results-oriented statement that clearly links **who** needs strengthened capacity and **what change or impact** this capacity is meant to support. The definition should be:

- **Purpose-driven:** aligned with specific biodiversity outcomes or GBF targets.
- **Contextualised:** relevant to national or subnational circumstances.
- **Actionable:** specific enough to guide planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

In the biodiversity context, these typically relate to conservation, sustainable use, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from biodiversity.

Example:

“The ability of subnational-level environmental authorities and community-based organisations in Country X to plan, implement, and monitor ecosystem restoration initiatives in degraded forest landscapes, in line with national biodiversity targets and commitments under the GBF.”



1.1.2 Capacity Development

Three terms frequently used interchangeably are **capacity building**, **capacity development** and **capacity strengthening**. The term **capacity building** came first but, over time, concerns emerged about its implication that capacity must be built from scratch, often by external actors, as if no capacity previously exist. This perspective risks overlooking or undervaluing the inherent capacities and organic development processes present in all societies. In response, the term **capacity development** gained prominence. It emphasises the importance of recognising and working with the endogenous development processes that exist in all countries and communities. It reflects the need not only to introduce new ideas or skills, but also to support and strengthen processes already underway. **Capacity strengthening** has also come into use. Like capacity development, it implies working with existing capacities and supporting their ongoing evolution. You will find that all three terms remain in common use because there is no universal agreement about which is the most appropriate.

The LTSF under the CBD uses the term **capacity-building and development** (CB&D) and defines it as:

The process whereby people, organizations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time to achieve positive biodiversity results.

While this term reflects a broad and inclusive approach, for the sake of simplicity and consistency, **this guide uses the shortened term *capacity development*, and unless otherwise stated the term is used in line with the LTSF definition above.**

Note: Definitions provide an opportunity for learning and building shared understanding. Using definitions of key terms as a starting point for discussion about how different actors interpret them can help establish a common foundation for collaboration.

The next question is ‘How?’ and answering that is dependent on many contextual factors, including existing capacity, governance systems, and available resources. This practical guide has been created to support you in finding the answers so that you can design capacity development initiatives that lead to meaningful, lasting biodiversity outcomes.

1.2 Principles Guiding Capacity Development

This module introduces some of the issues that will help you understand the big picture of capacity development generally in terms of principles to guide actions, specifically in terms of the guiding principles set out in the LTSF. There is then a

table setting out selected considerations from Section C of the GBF and their relevance to capacity development.

1.2.1 Key Principles

Some key principlesⁱ of capacity development show how thinking has shifted from past donor-driven approaches. A primary principle is that **capacity development should be led by local actors**, who have full ownership of the decisions about what needs to be done and how to do it. This is closely linked to the principle of support being **demand-driven**, meaning that **external support should be aligned with and respond to locally defined goals and priorities** to meet locally identified needs, rather than externally imposed agenda. Another agreed and important principle is that **any intervention should build on what already exists**: efforts must recognise and strengthen the capacities, systems, and processes already in place, rather than assuming a blank slate. These shifts reflect a deeper understanding of capacity as an endogenous, locally owned process.

1.2.2 Guiding Principles of the LTSF

The Guiding Principles of the LTSF provide guidance in the context of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs). When applied, they will help you to strengthen the effectiveness, sustainability, and national ownership of capacities needed to implement the GBF.

Box 1-1: Guiding Principles of the LTSF

- (a) **Inclusive analysis of existing capacities and needs** is essential to ensure effective capacity-building and development interventions.
- (b) **Country ownership and commitment** should be cornerstones for capacity-building and development actions.
- (c) **Strategic and integrated system-wide approaches** to capacity-building and development should be promoted.
- (d) Interventions should be designed and implemented according to **recognized good practice and lessons learned**.
- (e) **Indigenous peoples and local communities, gender and youth perspectives should be fully integrated** into biodiversity capacity-building and development efforts taking into account the Gender Plan of Action.
- (f) **Monitoring and evaluation, and learning frameworks should be incorporated** into capacity-building and development strategies, plans and programmes from the start.

Table 1-1 below shows some important considerations from Section C of the GBF and how they are relevant to capacity development.

Table 1-1: Selected Considerations from Section C of the GBF and their Relevance to Capacity Development

Considerations	Relevance to Capacity Development
The whole of government and whole of society approach	Biodiversity issues cut across multiple sectors and levels of governance. Capacity development must therefore strengthen coordination and collaboration among government institutions to promote policy coherence and joint action. At the same time, engaging all parts of society - civil society, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, youth, women, and the private sector - broadens ownership, mobilizes diverse knowledge, and ensures that capacity is built collectively for effective implementation of the GBF.
National circumstances, priorities and capabilities	Effective capacity development must be context-specific. National circumstances shape what kinds of capacity are most needed and what approaches are feasible. Recognizing national priorities and existing capabilities helps ensure that efforts are relevant, realistic, and sustainable.
Human rights-based approach	A human rights-based approach grounds capacity development in the principles of equality, participation, accountability, and non-discrimination. It emphasizes that all people have the right to benefit from biodiversity and to participate in decisions that affect their environment and livelihoods. Integrating a human rights-based approach into capacity development ensures that institutions and practitioners are not only technically capable but also ethically guided to uphold rights, ensure procedural fairness, and promote inclusive governance in biodiversity action.
Gender	Gender equality is a fundamental component of effective capacity development. Women and men often have different roles, knowledge systems, and experiences with biodiversity use and management. Building gender-responsive capacity ensures that these perspectives are recognized and that both women and men have equal opportunities to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from biodiversity-related initiatives.

1.3 Dimensions and Themes

Capacity is not a fixed or one-dimensional concept. To support effective and sustainable biodiversity outcomes, you need to understand it as part of a broader system involving different actors, scopes, functions, and enabling conditions. This section explores the four key dimensions that will help you to unpack this complexity:

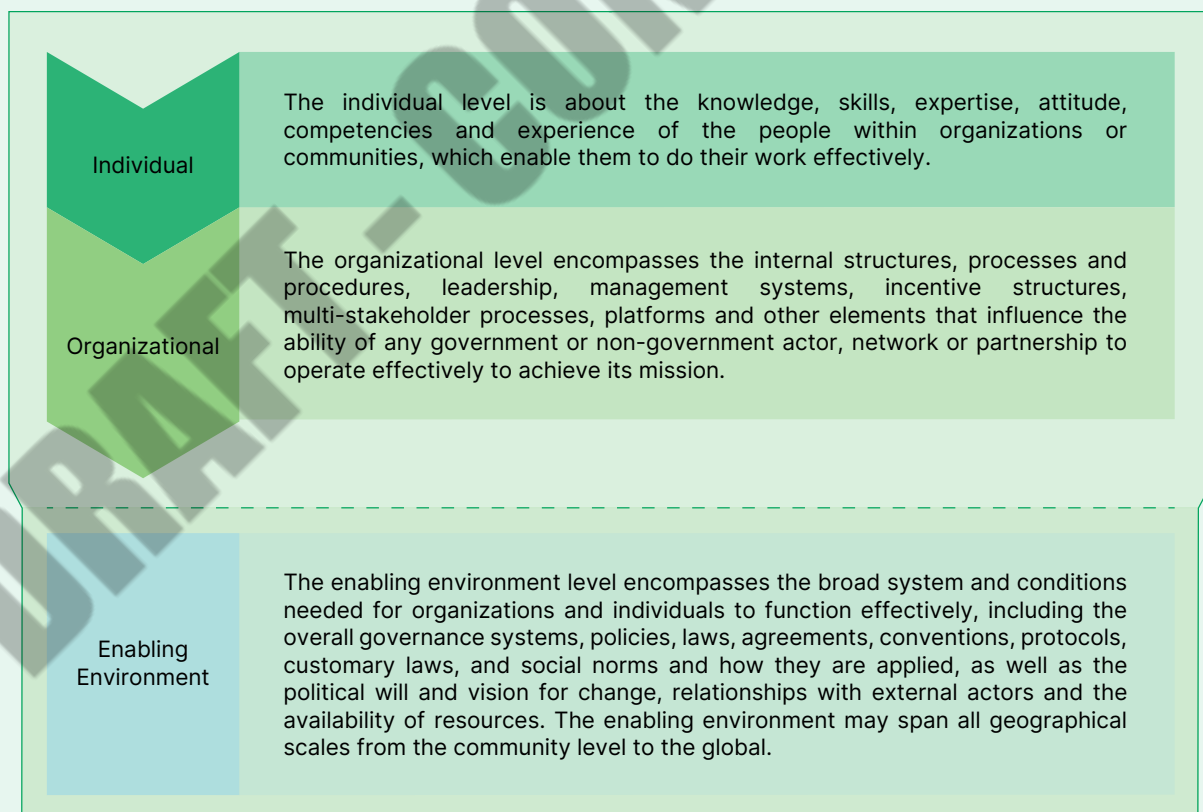
- The **levels** at which capacity exists and interacts;
- The **types of capacity** needed for different functions and to enable change;
- The **stages through which capacity must progress** to be sustained; and,
- The **thematic areas** around which capacity development efforts are often organised.

Together, these dimensions provide a structured way for you to analyse capacity, identify gaps, and design targeted, context-appropriate interventions. They are especially relevant in the biodiversity conservation context, where systems are diverse, dynamic, and deeply interconnected.

1.3.1 The Levels at which Capacity Exists and Interacts

Any comprehensive analysis of capacity, whether in a small organisation or across an entire system, recognizes that capacity exists at multiple levels. The number and names of these levels may vary depending on the framework. The most frequently used model identifies three core levels: individual, organizational and enabling environment. This simple structure is widely applied for assessing and strengthening capacity within systems. Figure 1.1 below presents a commonly used set of capacity levels, along with examples of how they are defined.

Figure 1-1: Capacity within a System: Commonly Referenced Levels and Influences



Box 1-2: A Note on Levels

There is no one-size-fits-all model or universally agreed framework for defining levels. You may find that different agencies include a sectoral, network, or even global level, especially if they work on transboundary issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and trade. The number, names, and definitions of levels may vary depending on the organisation, context, sector, systems, challenges, and mandate.

What matters most is not choosing a fixed set of categories, but that you can recognise how capacity exists in all dimensions of the systems you are working with. Sustainable capacity development depends on both strengthening each level and on working with the dynamic relationships and interdependencies between them.

These factors shape the conditions in which capacity can be developed, mobilised and sustained, but they are **not levels where capacity is directly held or built**, as is the case with individuals, organisations, or sectors. Instead, they **represent realms of governance, power and context** that influence what is possible at more operational levels, all of which are also strongly linked to the political economy.

1.3.2 The Types of Capacity Needed for Different Functions and to Enable Change

Capacity is not a single or uniform concept. It includes many different types of skills, behaviours, systems and conditions that enable individuals, organisations, and institutions to function and improve. To help make sense of this complexity, capacity is often grouped into **two broad categories**:

- **Soft capacities** refer to the **social, relational, intangible and invisible** attributes, values, skills and competencies that influence performance and adaptation.
- **Hard capacities** refer to the **technical, functional, tangible and visible** aspects of capacity such as skills, systems, and legal frameworks.

While these classifications can be useful, it's important to remember that the **boundaries between them are not always clear-cut**. In practice, you will often find that these two forms of capacity are interacting across all levels, and both are needed for capacity to be effective and sustainable. For examples see Table 1.2.

Table 1-2: Examples of Capacity at the Three Levels

	Hard Capacity	Soft Capacity
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competency to use appropriate methods and tools for designated tasks • Technical awareness, knowledge, skills and expertise, especially the traditional knowledge of indigenous and local communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal values, attitudes, behaviours and ethics • Relational skills: negotiation, teamwork, conflict resolution, facilitation, etc. • Social and emotional intelligence; confidence, motivation, self-esteem • Problem-solving skills • Ability to self-reflect and learn for change • Analytical and logical thinking
Organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational structures • Management systems and procedures • Strategic frameworks and action plans • Networks and multi-stakeholder processes, partnerships and platforms • Financial and human resources • Knowledge/technology transfer systems • Monitoring and evaluation frameworks • Project cycle management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational mandate and strategies • Inspirational organizational culture: values, accountability, trust and continuous learning • Change management: readiness, adaptability, flexibility, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. • Ability to balance long-term solutions with emergent changes • Organizational reputation, credibility
Enabling Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional and international treaties, conventions, etc. • National social and economic policy framework and laws • Political systems and strategies • Financial mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visionary leadership to inspire change • Political will to influence others for positive change • Good will for cooperation and collaboration • Effective governance

The type and combination of capacities required will vary depending on the context, functions to be performed, and the specific development objective. While both are essential, experience shows that **soft capacities are often the foundation that allows hard capacities to be effective**. For instance, a team may have the technical skills to enforce a no-fishing zone in a Marine Protected Area, but if there is strong resistance from the fishing community, those skills alone will not deliver results. Success depends equally on the team's ability to build trust, negotiate solutions, engage stakeholders and mobilise collective support. As a result, you will need to tailor your **support for capacity**

development to take different forms depending on what kind of capacity is being strengthened, at what level, and for what purpose.

1.3.3 The Capacity Development Process

A holistic approach to capacity development recognises that building capacity involves more than training individuals; it is an ongoing process that adapts and evolves over time. To build and develop capacity in a sustainable manner, you need to plan to work on the following critical elements:

1. **Analysis:** the process begins with a structured assessment to enable analysis of existing capacity and identification of needs and gaps.
2. **Development:** once capacity needs and gaps are identified, the next step is to strengthen existing capacities or create new ones to address those gaps.
3. **Utilization:** when capacity already exists, or after new capacity has been developed, it is essential to ensure that it is mobilized and used effectively. This means moving from *having capacity* to *using capacity*. For example, if a new monitoring system has been introduced, staff must not only be trained but also required and supported to use it consistently. Similarly, when a new law is passed, attention must shift to its enactment, enforcement, and uptake by relevant institutions and stakeholders. Without this stage of application, capacity risks remaining dormant or symbolic.
4. **Retention:** the next stage focuses on nurturing and sustaining capacity over time. At the individual level, it includes retaining skilled staff once they have developed proficiency in their roles and keeping them motivated through recognition and opportunities for continued learning and growth. At the organizational and enabling environment levels, it means regularly reviewing and updating laws, policies, and procedures to ensure they remain relevant and effective. This stage often loops back to earlier ones, creating a continuous process of assessment, learning, adaptation, and improvement.

The matrix in Table 1.3ⁱⁱ provides examples of what you need to think about for each level and stage in the process. You can use this as a practical framework for analysis and planning.

Table 1-3: Stages of Capacity Development by Level

	Analysis	Capacity creation	Capacity utilisation	Capacity retention
Individual level	Identification of learning and development needs of individuals in an organization or group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development or strengthening of necessary skills, knowledge, competencies and attitudes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application of competencies, skills and knowledge in the workplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nurture of existing expertise and reduction of staff turnover • Facilitation of skills and knowledge transfer within institutions
Organizational level	Analysis of organizational capacity and readiness for change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment or strengthening of effective and efficient structures, processes and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing workflow through functional structures • Integration processes and procedures into daily workflows 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular adaptation of structures, processes and procedures • Empowerment of staff to engage in decision-making
Enabling environment	Analysis of gaps in the enabling environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment or strengthening of necessary policies, laws and regulations • Formation or strengthening of partnerships, coordination mechanisms, and shared strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enforcement of laws and regulations for good governance • Implementation of cross-sectoral plans and collaborative initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review, adaptation and update of policies, laws and regulations • Maintenance of inter-sectoral platforms and long-term cooperation models

While the stages outlined above may suggest a linear sequence with a clear end point, capacity development is, in practice, a continuous and iterative process. It involves ongoing feedback loops, learning, and adaptation as new challenges and opportunities emerge. Newly created capacity often leads to further development, as implementation and experience generate deeper understanding, new skills, and improved ways of working.

1.3.4 Biodiversity as a Thematic Focus

At national, regional and global scales capacity development for any given issue typically cuts across multiple themes and their related disciplines and communities. These themes serve as connecting points, helping to integrate knowledge and experience from different nations, sectors and actors.

For many agencies, themes linked to their own mandate are the best way to organise capacity development work, because themes allow them to operationalise the overall guiding concepts to local context and need. In some cases, the themes help to identify the areas where capacity is needed, in others the themes are the drivers of change, influencing what needs to evolve and what support is required. These themes can bring together many technical disciplines, schools of thought and communities of practice, making them valuable tools for cross-sector collaboration and integration.

1.3.4.1 Capacities for the Implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework

A practical example of a thematic approach is found in the GBF which groups 23 targets into **three thematic areas**, see Figure 1.4. This kind of structure not only helps to organize the targets into actionable clusters which would help to operationalise and implement the GBF but also ensures that capacity development efforts can be planned and delivered in ways that are **coherent, targeted, and responsive to biodiversity goals**.


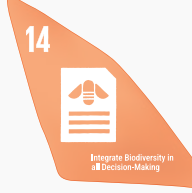








Section C of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework outlines the key considerations for implementing the Framework effectively. It emphasizes that achieving the Vision, Mission, Goals, and Targets requires more than technical measures; it depends on respecting **rights, diverse knowledge systems, and value frameworks**, promoting **inclusive participation**, and integrating biodiversity into broader societal, economic, and environmental decision-making.

These are not peripheral concerns, they shape the context in which capacity is built, expressed, and sustained. Building capacities across these dimensions ensures that all stakeholders can implement the Framework **effectively, equitably, and sustainably**, integrating biodiversity into development agendas while safeguarding human rights and promoting inclusive, transformative action. Ignoring them risks undermining the very goals that capacity development seeks to support.



Table 1-4: Capacity Development Needs for the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework Targets

 <p>1</p> <p>Plan and Manage Areas to Reduce Biodiversity Loss</p>	<p>Hard: Technical skills in spatial modelling, GIS, land-use planning, marine planning.</p> <p>Soft: Stakeholder engagement, negotiation, consensus-building across sectors and communities.</p>	 <p>2</p> <p>Restore 30% of Degraded Ecosystems</p>	<p>Hard: Technical expertise in ecosystem restoration methods and monitoring.</p> <p>Soft: Motivation and commitment to long-term stewardship and learning.</p>
 <p>3</p> <p>Conserve 30% of Land, Waters and Seas</p>	<p>Hard: Competence in protected area management and spatial planning.</p> <p>Soft: Partnership building and co-management with Indigenous Peoples and local communities.</p>	 <p>4</p> <p>Halt Extinction, Protect Genetic Diversity and Manage Human-Wildlife Conflict</p>	<p>Hard: Capacity to establish and use data management and monitoring systems for threatened species.</p> <p>Soft: Advocacy and communication to build public and political support.</p>
 <p>5</p> <p>Ensure Sustainable Harvesting and Trade of Wild Species</p>	<p>Hard: Technical capacity for monitoring harvests and enforcing regulations in trade of wild species.</p> <p>Soft: Awareness and behaviour change among users and communities.</p>	 <p>6</p> <p>Reduce the Introduction and Impact of Invasive Alien Species</p>	<p>Hard: Technical expertise in invasive alien species identification, control, and biosecurity.</p> <p>Soft: Coordination and information sharing between agencies and sectors.</p>
 <p>7</p> <p>Reduce Pollution to Levels That Do Not Harm to Biodiversity</p>	<p>Hard: Capacity to set up and manage systems for pollution control, waste management, and data reporting.</p> <p>Soft: Public awareness and commitment to pollution reduction practices.</p>	 <p>8</p> <p>Minimize Impacts of Climate Change on Biodiversity and Build Resilience</p>	<p>Hard: Capacity to integrate biodiversity and climate data in decision-making.</p> <p>Soft: Collaboration and information sharing between biodiversity and climate actors.</p>
 <p>9</p> <p>Manage Wild Species Sustainably</p>	<p>Hard: Competence in wild species inventory, genetic data collection, and monitoring.</p> <p>Soft: Inclusive engagement with local communities and Indigenous knowledge holders.</p>	 <p>10</p> <p>Enhance Biodiversity and Sustainability in Agriculture, Aquaculture, Fisheries, and Forestry</p>	<p>Hard: Monitoring systems for biodiversity-friendly production practices.</p> <p>Soft: Behavioural change and incentive alignment to promote sustainability.</p>
 <p>11</p> <p>Restore and Enhance Nature's Contributions to People</p>	<p>Hard: Skills in ecosystem valuation, service mapping, and natural capital accounting.</p> <p>Soft: Dialogue and consensus-building on trade-offs and shared benefits.</p>	 <p>12</p> <p>Plan Urban Areas for Human Well-Being and Biodiversity</p>	<p>Hard: Capacity to undertake environmental impact assessment and biodiversity-sensitive planning.</p> <p>Soft: Collaboration and dialogue between planners, developers, and communities.</p>

	<p>Hard: Legal and institutional capacity for Access and Benefit Sharing frameworks and compliance monitoring.</p> <p>Soft: Trust-building and equitable negotiation between users and providers.</p>		<p>Hard: Skills in biodiversity valuation, policy analysis, and mainstreaming tools.</p> <p>Soft: Intersectoral coordination and communication across government agencies.</p>
	<p>Hard: Technical expertise in biodiversity risk assessment, disclosure, and reporting standards.</p> <p>Soft: Corporate commitment to sustainability and ethical accountability.</p>		<p>Hard: Technical know-how for sustainable production and recycling processes.</p> <p>Soft: Partnerships across supply chains to promote shared responsibility.</p>
	<p>Hard: Laboratory and technical capacity for biosafety risk assessment and monitoring.</p> <p>Soft: Cross-sector coordination between science, policy, and civil society actors.</p>		<p>Hard: Economic and policy analysis skills to identify and assess incentives</p> <p>Soft: Political will and stakeholder consensus for reform.</p>
	<p>Hard: Technical skills in proposal development, budgeting, and financial reporting.</p> <p>Soft: Advocacy and communication to demonstrate the value of biodiversity investment.</p>		<p>Hard: Capacity for developing and applying innovative technologies for biodiversity management</p> <p>Soft: Mutual respect and dialogue between scientific and Indigenous knowledge holders.</p>
	<p>Hard: Institutional mechanisms for stakeholder participation, data sharing, and legal access.</p> <p>Soft: Commitment to equity, transparency, and accountability in governance.</p>		<p>Hard: Systems for collecting and analysing gender-disaggregated biodiversity data.</p> <p>Soft: Commitment to gender equality and inclusion as organizational values.</p>
	<p>Hard: Legal and institutional mechanisms to recognize and protect IPLC rights and territories.</p> <p>Soft: Cultural sensitivity, intercultural dialogue, and shared governance practices.</p>	<p>Insert photo</p>	

Effective implementation of the Framework requires strengthening specific capacities across all elements of Section C. Table 1-5 below summarizes these hard and soft capacities and their relevance for capacity development.

Table 1-5: Capacity development needs for Section C of the Kunming-Montreal GBF

	Hard Capacities	Soft Capacities	Why It Matters for Capacity Development
a) Contribution and rights of indigenous peoples and local communities	Mechanisms for documenting traditional knowledge; community databases; participatory mapping platforms; legal recognition of community protocols	Respectful engagement, facilitation of free; prior & informed consent (FPIC); participatory negotiation; trust-building; cultural humility and competency	Integrating IPLC knowledge and rights strengthens capacity development by expanding learning systems, ensuring co-creation of knowledge, and enhancing legitimacy and ownership of biodiversity actions.
b) Different value systems	Decision-support tools that incorporate diverse valuation methods; inclusive policy design frameworks	Openness to plural worldviews; empathy; respect for cultural and spiritual values of nature	Recognizing multiple value systems ensures that capacity development embraces cultural and spiritual understandings of nature, fostering inclusive learning processes and decision-making that reflect local realities and worldviews.
c) Whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach	Cross-ministerial coordination mechanisms, inter-ministerial committees; multi-stakeholder engagement platforms	Collaboration, leadership, communication, and shared accountability	Encourages integrated capacity development across institutions and social groups, improving coherence, reducing duplication, and amplifying collective impact of training and institutional investments

d) National circumstances, priorities and capabilities	Country-specific capacity assessments; national biodiversity strategies and action plans	Strategic planning; adaptability; contextual awareness	Grounds capacity development in national realities and priorities, ensures they are demand-driven and sustainability, making interventions relevant and cost-effective.
e) Collective effort towards the targets (mobilization of broad public support at all levels)	Public awareness campaigns; stakeholder coordination platforms; participatory monitoring mechanisms	Partnership-building; motivation; civic engagement	Emphasizing collective responsibility mobilizes capacity development beyond institutions to include citizens, youth, civil society, and private actors, broadening participation and multiplying skills and knowledge for GBF implementation.
f) Right to development	Policy instruments linking biodiversity use and responsible and sustainable socioeconomic development; Access and Benefit Sharing mechanisms supporting local livelihoods	Equity and inclusion mindset; participatory decision-making	Anchoring capacity development in the right to development aligns biodiversity skills and institutional strengthening with poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods, ensuring biodiversity actions also advance social and economic wellbeing.
g) Human rights-based approach	Legal safeguards; compliance and grievance mechanisms; monitoring frameworks ensuring access to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment	Empowerment; sensitivity to rights; inclusiveness	Embedding human rights in capacity development ensures that skills development, institutional strengthening, and policy processes are equitable and empowering, leading to more legitimate and enduring biodiversity outcomes.

h) Fulfilment of the three objectives of the Convention and its Protocols and their balanced implementation	Integrated biodiversity policy frameworks and national reporting systems	Systems thinking; holistic understanding; coordination across thematic areas	Integrating all three CBD objectives into capacity development ensures that training, institutional design, and policy support reinforce the full biodiversity mandate, linking conservation, sustainable use, and equitable benefit-sharing in practice.
i) Consistency with international agreements or instruments	Legal alignment matrices; coordination mechanisms across Conventions	Policy coherence; negotiation and diplomacy skills	Embedding this principle in capacity development helps countries align training, reporting, and governance systems with global obligations, avoiding duplication and enhancing synergy across conventions and multilateral processes.
j) Principles of the Rio Declaration	Legal and institutional frameworks for environmental governance; access to information and justice systems; mechanisms for public participation and stakeholder consultation; environmental assessment and monitoring tools; transboundary cooperation and data-sharing systems; financing and accountability mechanisms	Ethical responsibility, environmental stewardship, inclusiveness, transparency, empathy, intercultural understanding, precautionary and long-term thinking, collaborative problem-solving, and respect for human rights and diversity	Ensuring capacity development reflects the Rio Principles instils precaution, participation, transparency, and equity in biodiversity governance—developing both the technical systems and ethical competencies for sustainable development.
k) Science and innovation	Research infrastructure; biodiversity monitoring systems; data-sharing	Critical thinking; creativity; interdisciplinary collaboration	Strengthens national scientific and technical capacity, enabling countries to generate, use, and share biodiversity

	platforms; technology transfer mechanisms		knowledge for adaptive management and innovation.
l) Ecosystem approach	Spatial planning tools; ecosystem-based management frameworks; GIS systems	Integrated thinking; adaptive management; ecological literacy	Ensures capacity development promotes integrated, cross-sectoral skills that address ecosystem interlinkages, enhancing sustainability of biodiversity outcomes
m) Intergenerational equity	Long-term biodiversity strategies; time-bound monitoring indicators	Stewardship; foresight; sustainability values; Intergenerational solidarity	Builds capacities for meaningful participation of younger generations in decision-making and fosters lasting competencies, leadership, and values to sustain biodiversity gains for present and future generations.
n) Formal and informal education	National curricula; biodiversity education professionals; establishing training institutions; community learning networks	Lifelong learning; knowledge sharing; mentoring	Strengthening education within capacity development efforts creates a pipeline of biodiversity professionals and informed citizens, institutionalizing biodiversity literacy across generations.
o) Access to financial resources	Biodiversity finance plans; fundraising; trust funds and financial management; resource mobilization mechanisms	Resource mobilization skills; transparency; financial integrity	Enables sustained capacity development and implementation by ensuring resources are available and equitably allocated.



p) Cooperation and synergies	Regional networks; knowledge-sharing platforms; joint projects and partnerships	Collaboration; openness; mutual learning	Promotes cross-country learning and joint capacity development, reducing costs and increasing efficiency through shared expertise and regional solidarity.
q) Biodiversity and health	Biodiversity-Health nexus frameworks; cross-sectoral risk assessment tools; monitoring systems	Systems awareness; intersectoral collaboration; preventive mindset	Integrating biodiversity-health linkages into capacity development builds intersectoral understanding and equips practitioners to design policies that enhance ecosystem resilience and human wellbeing simultaneously.

1.4 Cross-Cutting Issues Influencing Capacity Development: Change, Culture, Context and Complexity

This section looks at the cross-cutting issues of **change, culture, context and complexity**, and how they relate to each other. You will need to think about these issues for any capacity development work on biodiversity issues.

1.4.1 Change

Your approach to capacity development will be helped if you understand that it is fundamentally about **enabling positive change** that improves something. But change is rarely straightforward. It happens in different ways at different levels, frequently at the same time. To be effective, you must first understand for **what kinds of change are already happening** and then consider **what additional or different change is needed** for the situation in which you are working. This is not only change in technical skills or structures, but in relationships, behaviours, and systems. There are lots of different models for change, including the two examples shown in the tables below.



Table 1-6: A Model of Types of Change

Type	Description	Examples
Emergent	Change that evolves gradually through daily activities, decisions and interactions: often unplanned and uneven. It can be positive or negative and can emerge as an unintended consequence of planned actions.	Positive: staff capacity improves through regular repetition of tasks, "practice makes perfect". Negative: introduction of a non-native species over time creates adverse impact on native species.
Transformative	Changes that happen as the result of crisis or a blockage being overcome. Sometimes it is about 'unlearning' or letting go of the old to make room for the new.	Positive: Regeneration of habitat when an invasive plant species is eliminated. Negative: The reshaping of landscape after a flood
Planned	Changes that happen in stable conditions to ensure results will be as planned - for specific problem solving and/or for creating a more desirable situation.	Ideally always positive e.g; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of a new grant fund to support local community action. Successful implementation of a new system for mangrove swamp management.

Note: All three types of change in this model often coexist in complex systems.

Another useful lens, which emerged from a major capacity development initiative in a government departmentⁱⁱⁱ, highlights that to support lasting improvements change needs to happen at multiple levels.

Table 1-7: Levels and dimensions of change example

Type	Description
Personal change	The knowledge and skills people need to do their jobs
Change in relationships	All relationships within and outside the department, which might be formal according to hierarchy or informal in terms of who does or does not have influence
Change in collective thinking and action	The culture and social norms within the department to create a positive environment for both policy and operational change

Change in systems and structures

The operational features of the department are fully fit for purpose to enable effective and efficient functioning



Practitioner tip:

Questions for understanding change

Think about where change is most needed and remember that it does not happen in isolation. Everywhere you work will already have **ongoing political, social, environmental, organisational and individual change processes**, which may either **enable** or **hinder** your efforts. Are you focusing too narrowly (e.g. only on training), or are you also addressing deeper shifts in relationships, mindsets, or systems?

When designing capacity development interventions, it's essential to:



- Recognise that you are **working with, and within, a changing system**
- Identify:
 - What changes are already in motion?
 - What changes are needed?
 - The levels at which those changes must occur.
- Understand that change is **multi-layered** and **interconnected**
- Expect resistance, blocks, or competing dynamics — and be prepared to adapt.



1.4.2 Culture, Context and Complexity

In addition to change, capacity is always also interwoven with culture, context and complexity. While it will help you to understand each of them, you also need to consider them together because of how they all influence each other.

Table 1-8: Culture, Context and Complexity

Description	Biodiversity relevance and examples
<div data-bbox="212 622 424 837">  <p>Culture</p> </div> <p>A society or group's unique system of values, beliefs, norms, and practices, including the religious and traditional beliefs that influence where and how change can happen.</p> <p>Culture can be slow to change because people will continue to make decisions based on their traditional belief system even if apparently better alternatives are available.</p>	<p>Culture includes traditional beliefs and practices about nature, and the relationship between people and the planet. A group culture embedded in nature will be more responsive to biodiversity initiatives than one that is distanced from the natural world. Even though changes in culture-based beliefs may be slow to achieve, they are often very important for capacity development.</p> <p>Example: Positive biodiversity change can be seen where traditional hunters have been persuaded that ecotourism will provide their communities with a much better living if they protect rather than kill wild animals.</p>
<div data-bbox="212 1189 424 1404">  <p>Context</p> </div> <p>All the factors that apply to a place or situation at any given time including: political, economic and institutional systems; local, national and international relationships; geography; history; and many other dimensions of society.</p> <p>Context can change in expected and planned ways, such as through elections, new laws or trade agreements with neighbouring countries. But some big events can cause context to change unexpectedly.</p>	<p>Context includes geographic and physical features of a location, as well as complex societal factors like urbanisation that have a profound impact on biodiversity.</p> <p>Political and economic factors such as a government prioritising economic development over environmental protection are also a part of context.</p> <p>Example: The tsunami in December 2004 created a dramatic change of context for the affected regions in that it caused massive environmental and biodiversity damage, some of which may never be repaired.</p>

Complexity

Describes circumstances or systems that are made up of many parts or factors interacting together, often in unpredictable ways.

Acknowledging complexity is also a way of understanding that the world rarely functions in an ordered, logical, or linear way and capacity development cannot be approached as if it does. This concept is closely linked to living systems theory.

Everything about the natural world is complex and interrelated. In many places unprecedented climate related events, particularly floods, droughts and fires, create destructive impacts on the environment generally and biodiversity in particular and on the wellbeing and sustainability of communities.

Example: Climate change factors have caused seas to warm, causing some fish species to migrate to different waters, where they have a detrimental impact on the native fish.

How they all work together and create opportunities

Capacity, change, culture, context and complexity are deeply interconnected, influencing and shaping capacity development processes within any socio-political environment. Effective change depends on interventions that are adapted to reflect the complexity of the local culture and context. All affect the success of capacity development initiatives and the scaling or spreading of good practices.

Figure 1-2: The Relationships between Capacity, Culture, Context, Complexity and Change

Context shapes capacity and change:

Capacity and change are embedded within context, which at the same time offers potential levers for change. Political decisions and national culture significantly impact responses to change and development efforts.

Challenges can foster collaboration:

Difficult circumstances can enhance soft capacities like collaboration and cooperation, leading to rapid and effective solutions, for example when many different groups and disciplines work together in response to a natural disaster.

Political will and adaptation are crucial:

The success and relevance of capacity development initiatives depend on political will for change and understanding cultural and contextual factors. Interventions must be adapted to local conditions to ensure effective implementation and avoid resource wastage.



Practitioner tip:

Questions to help identify culture, context and complexity

Think about:

- What are the influential cultural factors in the groups you need to work with that will either help or hinder change?
- How can you define the context of the situation in which you will need to work? What elements of the context will you need to consider when making plans?
- How do all of the factors and issues of change, culture, context and complexity come together in relation to what you need to do? What will you have to focus on in order to make progress?

Key Takeaways

- Clarifying what you mean by capacity and capacity development at the start will help you and everyone you work with have a shared vision and purpose.
- Adopting key principles to guide your work will ensure that you are following good practice
- Understanding the different dimensions of capacity will help you to develop an effective holistic approach to address your biodiversity capacity needs
- Being aware of the cross-cutting issues of change, culture context and complexity will give you important understanding of what is going to help or hinder your biodiversity capacity development initiatives.

What comes next?

Now that you have been introduced to the core concepts, the next modules provide you with some guidance on how to work effectively in implementing capacity development initiatives. This guidance draws on materials from many of the large institutions that have capacity development as part of their mandate. The five modules each cover one main subject that you need to know about in order to design and deliver capacity development programmes and project. These modules explore:

- Engaging Stakeholders and Working with Partners
- Conducting Capacity Assessments
- Defining Capacity Development Results and the Desired Change
- Designing Capacity Development Interventions
- Monitoring, Evaluating and Learning



Further reading and resources

Documents

An interesting example of how an organisation has framed its definitions, themes, and approaches to capacity development is available on the website of the Capacity for Disaster Reduction Initiative (CADRI)

<https://www.itad.com/article/viewing-capacity-development-through-four-dimensions-of-change/>

Ramalingam B et al. (2008) Exploring the science of complexity: Ideas and implications for development and humanitarian efforts. *Overseas Development Institute Working Paper 285*, 2nd ed. Available at <https://www.odl.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/833.pdf>

WBI: *Shared Glossary to Build Understanding of Concepts in Capacity Development and its Results*, <http://capacitydevelopmentindex.pbworks.com/w/page/4020156/FrontPage>

Other resources

The Cynefin model is a useful framework for understanding the different levels of order in systems - in this short video (8.37 min) David Snowden explains the model.

A short TED talk (3.42 mins) on complexity by ecologist Eric Berlow shows how embracing complexity can sometimes lead to simpler solutions

This video based on the book *Who moved my cheese?* is very helpful for looking at change

End notes

ⁱ See for example the FAO Learning Module 1: Enhancing FAO's Practices for Supporting Capacity Development of Member Countries. Available at <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/7f75022d-8bf2-4717-9ce5-0a2b37e02965/content>

ⁱⁱ Adapted from (2011) Public Sector Capacity Building Secretariat of Rwanda, now incorporated into the Rwanda Development Board

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.itad.com/article/viewing-capacity-development-through-four-dimensions-of-change/>

