

Methodology for Assessment and Development of Organization Capacity

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Abstract

Through capacity-building initiatives with obstetrics and gynaecology organizations in Guatemala, Haiti, and Uganda, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada has developed the organization capacity improvement framework (OCIF), a model for strengthening associations' essential organizational capacities. The OCIF focuses on capacity development within the organization over time, rather than on individual training and short-term outcomes. A cycle of assessing, planning, implementing, and measuring improvement builds rigour into the process while encouraging participation, understanding, and commitment to sustainable capacity development.

Résumé

Par l'entremise d'initiatives de renforcement des capacités menées auprès d'organisations d'obstétrique-gynécologie au Guatemala, en Haïti et en Ouganda, la Société des obstétriciens et gynécologues du Canada a élaboré le cadre d'amélioration des capacités organisationnelles (CACO), soit un modèle visant le renforcement des capacités organisationnelles essentielles des associations. Le CACO est axé sur le développement des capacités au sein de l'organisation avec le temps, plutôt que sur la formation individuelle et les résultats à court terme. Un cycle d'évaluation, de planification, de mise en œuvre et de mesure de l'amélioration injecte de la rigueur dans le processus, tout en favorisant la participation, la compréhension et l'engagement envers le développement de capacités durables.

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INTRODUCTION

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada has long agreed with official development assistance agencies in recognizing the contribution of civil society and its essential role in addressing development

issues.^{1–4} The SOGC believes that professional obstetrics and gynaecology associations, as part of civil society, can and do make significant contributions to improving health conditions in any country.

Since 1998, CIDA, through the Canadian Partnership Program, has funded the SOGC Partnership Program to undertake capacity development efforts in three low-resource countries in cooperation with their respective professional obstetrics and gynaecology associations:

- Uganda: Association of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Uganda
- Guatemala: Asociación de Ginecología y Obstetricia de Guatemala and
- Haïti: Société haïtienne d'obstétrique et gynécologie

The SOGC's capacity development work with these associations is based on the premise that strong and vibrant professional associations can assume an important leadership role in the promotion of women's reproductive health and rights and contribute to the reduction of maternal and neonatal mortality and morbidity. It is also based on the recognition that for associations to be strong, they must have sufficient organizational capacity to undertake their activities in a planned and sustainable manner. The notion of strong organizational capacity as a prerequisite to successful performance has been supported in recent years by various program experts.^{5–10}

The SOGC's experience has shown that capacity development requires an ongoing cycle of action and learning from experience that feeds into improved policies and renewed action at the organizational level. The participation and learning aspects of the process are critical to its sustainability. Furthermore, capacity development requires the commitment of various position holders in organizational governance to understand the association's capacity needs, and to be willing to effect positive change. The process also requires time, as the experience of the SOGC's

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Partnership Program in facilitating fundamental change bears out.

As a result of work undertaken to assess organizational capacity development and sustainability within the Partnership Program, the SOGC has developed a comprehensive framework for assessment and improvement. This framework, the OCIF, is a versatile model that can be applied to any organization, project, or program concerned with developing capacity.

DEFINING CAPACITY

Although “capacity” and “capacity building” are common terms in almost all development literature, the underlying concepts remain poorly understood, often expressed merely in terms of training and enhancing the technical skills of individuals. Capacity entails much more than the sum of individual skills; true capacity building incorporates individual skills enhancement in a holistic system of structural and procedural improvements and feedback. The process is cyclical, with measurable results from the first rounds of assessment, planning, and implementation informing the next.

The United Nations Development Programme¹¹ has defined capacity building or capacity development as “the process by which individuals, organizations, institutions, and societies develop abilities (individually and collectively) to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve objectives.”

More recently the World Bank¹² has described capacity building as “a long-term process requiring a systematic approach, demand for improved public sector performance, and supply of well structured organizations and skilled personnel.”

The European Centre for Development Policy Management¹⁰ has defined capacity as “that emergent combination of attributes, assets, capabilities, and relationships that enables a human system to perform, survive, and self-renew.”

The SOGC defines capacity as the ability of an entity (a person, an organization, or a system) to perform planned functions effectively, efficiently, and sustainably to achieve their planned objectives in support of their organizational mission.

THE ORGANIZATION CAPACITY IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

The SOGC’s Organization Capacity Improvement Framework (Figure 1) prioritizes four core elements: organization capacity assessment, data analysis, organization capacity improvement plan (i.e., capacity development actions); and implementation and performance measurement. These are linked to enable a managed development of capacity aligned with the organization’s priorities and strategic objectives.

Organization Capacity Assessment Tool

The first step in the methodology is the objective evaluation of an organization’s capacity, using the questionnaire and set of criteria in the framework’s organization capacity assessment tool. Congruent with recent trends,^{10,13} the tool is structured to include both quantitative and qualitative assessments as appropriate.

The OCAT considers the organization from four major perspectives supporting capacity sustainability (Table 1) and addresses the core areas of competence generally accepted in the development environment.^{14–16} For each core area, a series of questions has been developed to assess the association’s organizational capacity (Table 2).

The OCAT is not meant to be rigorously scientific and mathematical; it is an experiential approach that enables an organization to have a reasonably precise indication of its organizational capacity, from which it can identify and plan for specific capacity improvement. As such, the OCAT is in general accord with other tools that have been developed for the assessment of capacity building in the public sector^{16–18} and in not-for-profit associations.^{19,20}

The assessment involves the participation of the association’s governing and executive bodies, senior management, and knowledgeable staff and members. Its main purposes are to gain first-hand information about the organizational capacity of the association and to sensitize its leaders to viewing their organization from this perspective. It also establishes the baseline measurements used for making capacity improvement recommendations and for comparing data collected for monitoring and evaluation. Responses to the OCAT are obtained through association-led discussions, assessment of relevant documentation, and interviews with key executive members and personnel.

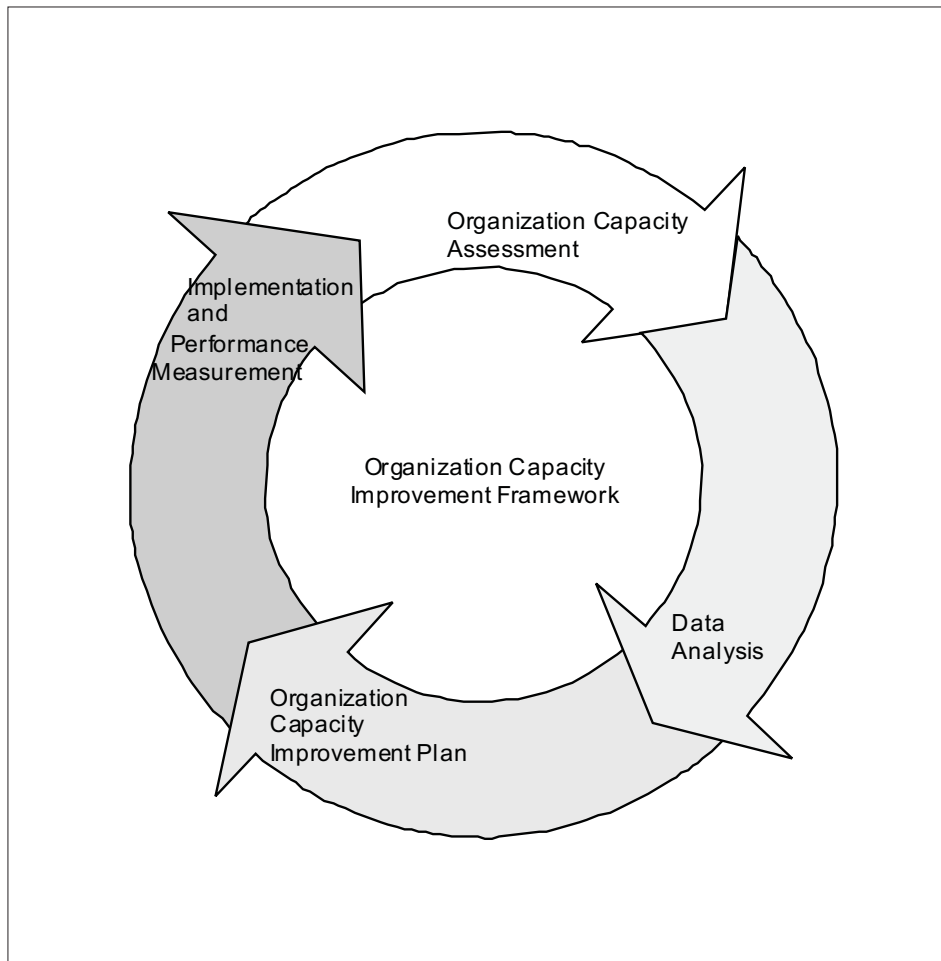
Data Analysis

Once the information is collected, individual assessment questions are assigned a score based on the rating scale and definitions shown in Table 3. The rating scale reflects that some subjective assessment is inevitable in the interpretation of responses associated with organizational capacity.

ABBREVIATIONS

CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
OCAT	organization capacity assessment tool
OCIF	organization capacity improvement framework

Figure 1. The OCIF is a practical framework that creates a continuous improvement cycle building capacity aligned with association operational goals and objectives



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After assessment and rating of individual questions, an overall rating for each major perspective (organization culture, operational capacity, organization performance, and external and perception factors), based on the clustering of individual responses, is calculated as a percentage of possible maximum points for each subset area of capacity. Clusters of responses for each subset are then compared to an overall capacity rating scale (Figure 2), from which an overall rating of each major capacity perspective is made. The overall capacity rating scale, which was empirically derived from SOCG observations, reflects the non-linear and incremental nature of capacity growth and development.

Analysis of the findings of the assessment tool can be undertaken from any of three perspectives:

1. Theoretical ideal: analyzes findings against generally accepted ideal characteristics of an organization as it progresses through different stages of maturity.
2. Benchmark/baseline organization: analyzes findings against a selected benchmark organization, such as a recognized medical association or organization, or a pre-existing baseline of data.
3. Inter-organization comparison: analyzes findings between selected organizations.

A critical, objective evaluation of organizational capacity provides a sound basis for planning. Analysis gives all parties a clear understanding of their baseline status and presents a clear picture of where efforts need to be focused to enhance organizational capacity. Adopting the appropriate analytical approach, taking into account environmental realities and program-specific issues identified in the OCAT, ensures results and recommendations that best match the organization's reality.

Table 1. The OCAT brings the major capacity perspectives and associated core capacity areas into a practical tool for organizational capacity assessment

OCAT major capacity perspective	Capacity description	OCAT core capacity areas assessed
Organization cultural factors	Cultural factors examine what motivates and provides impetus for an organization to succeed. This is addressed through three areas that underlie an organization's ability to function and survive.	Organization vision and mission Organization culture Organization reward/incentives
Operational capacity factors	Operational factors represent a complex relationship of seven core areas that underpin the ability of an organization to perform, remain relevant and to grow and survive.	Leadership and strategy Governance and management structure Financial management Human resources Systems and procedures Communication Infrastructure
Organization performance factors	Organization performance factors examine four areas that relate to an organization meeting its goals and objectives and being viable.	Effectiveness Efficiency Organization relevance Financial health
External and perception factors	External and perception factors address four areas reflecting the reality that organizations are not isolated entities but must operate in a dynamic environment with many impinging elements.	Rules and norms Legal and political framework Linkages and networks Ownership and participation

Organization Capacity Improvement Plan

Following the initial assessment and analysis, the OCIF focuses on planning and developing an overall strategy of priority improvement actions to address areas of weakness and to support the organization's strategic plan and objectives within its operational environment.

The SOGC Partnership Program experience has shown that it is important to stress the need for organizations to focus their efforts by identifying and concentrating on areas where they can make the greatest ongoing difference. As in the assessment phase, executive participation in the organizational capacity improvement cycle is critical. It not only clearly indicates the importance the organization attaches to the assessment and capacity development effort but further ensures the organization's full commitment to, and ownership of, the process.

Implementation and Performance Measurement

Implementation and performance measurement completes the OCIF model. Performance indicators are developed to measure progress against the results-based plan and to be the basis for change management. Performance measurement and its reporting is a crucial link that supports the development and evolution of the partner organization.

In developing both the capacity improvement plan and associated performance measures, the OCIF takes into consideration other strategic objectives of the organization. The model facilitates prioritizing actions that link the capacity improvement plan to supporting overall organization objectives. For example, if an association has identified sexual and reproductive rights advocacy as a main objective, one of the critical capacities required is communications. If the capacity analysis has identified weaknesses in some aspects of communication, the capacity improvement plan would address this weakness as a priority in a manner that both supports the association's sexual and reproductive rights objectives and enhances core organizational communication capacity (Table 4).

The SOGC experience has shown that measurement and evaluation are critical, but as in all capacity development, performance measurement must be realistic for the association. Performance measurement is undertaken within the organization's normal operations and is developed in a manner that respects the resources and capabilities of the association.

An overview of the OCIF is shown in Figure 3 and identifies a number of key aspects of the framework and its application.

Table 2. Example of questions from the OCAT

Organization culture

1.1 Organization vision and mission

- Does the organization have a clearly articulated vision and mission statement?
- To what extent is the mission statement linked to the broader vision of the organization?
- Is the vision and mission understood by all members, giving a sense of purpose and direction?
- Do organization members act in accordance with the mission statement?
- Are organization members satisfied with it, i.e., do they interpret it in the same way and does it reflect key values and beliefs held by members?
- Is the mission statement aligned and consistent with the organization's goals and objectives?
- Are the actions of the organization consistent with the mission statement?
- Are the vision and mission reviewed on a regular basis (i.e., is there a formal process to review the vision and mission)?

Table 3. Capacity rating scale for individual assessment questions

Capacity rating	Capacity description	Rating/description definition
0	Nil	No capacity
1	Basic	Capacity supporting a minimal degree of performance
2	Basic-moderate	Capacity supporting a limited degree of performance
3	Moderate	Capacity supporting a reasonable or average degree of performance
4	Moderate-high	Capacity supporting above average performance
5	High	Capacity supporting significant performance

DISCUSSION

It is now commonly accepted that organizational capacity is essential to success in sustainable development initiatives. Developing capacity sustainably requires the adoption of models that are participative, reflective of the realities within which organizations operate, and that are focused enough to enable clear problem identification and practical solutions that can be managed within the resources of the partner organization.^{8,10,12}

A search of the relevant literature shows that definitions of capacity have moved beyond referring simply to the training of individuals, or the provision of resources to conduct activities, to recognizing multiple dimensions beyond technical skills. In fact, for an organization to perform operationally and have a lasting ability to undertake its work, it must have strong organizational capacities in a number of areas. The abilities to plan and act effectively, to manage both its work and its financial health, to create legitimacy and trust in the eyes of those it serves, to adapt to the changing environment in which it operates, and to influence stakeholders are all examples of the capacities required for a successful organization.

The OCIF tool developed and piloted by SOGC within its Partnership Program provides an opportunity for professional associations to consider their overall capacities

through the perspective of internationally recognized core areas of competence. It logically groups these elements, presenting them and the associated assessment questions in a manner that enables an organization to build a comprehensive picture of its state of capacity development.

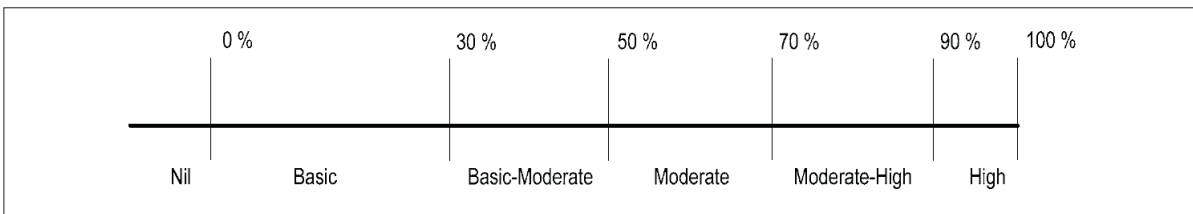
The OCIF differs from or builds upon previous types of assessments by (1) linking all the elements necessary for a continuous improvement model, (2) designing supporting tools for specific organizations so that they enable full participation and ownership of the process, (3) allowing for flexible analyses that result in improvement plans reflective of the realities of each organization, and (4) enabling the organizations to control and manage the pace of their progress.^{17,18,20-22}

While the OCIF makes use of many results-based management principles (e.g., evidence-based assessment, and defined plans and objectives) for performance measurement and evaluation,²³ it differs from other models by being driven by the organization itself, as opposed to using a top-down or donor-driven approach. It is participative in design, reflective of end-user needs and capabilities (not just donor requirements), and responsive to the need for buy-in and acceptance from the people who underlie the process and are central to its success.

Table 4. Example of the characteristics and potential performance indicators used to analyze capacity and measure and evaluate progress

Capacity element	Indicators
Communication	Evidence the organization understands the communication needs of stakeholders (internal and external). Evidence the organization is clear about the messages they wish to communicate. Evidence the organization knows whom they must communicate with, and the most effective means to accomplish communication. Evidence the organization actively informs the public about its programs and services. Number and type of communication activities. Evidence the organization is receptive to hearing what others have to say and is responsive to them through the number and type of feedback sought from stakeholders.

Figure 2. Overall capacity rating scale for major perspectives (Organization Culture, Operational Capacity, Organization Performance, and External and Perception Factors)



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The impact of the OCIF tool is enhanced by the SOGC Partnership Program’s principle of peer-to-peer interactions between the SOGC and its partner associations. Within the program each association assumes ownership of and responsibility for its plan and actions, and accountability to its stakeholders (public, government, members, and donors). The capacity development process is nourished and supported by the technical expertise of the SOGC, and is further strengthened by opportunities for partner organizations undertaking the same development process to discuss and to learn from one another’s experiences. The SOGC’s role is thus to provide technical support, expertise, and the forum needed to undertake the exercise in a manner that ensures incremental growth.

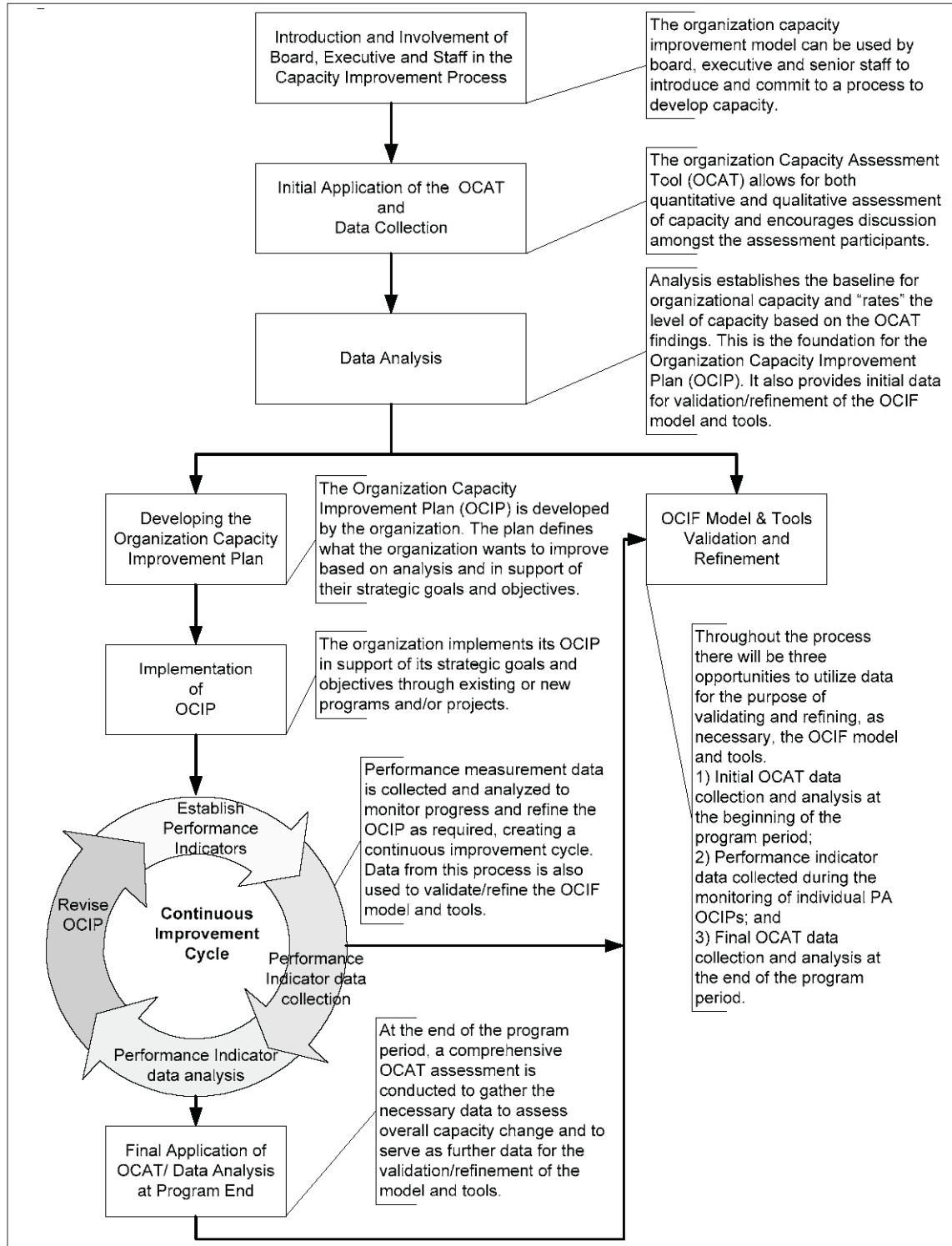
The Role of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada

Capacity development that runs project by project, focused mostly on individual skill building, is fragmented and does not evolve as a whole; often the capacity objectives are not even defined. Usually there is an inadequate needs assessment (no baseline) and no appropriate plan for improvement that reflects the organizational reality and the ability of individuals within the organization, as well as the organization itself, to change and evolve.¹²

For the SOGC Partnership Program, the OCIF model enables the focused and planned development of key organizational capacities that support the evolution of partner obstetrics and gynaecology associations. This helps them achieve a sustainable position from which to address the sexual and reproductive health initiatives and sexual and reproductive rights advocacy that is their strategic focus in supporting the safe motherhood and newborn health agenda. It takes the association from where it is to where it could or should be by identifying the appropriate cultural, operational, and performance changes needed to ensure that the organization can deliver its initiatives.

While the OCAT is used primarily for an association’s own purposes, it can also provide information about the association’s ability to undertake projects and about possible associated risks to an external observer or outside agency. The framework can easily be adapted by national, regional, or local health authorities as a tool to assess capacity and to plan for development. This OCAT analysis can help support external decision-making donor organizations and international agencies, and presents the basis for risk-identification and risk-oversight management strategies when engaging organizations to undertake work.

Figure 3. Outline of the OCIF implementation, identifying key steps and tools in the process



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The SOGC has found that successful sustainable capacity building must be driven by the association's executive and members; they must own the process and be responsible for its implementation. The Society has also found that associations know what they need to do and the pace at which change can be made. The SOGC's role, as program executor, is thus to facilitate this change by providing guidance, mentoring, and support as a peer organization that has gone through a similar process.

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