



# Practical aspects of capacity development in the context of disaster risk reduction



Magnus Hagelsteen<sup>a,b,c,\*</sup>, Joanne Burke<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Division of Risk Management and Societal Safety, Lund University, Sweden

<sup>b</sup> Lund University Centre for Risk Assessment and Management (LUCRAM), Sweden

<sup>c</sup> Centre for Societal Resilience, Lund University, Sweden

<sup>d</sup> King's College London, The Policy Institute at King's, Planning From the Future Project, Kingsway, London, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

Capacity development for disaster risk reduction (DRR) has been identified as one of the main ways of substantially reducing disaster losses. In previous research, several elements have been identified that are important in capacity development for DRR. For this study, documentation from nine international capacity development projects for DRR has been analysed. The projects were undertaken by a Swedish civil governmental agency, during the period 2007–2013. The documentation analysis was complemented with seven interviews with the organisation's project managers. The purpose was to understand to what extent the previously identified elements are reflected and dealt with in DRR projects conducted by the organisation. The analysis further sought to understand whether any developments can be observed during the period studied, and if additional challenges or opportunities were identified by the professionals running these projects.

The findings show a complex and progressive picture regarding the organisation's familiarity with and use of the elements from 2010 and onwards. The elements are noted to be useful in guiding the design and implementation of capacity development projects for DRR. Positive developments can also be noted on the part of the organisation e.g. a more structured way of working with capacity development and conducting capacity assessments. The organisation, however, faced challenges translating its capacity development guidance into a practical tool. Other noted challenges included staff turnover, project management limitations and funding restrictions.

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## 1. Introduction

The three World Conferences on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), held in Yokohama [18], Kobe [50] and Sendai [52], Japan, identified capacity development for DRR as one of the primary means of substantially reducing disaster losses. Many organisations are involved in supporting capacity development for DRR, both bilaterally and multilaterally, for example, governmental agencies and donors, United Nations agencies, regional governmental bodies, INGOs, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. While the importance of capacity development has been increasingly recognised, recent studies show that there are challenges impeding its implementation [3,6,12,14,15,42,49]. In particular, specific approaches, frameworks or guidance in capacity development may be lacking [8,21,23,35] and there is lack of academic research on

capacity development for DRR [40]. Further, knowledge about capacity development, what it involves and what works in practice is still an emerging practice. Project management frameworks, such as results-based management or the logical framework approach, are routinely used for DRR projects, yet they do not include guidance on capacity development. Thus, one recurring challenge facing the DRR community is related to how capacity development initiatives are identified, designed and implemented. For example, many DRR initiatives are undertaken without a proper capacity assessment [15,20]. In the absence of guidance, there is a tendency to undertake capacity development for DRR according to one's own rules and experience. This limits the ability of the DRR community at large to build a common body of knowledge on how to do capacity development for DRR.

There are many factors and issues that influence capacity development for DRR. In previous research a number of challenges and opportunities were identified from scientific literature and 35 interviews with capacity development and DRR experts [15]. Seven elements emerged from this study as being important to capacity development for DRR, namely: terminology, local context,

\* Corresponding author at: Division of Risk Management and Societal Safety, Lund University, PO Box 118, SE-221 00 Lund, Sweden.

E-mail addresses: [magnus.hagelsteen@risk.lth.se](mailto:magnus.hagelsteen@risk.lth.se) (M. Hagelsteen), [Joanne.Burke@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:Joanne.Burke@kcl.ac.uk) (J. Burke).

ownership, capacity assessment, roles and responsibilities, mix (variety) of activities and methods, and monitoring, evaluation and learning [15]. The degree of application of these elements was investigated in 2010 by reviewing three projects carried out by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) [16]. MSB is a Swedish civil governmental humanitarian and development aid organisation engaged in DRR, targeting mainly regional and national governmental organisations. MSB is an implementing organisation and receives its funding mainly from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). In 2010, a workshop was also organised by the MSB to exchange experiences in capacity development for DRR. From that workshop the need for an eighth element on partnership was identified.

Against this background, the purpose of the study is to increase our understanding of the aspects that might facilitate or hinder the success of capacity development projects. The study investigated if, and how, the elements for capacity development previously identified in the scientific literature and by experts in capacity development and DRR are dealt with in real DRR projects. Hence, the questions addressed were:

- To what extent are the elements previously identified dealt with in DRR projects conducted by MSB from 2006 to 2013?
- What development, if any, can be noted in terms of how the elements are dealt with between 2006 and 2013?
- Were additional challenges or opportunities experienced or identified by the professionals running these projects?

The three central concepts of this study are capacity, capacity development and DRR, for which there are various definitions. In this paper capacity is defined as, “the ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully” [33, p.12]. Capacity development is understood as, “a locally driven change process through which individuals, organisations and institutions obtain, strengthen, maintain and adapt their capacities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time and learn from their efforts”, adapted from the World Bank Institute and United Nations Development Programme [35, p.3, 48, p.5]. DRR is defined as, “the concept and practice of reducing disaster risks through systematic efforts to analyse and manage the causal factors of disasters, including through reduced exposure to hazards, lessened vulnerability of people and property, wise management of land and the environment, and improved preparedness for adverse events” [51, p.10–11]. The aim of developing capacity for DRR is to achieve outcomes and foster change that helps society to be resilient to risks from natural hazards.

## 2. Method

The study utilises two methods for data collection: project documentation and semi-structured interviews with project managers. Content analysis was used to review the documentation of 9 international MSB capacity development projects for DRR, planned or implemented between 2007 and 2013. After the analysis of the documentation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven managers running the projects to obtain more detailed insights into their capacity development for DRR work. MSB was chosen for the case study because of (1) the data availability (2) its pro-active work in capacity development for DRR (3) its own interest to enhance its capacity development work for DRR. Both authors had prior experience working with MSB on capacity development for DRR, which increased the potential for accessibility to MSB's data.

### 2.1. Content analysis of project documentation

In total, 66 documents were included in the analysis of the projects in Armenia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, West Africa (Liberia and Sierra Leone), South-East Europe, Botswana and the Southern African Development Community, SADC (not implemented). Two further projects, in Mozambique and Palestine, were ongoing during the period studied. The documentation reviewed included: pre-studies, project proposals, memoranda of understanding or letters of intent, reports to funding organisations and Swedish ministries, evaluations and final reports. MSB documents every project, providing a good basis for analysis. The reason for analysing project documentation is that it is preserved even if the project manager is replaced. This study builds on the eight elements that emerged from a previous literature review and from 35 interviews with capacity development and DRR experts [15]. In brief, the eight elements for capacity development for disaster risk reduction are:

1. Terminology – understand key concepts as well as how other partners interpret and understand them.
2. Local context – understand the basic political and institutional, social and cultural, physical and environmental, and economic setting of the initiative, including who are its stakeholders and their organisational set-up, routines and incentives.
3. Partnership – understand the specific types of collaborative alliances and relations that stakeholders form in order to achieve a specific outcome.
4. Ownership – ensure the capacity development initiatives are needs driven and internal partners have commitment to the capacity development process.
5. Capacity assessment – understand risks from hazards and the current capacities available for DRR in order to determine common and realistic entry points and provide input to the capacity development objectives.
6. Roles and responsibilities – ensure roles are clearly and evenly distributed between internal and external partners, ensure internal partners assume leading roles and external partners assume supporting roles, and that all partners understand this division.
7. Mix (variety) of activities and methods – address capacity needs and implement capacity development objectives in a systematic and holistic manner, acknowledge interdependencies between partners, sectors, capacity levels and types
8. Monitoring, evaluation and learning – ensure continuous monitoring and timely evaluation of the actual results of capacity development initiatives and their activities, and use these inputs for learning.

To ensure consistency in the review process, the two authors identified characteristics of each element, drawing on their own experience and previous research [15,16]. In addition, sources of information used to characterise the eight elements to develop Table 1, included the four High Level Forums on Aid Effectiveness [29–32], which have progressively focused on the need for common principles for development assistance. Table 1 provides a description of the main characteristics of each element, and selected questions that were used to review the projects. The elements are not arranged in any particular order of priority. Although the elements are based on a comprehensive review of previous research and practical experience, it can not be assumed that they reflect all challenges and opportunities that may be encountered in capacity development projects for DRR. The elements are intended to facilitate the analysis of the project documentation and understand the extent to which the different elements are reflected. Guided by the characteristics and questions

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