actalliance

ACT Alliance

Capacity Development & Learning Strategy

"Enabling a culture of applied learning"

Approved by the ACT Alliance Governing Board
May 2015

Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Capacity development takes place in several different ways within the ACT Alliance. Some members develop their own capacity using their own and locally-raised resources; some develop their capacity with support provided by other ACT members; some develop their capacity with support provided by partners from outside the ACT Alliance. For some, developing capacity is about seeking organisational change, either at an individual member level or at a forum level. These might be internal organisation capacities (such as vision, mission strategies etc.) or external relations capacities to enable linkages with actors outside the organisation. For others, the focus is more on developing technical capacity in the range of issues the alliance is engaged with, across the three pillars of humanitarian, development and advocacy work. This strategy seeks to provide a common framework for capacity development within the alliance, providing a strategic focus on the areas of leadership, forum development and capacities for impact through an applied learning approach.

In the past, ACT International, and subsequently ACT Alliance, has taken different approaches to capacity development. Between 1998 and 2004, this was predominantly through the Emergency Management Training (EMT) programme. An evaluation in 2002 recognised that while the training was of high quality, the benefits accrued largely to individuals rather than the member organisations that they worked for. In response to this evaluation, and a desire to seek to put capacity development *"…at the heart of ACT's work"*[1], the Capacity Development Initiative (CDI) was developed which aimed to support ACT members and forums to undertake a process of organisational assessment leading to a capacity development plan and subsequent implementation of that plan. The CDI ran from 2008-2013 and a number of members and forums used the Organisational Capacity Assessment (OCA) tool to assess their capacities and then sought funding to implement different capacity development activities. The CDI evaluation in 2013 culminated in a "Learning and strategy workshop on capacity development" which found that while the impact of the CDI was significant for those who had undergone the process, the low-take up rate had meant that the impact on the overall capacity of the alliance had not been as high as had been hoped. In addition, the 'shared learning' aspect of the CDI had largely been overshadowed by the development and application of the OCA tool.

This strategy seeks to build on the lessons learned from the CDI evaluation and intentionally strengthen key areas of capacity in the alliance through an applied learning approach.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this capacity development and learning strategy is to provide a common framework for capacity development within the ACT Alliance. It seeks to outline key focus areas with a cross-cutting approach of enabling a culture of applied learning throughout the alliance in order to improve the quality of our work.

Staff at the ACT secretariat will make use of this document to guide their work related to capacity development, particularly in relation to how to apply a learning approach to all the work that we do.

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[1] Borton, John (20017) "Putting Capacity Development at the heart of ACT's work"

Individual ACT members, forums, governance and other key ACT stakeholders, such as communities of practice & Advisory Groups, can use this document to understand the new approach to capacity development in the alliance and to identify where best they can contribute to developing capacity and enabling a culture of learning in the alliance.

1.3   Values

As an alliance, one of our core value statements is that *"We believe we are called to manifest God's gracious love for all people and work towards a reconciled human community. This is more clearly communicated when we work together. Therefore:*

- *We listen, learn from and share experiences with other members in order to improve the quality of our work and draw on the rich diversity of our alliance*
- *We build relationships, strengthen effectiveness and avoid duplication through our cooperation*
- *We recognise and value the unique gifts that each of us has been given*
- *We give priority to the role of local churches and their ministries in responding to the humanitarian and development needs of their local community*
- *We contribute to that vision through the inclusion of advocacy, capacity development of members, spiritual accompaniment, peace-building and psycho-social assistance in our humanitarian and development work"*[2]

The following values also underpin our capacity development work in the alliance:

- **Trust:** we seek to trust each other so that we can learn together in a safe space
- **Honesty and openness:** we can be honest and open about our failures as well as our successes so that we can all learn to continually improve our practice
- **Inclusiveness:** opportunities for learning in the alliance are accessible to all
- **Supportiveness:** we seek to support each other in our learning journey by sharing our resources and experiences for a common goal

1.4   Defining Capacity Development in the ACT Alliance

Capacity development is a complex concept and, as such, there is no commonly agreed definition. Indeed, within the alliance a number of different definitions exist. However, there are defining characteristics of capacity development that feature in many proposed definitions which can guide us as we seek to understand more clearly what we mean by capacity development in the ACT Alliance. These include:

- Capacity development is a long-term process of change, not a one-off intervention
- Capacity development takes place at an individual, organisational and societal level and these three levels are often interlinked
- Organisational capacity encompasses programme capacities (ability to achieve its goals or 'capacities to do'), internal organisation capacities (such as vision, mission, strategies, structure etc. or 'capacities to be') as well as external relations capacities (linkages with actors outside the organisation or 'capacities to relate').

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[2] ACT Alliance Founding Document (2009), p.3

- Capacity development is about enhancing your ability to achieve your goals, ie improved capacity is not an end in itself.

As such, the working definition of capacity development for the ACT Alliance is:

"A long-term process of continual learning and improvement in the 'doing', 'being' and 'relating' abilities of individuals, members and forums within the alliance to achieve improved quality in our humanitarian, development and advocacy work to achieve full life and dignity for all."

1.5   Link to ACT Strategic Plan

The ACT Global Strategy 2015-2018 has the following aims which contribute towards full life and dignity for all:

Aim 1:	Human dignity
Aim 2:	Community resilience
Aim 3:	Environmental sustainability
Enabling Aim:	A robust alliance

This capacity development and learning strategy is written primarily in support of the enabling aim and seeks to outline how learning will support the achievement of "full life and dignity for all" at the level of building a robust alliance. It also provides a framework for supporting the capacity development and learning envisaged at a more technical level in the three main aims of Human dignity, Community resilience and Environmental sustainability. This will help to ensure that capacity development, with a focus on applied learning, is integrated throughout all the work of the alliance.

2.   Developing the new capacity development and learning strategy

2.1   Lessons from the CDI Evaluation

The evaluation of the Capacity Development Initiative took place towards the end of 2013. The process of developing this new capacity development and learning strategy for the alliance has been intentional in seeking to learn the lessons from the CDI experience and to build on the strong foundations laid over the past years. The following key lessons were drawn from the CDI Evaluation report and have had a strong influence on the shaping of this strategy:

- The capacity development agenda should try and create space for experiments, for failure and for learning;
- The capacity development agenda should be advanced collectively without falling so heavily on one person and should avoid being an isolated project;
- The capacity development agenda should focus more on human beings and relationships and spirit, rather than tools and assessments and avoid dependence on the translation of complicated tools and documents;
- The capacity development agenda should engage directly with the mindsets that seek to undermine it and seek to provide those engaged in CD in the alliance with community, support and inspiration;
- The capacity development agenda needs to consider how to bring help and insight to members and

forums in crisis-groups which have very little present capacity.[3]

In addition, the 'capacity development learning and strategy workshop' that was held as part of the CDI evaluation in December 2013 in Geneva, also provided significant input to the development of this strategy. Following a process of collective reflection on the evaluation findings, the participants from across the alliance, spent a day developing key strategic areas for future capacity development work. The areas of learning, leadership development and forum strengthening featured strongly in this process.

2.2   Key features of the new strategy

Following the analysis of the findings of the CDI evaluation, this new strategy for capacity development and learning in the alliance introduces some important changes.   The key features are listed below:
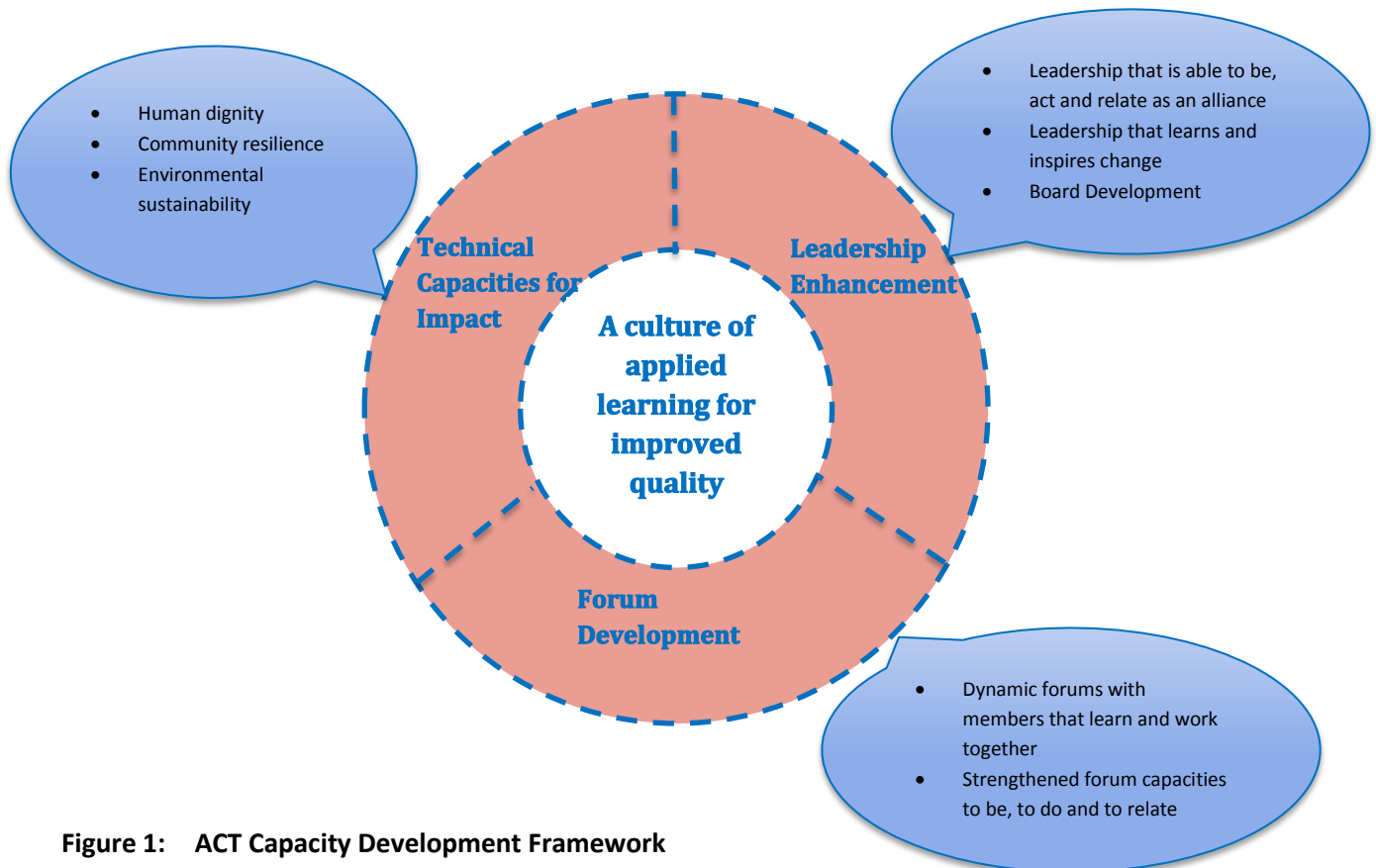
- The capacity development strategy needs to be linked with the new strategic plan of the alliance, supporting the development of capacities both for impact as well as for the institutional development of ACT Alliance, focusing primarily at the leadership and forum development levels.

- It is important to link the strategy at the level of the alliance with local and regional processes where member and forums are already involved in capacity development activities. In the future we see capacity development as an ongoing endeavor in ACT, instead of a project based initiative. In this sense, we expect the alliance to be a space for creating a sense of community, and giving support and inspiration to its members and forums.

- The new strategy should try not to be too prescriptive in terms of specific activities. Instead, It needs to be a broad framework which different actors in the alliance (e.g. forums, secretariat, Governance, Advisory Groups (AGs), Communities of Practice (CoPs), members etc.) can contextualise and achieve in a way that makes most sense to them.

- Applied learning will be a cornerstone in the new capacity development strategy. The strategy aims at enabling a culture of applied learning across the alliance. For significant and effective learning to take place, we think of capacity development as a means for experimentation and even learning from failures.

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[3] Capacity Development at a Crossroads – An evaluation of the ACT Alliance Capacity Development Initiative (2008 – 2013 and foundations for the future (2014) pp44-47

3.   Capacity Development Strategic direction

3.1   Capacity Development Framework

Human dignity
Community resilience
Environmental sustainability

Leadership that is able to be, act and relate as an alliance
Leadership that learns and inspires change
Board Development

Technical Capacities for Impact

Leadership Enhancement

A culture of applied learning for improved quality

Forum Development

Dynamic forums with members that learn and work together
Strengthened forum capacities to be, to do and to relate

Figure 1:   ACT Capacity Development Framework

The new capacity development framework for the alliance places learning at its centre. The overall purpose of all that is done in the area of capacity development is to ultimately improve the quality of our work.

Enabling a culture of applied learning will be the approach that is taken throughout all aspects of work in the alliance in order to achieve that. The dotted line around the inner circle symbolises this learning approach permeating all the capacity development work in the alliance.

For the strategic period 2015-2018, there will be a specific focus on three main areas of capacity development. These include; enhancing the capacities of our leaders, developing the capacities of our forums and developing our technical capacities for impact in the three strategic aims of the alliance.

The dotted lines between these focus areas signify that there is a lot of overlap between these three areas and each is mutually re-enforcing of the other. For example, part of forum development will include enhancing capacities of leadership in the forums as well as strengthening technical capacities for impact. Equally, strong leadership of technical communities of practice will help to build capacity in the alliance in the technical capacities for impact.

The dotted line around the outer circle reminds us that the capacity development and learning work of the alliance is not a closed system. There will be a lot to learn from the context around us in order to improve the quality of our work.

3.2   Capacity development objective

The main objective of capacity development in the ACT Alliance is:

"To improve the quality of the work of the ACT Alliance in seeking to achieve full life and dignity for all by contributing to the development of capacities in our leaders, members and forums through enabling a culture of applied learning."

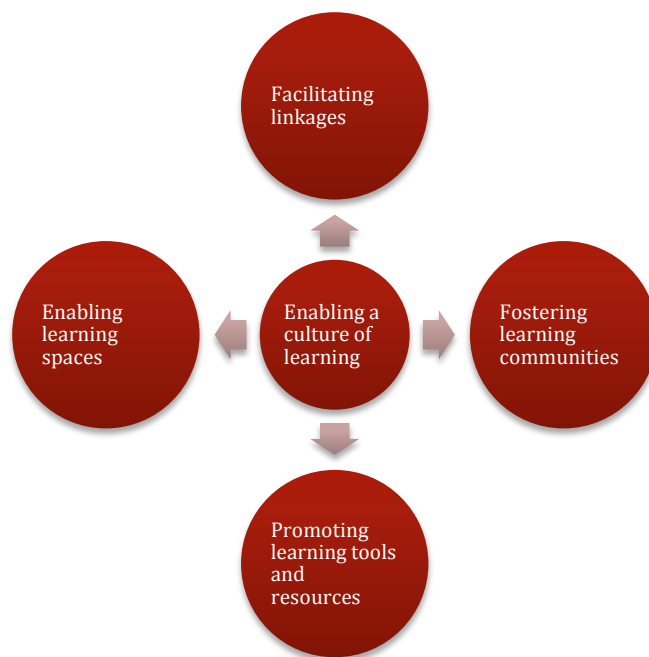## 3.3   Capacity development approach – a culture of applied learning

In ACT Alliance, learning is a strategic component of the work carried out by members, national and regional forums, advisory groups and communities of practice, the secretariat and ACT governance.   ACT Alliance recognizes the importance and diversity of learning that takes place at all these levels and seeks to further enable a culture of applied learning throughout the alliance as the cornerstone of our work on capacity development.

Applied learning in ACT Alliance is conducted under the following principles:

- Learning is systemic, integrated throughout the organization and involves multiple stakeholders. It aims at incorporating learning initiatives and processes that take place at the level of members, forums, advisory groups and communities of practice.
- As a process, learning takes place at the level of the organization and the alliance as organized and coordinated activities and events that point to the achievement of common objectives and outcomes.
- Learning is a constructive process, taking place through interaction, formal and informal, promoting dialogue among actors with diverse experience and knowledge, establishing learning communities.
- Learning takes place not only from successful experiences. Some of our best learning may come from difficult situations and that which may be considered a failure. Learning can often be difficult and painful, involving risk and vulnerability.
- Learning articulates knowledge that comes from practice with critical reflection, in order to transform practices as well as cultural and social structures.
- Learning transforms concepts and beliefs, as well as attitudes and behaviours, aiming at changing practices and those elements in the context that may affect the organization.
- Learning takes place at all levels in the organization, among partner organizations, with organizations that are not necessarily related to ACT Alliance, and especially in relation to grassroots and community organizations.

Figure 2 (below) depicts the main approaches that ACT will use in enabling a culture of applied learning in order to develop capacity within the alliance. These approaches are unpacked more under each capacity development focus area (Section 4) and concrete examples of what they could be in practice are listed in Section 5 related to roles and responsibilities for implementation of the strategy.

Figure 2:   Approaches for enabling a culture of applied learning

4.   Capacity development focus areas

4.1   Leadership enhancement

Rationale

"We share identity and aspiration. By working together and by connecting to one another effectively we can move forward and achieve even more together. This requires leadership at all levels; united leadership that is, acts and relates as an alliance, strengthening our abilities to uphold a common identity and to go the extra mile to reach the communities with whom we work." (ACT Strategy 2015-2018, p.12)

It has been identified that the work of the alliance goes well where there are leaders who create excitement and energy and inspire others. Over the coming years, we seek to enable a learning culture which develops leaders that are, act and relate as a true alliance, strengthening their abilities to help uphold a common identity and to inspire change.

The key leadership competencies that we seek to enhance include the following:

Leadership capacities 'to be'	• Visionary with a strong sense of identity as a leader in ACT • Desire to learn • Ethical and accountable
Leadership capacities 'to relate'	• Good communicator • Inspirational • Promotes equal partnerships • Able to interpret the social, economic and cultural context
Leadership capacities 'to do'	• Relevant technical capacities related to ACT's mission • Management skills • Able to develop a systemic and strategic perspective to respond to different challenges • Linking the local and the global

Approaches

Learning communities: Promote and support learning communities/communities of practice for specific groups of leaders (e.g. forum coordinators, chairs of advisory groups, chairs of communities of practice) to exchange experience and jointly enhance key leadership competencies.

Learning spaces: Promote and support opportunities for leaders to learn through shared experience, knowledge exchange and training among members of ACT as well as from external organisations.

Practical resources: Identify/develop and disseminate practical resources and guidelines to support the enhancement of leadership competencies.

Board Development: Design and implement a board development plan to address issues such as board orientation, team-building and development, recognition of achievements, succession and accountability.

What will have changed?

- Forum coordinators have increased capacity to lead dynamic ACT forums which learn and work well together.

- Chairs of Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice have increased capacity to lead inspiring and engaging groups that contribute significantly to ACT's mission.

- ACT leaders in all corners of the globe represent, through word and deed, the mission, vision and values of the alliance.

- ACT Governance leads and inspires the alliance and communicates effectively with the regions.

4.2   Forum development

Rationale

In joining the ACT Alliance, all members commit themselves to *'actively participate in national and regional forums where they exist and work with and strengthen other ACT members'*[4]. While ACT recognises that every national context is different and that forums will differ from country to country in their structure and activities, there is a clear recognition that the forums, at both national and regional level, are key to achieving ACT's mission and strategy. Dynamic forums, with ACT members actively engaged and learning and working together, will be necessary for the alliance to achieve its ambitious strategy for 2015-2018.

In the Forum Policy and Guidelines, it states that *"An ACT forum should be a participatory gathering of peers. All ACT forum members should equally contribute to, and be included in, major discussions and activities, with due consideration of differences in capacities and resources of each member. Forum members must ensure that all are given equal opportunity to contribute their different perspectives, strengths and resources, and must be sensitive to address imbalances in power dynamics, such as those created by control of funding, or by different forms of discrimination (whether gender, age or ethnicity)."*[5] However, to date, there has been limited support provided to forums to help achieve some of these 'relational' and 'being' capacities with more focus being provided on developing technical capacities 'to do' humanitarian, development and advocacy work.

With this strategy, we seek to develop and strengthen national and regional ACT forums capable of delivering high-quality work together, emphasising the 'relational' and 'being' elements of trust and confidence, partnership, ownership, leadership, transparency and accountability, in addition to strengthening the capacities 'to do'.

The key competencies for forums that we seek to develop include the following:

Forum capacities 'to be'	• Ownership and belonging • Structure and governance • Trust and confidence
Forum capacities 'to relate'	• Partnering • Communication • Transparency and accountability
Forum capacities 'to do'	• Humanitarian, development and advocacy technical capacities • Specific thematic capacities in the strategic areas of human dignity, community resilience and environmental sustainability.

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[4] ACT Alliance Founding Document (2009), p.5

[5] ACT Alliance National and Regional Forums Policy and Guidelines (2011), p.4

Approaches

Learning communities: Promote and support learning communities/communities of practice for forum coordinators to exchange experience and jointly develop key leadership competencies.

Learning spaces: Promote and support opportunities for members in forums to learn from and with each other through shared experience, knowledge exchange and training among members of individual forums, as well as between forums within regions, as well as globally as appropriate.

Practical resources: Identify/develop and disseminate practical tools, resources and guidelines to support forum development in the areas of 'being', relating' and 'doing'.

Linkages: Enable linkages between forums and the technical experts in the alliance e.g. Advisory Groups, Communities of Practice and individual members with specific thematic expertise.

What will have changed?

- Forum coordinators have increased capacity to lead dynamic ACT forums that engage members to learn and work well together.

- ACT forums become a dynamic hub of learning that enable the members of forums to work well together and improve the quality of their collective work at the forum level.

- ACT members are engaged in their forums, both seeking to learn from others as well as to contribute their experience so that others can learn from them.

- ACT members and forums have established better linkages with communities of practice and advisory groups to enhance their technical capacities.

4.3   Capacities for impact

Rationale
The new ACT Alliance Strategic Plan for 2015-2018 outlines the three strategic aims under which the alliance seeks to achieve impact in the next strategic period.

These are:
Human Dignity - We believe God created all people as equals, with dignity, worth and the right to fullness of life.
Community Resilience – Resilience goes to the heart of our shared belief that people are actors in their own development as well as in overcoming hardships they have to confront; it speaks about the inner strength and the resources, knowledge and skills we all have.
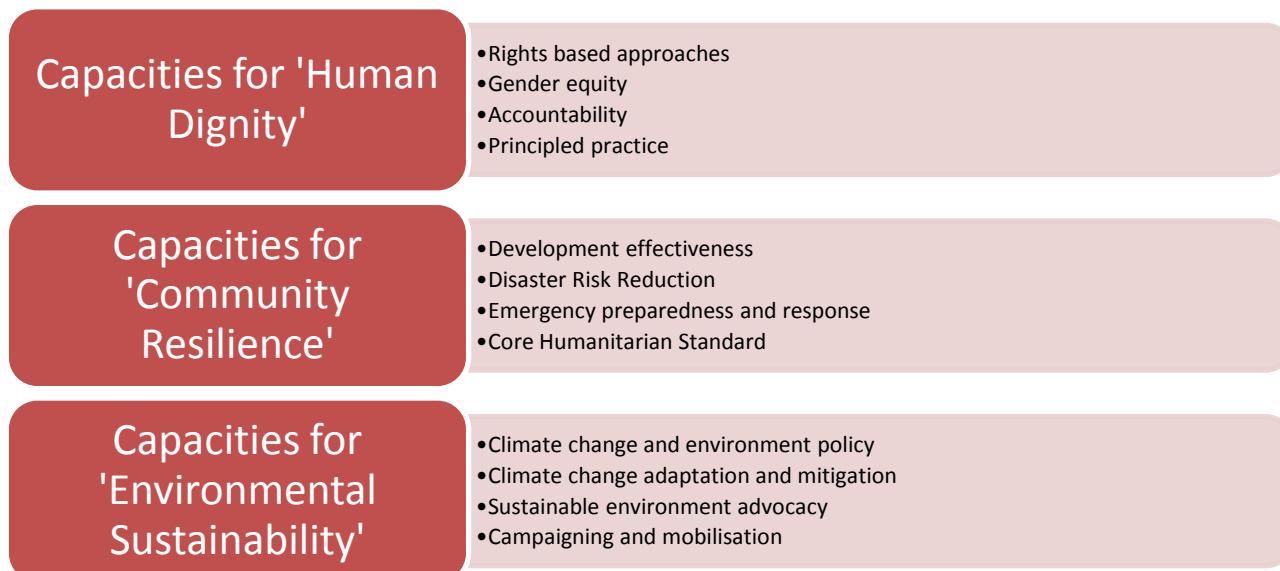*Environmental Sustainability – We seek sustainability in our actions so as to protect God's creation for future generations.*

In order to support the alliance to undertake quality work in these three areas, there is a recognition that some members and forums would value the opportunity to develop their technical 'to do' capacities in these three areas. There is also the recognition that many members and forums are already doing quality work in these areas and have a wealth of experience that the rest of the alliance could learn from.
In addition, the alliance has the added value of housing technical expertise in a range of communities of practice and advisory groups. However, the linkages between the technical experts (e.g. in a COP or AG)

and the majority of the practitioners (implementing members and forums) have not been clearly defined and as such the ability to learn from each other has been limited.

With this strategy we seek to promote stronger linkages between different ACT structures in order to develop improved technical capacities in the three strategic priorities for the alliance.

Capacities for 'Human Dignity'	•Rights based approaches •Gender equity •Accountability •Principled practice
Capacities for 'Community Resilience'	•Development effectiveness •Disaster Risk Reduction •Emergency preparedness and response •Core Humanitarian Standard
Capacities for 'Environmental Sustainability'	•Climate change and environment policy •Climate change adaptation and mitigation •Sustainable environment advocacy •Campaigning and mobilisation

Approaches

Learning communities: Continue to promote and support communities of practice for technical experts to exchange experience as well as to reflect, learn and innovate together.

Learning spaces: Promote and support opportunities for members in forums to learn from and with each other through shared experience, knowledge exchange and training among members of individual forums, as well as between forums within regions, as well as globally as appropriate, in the specific technical areas of human dignity, community resilience and sustainable environment.

Practical resources: Identify/develop and disseminate practical tools, resources and guidelines to support forums and members in the areas of human dignity, community resilience and sustainable environment.

Linkages: Enable linkages between forums and the technical experts in the alliance e.g. Advisory Groups, Communities of Practice and individual members with specific thematic expertise.

What will have changed?

- The communities of practice and advisory groups are vibrant learning communities that continually seek to improve their knowledge and practice of their technical areas of expertise.

- ACT members and forums have established better linkages with communities of practice and advisory groups to enhance their technical capacities.

- Members and forums learn from each other's experiences (positive and negative) and apply what they have learned to improve their own practice.

5.   Roles and Responsibilities in Implementation of the Strategy

5.1   Role of Members

ACT member agencies play a key role in implementing this capacity development and learning strategy. In a member-driven alliance, the commitment by members to shared learning and supporting the development of each other's capacity is critical to success in improving both the quality of the work we undertake and the quality of the ACT brand. Specific activities will depend on context and specific identified capacity needs, but could include:

- Sharing of expertise, tools and resources between members in areas of strategic importance;
- Opening up capacity building initiatives (e.g. trainings) to other ACT members working in a given location, in addition to members' own staff;
- Offering staff time and expertise to join learning communities within ACT, such as CoPs;
- Taking part in exchange visits to learn from each others' work;
- Actively contribute to capacity development in relevant ACT Forums;
- Bi-lateral funding of capacity building activities between members.
- Working together in a consortium of ACT members to access external fundraising for capacity development of ACT members or forums.
- Organising capacity development workshops for groups of members and related churches

5.2   Role of Forums

Dynamic ACT forums, with ACT members actively engaged and learning and working together, will be one of the most critical success factors for the future of the alliance. The role of forums in implementing this capacity development and learning strategy is therefore pivotal. Specific activities will depend on context and self-identified capacity needs, but could include:

- Use forum meetings to share experiences and learn from each other as well as 'doing business';
- Develop a Forum Capacity Building Plan based on ACT Global Strategy;
- Pool funds to get external training provided to the whole forum;
- Create linkages with strategically relevant Communities of Practice or Advisory Groups to benefit from global alliance expertise;
- Connect with other forums in your region to share experiences and learn from each other;
- Periodically reflect and learn from the experience of the forum – what is going well and not so well, what could be done better;
- Enable forum coordinators to connect with other forum coordinators to share experiences and learn together;
- Conduct exchange visits between members of the forum to learn from each others' experience working in the same context.

5.3   Role of Governing Board

The role of the governing board in implementing this capacity development and learning strategy is critically important. Setting the 'tone from the top' by modelling a culture of applied learning will help lead the alliance forward as it seeks to improve quality in all areas of its work. Specifically, the role of the governing board includes:

- Encouraging ACT members and forums to actively seek opportunities to learn from each other and build each others' capacity as outlined above;

- Consciously creating space in Governing Board meetings to reflect and learn together as leaders of the alliance;
- Engaging with a Board Development plan that seeks to build capacity by addressing issues such as orientation, team-building, recognition of achievements, succession and accountability;
- Modelling a culture of learning by being open to learning from failure as well as success.

5.4   Role of Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice

ACT Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice both bring together members of staff from ACT member agencies around a thematic area of expertise. These structures are well placed to become hubs of learning for the alliance to benefit from. Specific areas of implementation of this capacity development and learning strategy for Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice include:

- Identify/develop and disseminate practical tools, resources and guidelines to support building capacity of forums and members in specific technical areas of expertise related to global strategy;
- Create linkages with forums to ensure global hubs of expertise are benefitting ACT members at the local level;
- Ensure meetings and workplans are designed to share experience, good practice and to enable reflection, learning and innovation together;
- Create intentional linkages between different Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice to share experiences and learn from each other;
- Support the leadership of the Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice to connect with each other and develop their own leadership learning community.

5.5   Role of Secretariat

The ACT Secretariat plays a critical role in enabling a culture of learning throughout all the work of the alliance. Whether it is through engagement with the Governing Board, with individual members, with forums or with other structures such as Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice, all members of the ACT Secretariat can play a key role in implementing this capacity development and learning strategy. Specifically, the role of the ACT Secretariat includes:

- Consciously building time for reflection and learning into all alliance processes and ensuring that the learning is applied in the future to ensure continual improvement;
- Facilitate and support the Governing Board and others in leadership in ACT to actively build their capacity and develop a strong learning culture at the leadership level;
- Facilitate the sharing of practical tools, resources and guidelines within the alliance through tools and systems such as the ACT Website;
- Support forums to develop in a way that enables learning and sharing of experiences between members, as well as promoting joint capacity building initiatives;
- Enable the Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice to become hubs of learning within the alliance and facilitate linkages between them and the ACT members and forums.