



Challenging disparities in capacity development for disaster risk reduction



Magnus Hagelsteen*, Per Becker

Lund University Centre for Risk Assessment and Management (LUCRAM), Training Regions Research Centre, Box 118, 221 00 LUND, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 July 2012

Received in revised form

14 November 2012

Accepted 15 November 2012

Available online 22 November 2012

Keywords:

Capacity development

Capacity building

Disaster risk reduction

Disaster

Disaster risk management

Disaster management

Ownership

ABSTRACT

Although capacity development has been identified as the means to substantially reduce global disaster losses, it is a challenge for external partners to facilitate the development of sustainable capacities for disaster risk reduction in disaster-prone countries. The purpose of this study is to investigate potential gaps between how leading professionals approach such capacity development and guidelines found in available theory. The analysis of data from thirty-five qualitative semi-structured interviews reveals that there are gaps between theory and practise, as well as between the practitioners, in all seven elements identified in available theory. There is ambiguity regarding terminology, different views about the meaning of local context, ownership and capacity assessment, as well as contradicting opinions of the role and responsibilities of external partners. Focus is on training individuals, while other requisites are often ignored, and there is a general lack of understanding of what results to assess and how to monitor and evaluate projects.

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1. Introduction

Statistics indicate an increasing number of disasters caused by natural hazards in the world [1], and the international community is realising the need to increase global efforts to reduce disaster losses. The majority of these losses occur in the developing world, causing a major threat to sustainable development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals [2–4]. The final document of the 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction, only a month after the Indian Ocean tsunami, specifies a roadmap for how to substantially reduce disaster losses by laying down three strategic goals and focusing efforts on five priority areas for action [5]. This Hyogo Framework for Action also specifies capacity development within the five priority areas as the tool

for meeting the goals [5]. It mentions the word capacity in relation to development, building, or strengthening more than 25 times [5], but never specifies or explains how to develop capacities for disaster risk reduction.

The contemporary key word of capacity development is “ownership” [6], which implies that primary responsibility and ownership rest with internal partners,¹ while external partners² have supporting roles [5,7]. However, in practise the division of roles and responsibilities may often be vague and understood differently by different partners. There is for instance a tendency of external partners to have a “right answer” or know better approach to capacity development which is not tailored to fit the needs of the targeted organisation or country [8]. External partners are often recruited for short periods, do

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +46 70 383 55 85;

fax: +46 46 222 46 12.

E-mail addresses: magnus.hagelsteen@lucram.lu.se (M. Hagelsteen), per.becker@lucram.lu.se (P. Becker).

¹ An internal partner is a partner belonging to the organisation attempting to develop its own capacity.

² An external partner is a partner belonging to an organisation attempting to support the development of the capacity of another organisation.

the work themselves, and leave before any institutional memory can be created. There is also an inclination to ignore established systems, strategies and capacities, thus creating parallel structures [3], and projects usually decline soon after external expertise is withdrawn [9]. Capacity development projects for disaster risk reduction focus frequently on training individuals without paying enough attention to organisational issues, structures, and how such organisations interact with each other [8,10]. With staff turnover, the little capacity that may be developed is lost.

There seems to be gaps between guidelines given by available theory and how capacity development for disaster risk reduction is done in practise. The purpose of this study is to investigate these gaps in order to inform recommendations how to close them and thus improve the effectiveness and sustainability of future capacity development for disaster risk reduction projects. The study intends to meet that purpose by answering the following research question: How do external experts approach capacity development for disaster risk reduction?

2. Theoretical background

There is no consensus among stakeholders as how to define capacity development or disaster risk reduction [11]. Hence, the same terms are defined in different ways by different organisations, resulting in a detrimental “Babelonian Confusion” of *terminology* [12]. Capacity development is here defined as “the process through which individuals, organisations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time” [13]. The two terms *capacity development* and *capacity building* are sometimes used interchangeably, while others describe them as different. For instance, the “building metaphor suggests a process starting with a plain surface and involving the step-by-step erection of a new structure, based on a preconceived design” [8]. This implies that capacity is something that is built by outsiders from a clean slate [14], and do not consider existing structures and plans. Capacity development, on the other hand, is something that must grow from inside and be based on existing capacities [14]. Although the term capacity development will be used in this study, it must be open to whatever term the informants choose to use, knowing that the connotation for them may be the same. Disaster risk reduction is defined as the process to “minimise vulnerabilities and disaster risk to avoid (prevention) or to limit (mitigation and preparedness) the adverse impacts of hazards” [15].

To design a project for capacity development for disaster risk reduction, it is important to first analyse and understand the *local context* [8], including general political, social, cultural, economic, physical and environmental factors [15,16]. One needs to consider not only the facts that people live in hazardous locations, but why they live there [17]. It is also important to understand that communities are not homogeneous, but made up by diverse groups with different vulnerabilities, capacities and needs [4,18]. There are in other words no

“one-size-fits-all” solutions that can be used everywhere and in all situations [6,14], and it is also essential to understand the relationships and dependencies between individuals or organisations [14].

One of the cornerstones for capacity development is *ownership*, which means that the primary responsibility and ownership for capacity development rests with internal partners and that external partners have supportive roles [5,7]. Although there is a broad consensus that lack of ownership is an important reason for the failure in many projects, there is a lack of consensus on what ownership means. This is further complicated by concepts changing meaning over time [6].

Ownership is here referred to as creating and owning ideas and strategies, development processes, resources and the result of the development process [14]. Taking ownership is something that is voluntary and cannot be imposed by someone else [6,18]. Capacity development is thus a process that must grow from the inside [8,19], with or without the help of external partners. Involving people through participatory approaches is essential for establishing ownership and commitment [18,20]. In addition, the engagement of strong and knowledgeable leaders is important in order to recognise and allocate needed resources such as time, funds, equipment and personnel [21].

In order for capacity development for disaster risk reduction to be effective, the purpose must be clear. It is therefore necessary to focus on the analysis of risks the internal partners are facing and the analysis of capacities, which are currently available to manage them. This is in general capacity development literature often referred to as *capacity assessment* [22,23] and has the purpose to identify what capacities already exist and what additional capacities may be needed [6]. It has also been suggested that a capacity assessment consist of asking basic questions, e.g. why capacitate, capacity for whom and what [23], and then address more specific questions regarding DRR. However, it is important to be mindful of that changes may cause resistance, and even create tensions amongst groups in society [24].

When working in partnership, clear and mutually agreed *roles and responsibilities* for all partners are necessary. External partners can take on different roles, ranging from providing technical services to facilitating the capacity development process. Which role is to be taken should depend on what the internal partner needs and what the external partner is able to provide [21]. However, whatever type of support provided, it should never undermine local ownership [6], always be based on existing capacities, and be aligned with national disaster risk reduction processes [10]. This is closely related to power relations, which heavily influence any international development cooperation [25]. The role of the external partner should be to create awareness, motivate and engage people, resulting in the internal partner taking responsibility and ownership of the process [26]. Mannervik [27] concludes that “a person who does not have access to information cannot take responsibility. A person who has information cannot resist from taking responsibility”.

Capacity development entails addressing challenges on various levels, i.e. legal and institutional frameworks,

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