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Forwarding a Challenging Task: Seven Elements for Capacity Development for Disaster Risk Reduction¹

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Abstract – Capacity development for disaster risk reduction is an important process to substantially reduce disaster losses, which threaten sustainable development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. This paper presents seven elements for capacity development for disaster risk reduction that has been applied in practise with noteworthy results. The seven elements are: (1) Terminology, (2) Local context, (3) Ownership, (4) Capacity assessment, (5) Roles and responsibilities, (6) Mix of activities, and (7) Monitoring, evaluation and learning. Although this set of elements should not be seen as a comprehensive methodology in itself, the seven elements for capacity development for disaster risk reduction still highlight vital aspects and seem to be a both conceptually and pragmatically interesting path to follow for increasing the impact and sustainability of projects.

Keywords – *capacity development, capacity building, disaster risk reduction, disaster risk management, disaster management, disaster.*

1. Introduction

Disasters are not evenly distributed in the world. Developing countries are bearing the brunt of the death and destruction (UNDP, 2004: 9-27; Twigg, 2004: 2; Fordham, 2007: 340), and the international community has identified capacity development for disaster risk reduction as a vital tool to substantially reduce disaster losses (UNISDR, 2005). However, not all capacity development projects have resulted in improved capacity for disaster risk reduction in the intended countries (UNDP, 2004: 76-77; CADRI, 2011: 7-8). One reason for this may be lack of analysis of the relevant risks and initial capacities within the countries in question, as a foundation for project planning and implementation (Schulz et al, 2005: 7; Twigg, 2004: 289; Becker, 2009). The division of roles, responsibilities and ownership may be vague and understood differently by different partners. External experts are often involved during short periods, do the work themselves, apply ready-made solutions, and leave before any institutional memory have been created. Thus ignoring established systems, strategies and capacities, which result in the creation of parallel structures and processes (Twigg,

2004: 289; Becker et al, 2013: 4), and in the deterioration of project results soon after external expertise is withdrawn (UNCRD; SEEDS, 2002: 1). Capacity development projects for disaster risk reduction often focus on the training of individuals without paying sufficient attention to organisational issues, structures, and how such organisations interact with each other (OECD/DAC, 2006: 3; UNDP, 2007: 5-7), making the little capacity that may have been developed in the project liable to staff turnover. It seems in other words that there is lack of guidance for capacity development for disaster risk reduction.

The purpose of this paper is to present seven requisite elements for effective capacity development for disaster risk reduction identified in the literature and give examples of how they can be used in practice. The seven elements are:

1. Terminology
2. Local context
3. Ownership
4. Capacity assessment
5. Roles and responsibilities
6. Mix of activities

¹This article is based on a presentation given during the 4th International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos 2012, held 26-30 August 2012 in Davos, Switzerland (<http://idrc.info/home/>)

7. Monitoring, evaluation and learning

2. Seven elements for capacity development for disaster risk reduction

There are no commonly accepted definitions for capacity development or disaster risk reduction among all stakeholders (Eriksson; Gustavsson, 2007: 13). The same terms are defined in different ways by different organisations (Thywissen, 2006: 10-11; Twigg, 2004: 12), and concepts are often used interchangeably, e.g. capacity development and capacity building (OECD/DAC, 2006: 9; Schulz et al, 2005: 13). The used terminology relies often upon abstract concepts that are difficult to translate into objectives and practical activities (Eade, 1997: 2; Lopes; Theisohn, 2003: 1; UNDP, 2007: 3). Hence, the same terms are defined in different ways by different organisations, resulting in a detrimental “Babelonian Confusion” (Thywissen, 2006: 10-11).

To design a project for capacity development for disaster risk reduction, it is important to first analyse and understand the local context (UNDMTP, 1997: 55; OECD/DAC, 2006: 17), including general political, social, cultural, economic, physical, and environmental factors (Wisner et al, 2004: 49-52; Coppola, 2007: 146-158; UNISDR, 2004: 16) and to understand the relationships and dependencies between individuals or organisations (Schulz et al, 2005: 31). However, there is often a lack of such analysis, increasing the risk of creating parallel structures (Twigg, 2004: 289; Schulz et al, 2005: 7) and reducing the effectiveness of the project (Becker, 2009).

One of the cornerstones for capacity development is ownership, which means that the primary responsibility and ownership for capacity development rests with internal partners² and that external partners³ have supportive roles (UNISDR, 2005: 3-5; OECD, 2005: 3-5). Involving people through participatory approaches is essential to establish ownership and commitment (Anderson; Woodrow, 1998: 28; UNDP, 2007: 17), and the sustainability of capacity development projects has been shown to increase in direct relation to the level of participation and ownership of the internal partners (Fukuda-Parr et al, 2002: 12). However, there is lack of consensus on what ownership means (Lopes; Theisohn, 2003: 29; Schulz et al, 2005: 23) and the lack of local ownership in capacity development is still a main reason for the failure of many projects (Lopes; Theisohn, 2003: 29-31).

In order for capacity development for disaster risk reduction to be effective, it must be clear in its purpose. Therefore, there is a need to focus on the analysis of risks that the internal partners face and the analysis of capacities that are currently available to manage them. This is in general capacity development literature often referred to as capacity assessment (UNDP, 2009: 21-24; UNDP, 2008), but there is a lack of methods and tools for capacity assessment that are tailored for disaster risk reduction. Without sufficient capacity assessment, there is a risk of external partners misunderstanding their internal partners' capac-

ity needs (Ebrahim, 2007: 16).

When working in partnership, clear and mutually agreed roles and responsibilities for all partners are necessary. Especially as external partners can take on different roles, ranging from providing technical services to facilitating the capacity development process. Which role that is taken should depend on what the internal partner needs and what the external partner is able to do (Motes; Hess, 2007: 117). Whatever role taken, it should never undermine local ownership (Lopes; Theisohn, 2003: 29), but instead create awareness, motivate and engage the internal partners in taking ownership (Whitmore et al, 2003: 24). However, in practise the division of roles and responsibilities is often vague and understood differently by different partners, and external partners have often a tendency to have a “right answers” approach to capacity development (OECD/DAC, 2006: 7, 15).

As capacity development entails activities on various levels, i.e. legal and institutional frameworks, systems of organisations, organisation and human and material resources (Becker et al, 2011: 4), it is necessary to address challenges on all of them by implementing a mix of activities, on short and long term (UNDP, 2008: 23; UNDP, 2009: 25). The reason for this is that changes at one level often require changes at other levels too (CADRI, 2011: 9; UNDP, 2007: 13; Coppola, 2007: 300), as the levels are interdependent (UNDP, 2007: 13). Nevertheless, the focus of many capacity development projects for disaster risk reduction is often on training individuals without paying enough attention to organisational and institutional issues (UNDP, 2007: 5-7; OECD/DAC, 2006: 3).

The purpose of monitoring and evaluation is to measure the progress and results to determine whether the project has caused any actual change towards the overall objective, continuously (monitoring) or periodically at predetermined points in time (evaluation) (Ortiz; Taylor, 2008: 2). However, evaluations are often done at the end of a project and have short-term perspectives that usually miss to assess long-term consequences (Twigg, 2004: 353) as a result of projects often being directed by budgetary time cycles or annual budgets (UNDMTP, 1997: 59). Monitoring and evaluation is not only for validating results, but also for learning from experience.

To summarize, the seven elements for capacity development for disaster risk reduction are:

1. Terminology – understanding key concepts as well as how other stakeholders understand them.
2. Local context – understanding the basic political, social, cultural, physical, environmental, economic and institutional context of the project, including who are its stakeholders and organisational set-ups that may feed into the project risk analysis and conditions for engaging.
3. Ownership – ensuring local stakeholders having ownership over the capacity development process.
4. Capacity assessment – understanding risks and the current capacities available for disaster risk reduction,

²An internal partner is a partner belonging to the organisation attempting to develop its own capacity.

³An external partner is a partner belonging to an organisation attempting to support the development of the capacity of another organisation.

and determining commonly accepted capacity development objectives among stakeholders.

5. Roles and responsibilities – ensuring local stakeholders to assume leading roles and external stakeholders to assume supporting and coaching roles, and that all stakeholders understand this division.
6. Mix of activities – addressing capacity development needs in a systematic and holistic manner, acknowledging dependencies between stakeholders, sectors, levels, etc.
7. Monitoring, evaluation and learning – ensuring continuous monitoring and timely evaluation of the actual effects of capacity development projects and their activities, and use these inputs for learning.

These elements are mentioned frequently in the literature and thus seem to be important. The elements should be seen as flexible and as a foundation, with the possibility to extend with other elements that may have been left out from this study. In other words, we do not claim that the seven elements constitutes a complete framework, but that each of them is crucial for grasping and improving capacity development for disaster risk reduction.

3. Application of the seven elements

The seven elements have so far been used for analysing how external partners approach capacity development for disaster risk reduction and for gap analysis and evaluation of three capacity development projects.

3.1. External partners ideas concerning capacity development for disaster risk reduction

35 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with external partners who work with disaster risk reduction and capacity development in the international community. The purpose of the study is to analyse how external partners approach capacity development for disaster risk reduction and to compare and contrast between them based on the seven elements (Hagelsteen; Becker, 2013: 4-13).

The results of this study indicate that there is a high degree of terminological ambiguity regarding what disaster risk reduction, capacity development and ownership means in theory and practice. There are also different notions of understanding the local context, capacity assessment, as well as the division of roles and responsibilities. Focus is most often on training individuals and not having a holistic and systemic approach with a mix of activities. There seems to be a lack of procedures of what results to assess, how to monitor and evaluate projects, as well as how to capture and share lessons learnt and who should do it. Thus, the study reveals that there are substantial discrepancies in the responses between the informants, as well as a gap between theory and practice in relation to the seven elements.

3.2. Gap analysis

During 2011 a consultant for MSB (a Swedish governmental agency active in international humanitarian assistance and development cooperation), performed an evaluation in the form of a gap analysis of three capacity development for disaster risk reduction projects in Pakistan, Armenia, and Tajikistan. The gap analysis was based on project documents and reports. The gap analysis was guided by the seven elements, which proved to be a useful guide for undertaking the evaluation.

The results from the gap analysis indicate that concepts are used interchangeably and that there is a lack of explanation of the various disaster risk reduction and capacity development concepts. The gap analysis also reveals that the project documents do not provide details about if and how local context analysis, risk assessment, the definition of roles and responsibilities and capacity assessment are explicitly undertaken. The gap analyses also note the lack of adequate baseline information to monitor and evaluate projects, and that there is an emphasis on “hard” or service delivery capacities over “soft” dimensions of capacity development.

4. Added value to integrative risk management

The seven elements have proven useful for analysing stakeholders’ notions of capacity development for disaster risk reduction, for gap analysis and evaluation of existing capacity development projects, and may be used to inform the design and implementation of future capacity development projects. However, the seven elements should not be seen as a comprehensive methodology for capacity development for disaster risk reduction. The elements should be considered as guidance with an explicit focus on softer or more process-oriented aspects. These aspects are at least as important as the technical ones to reach success in the project, but are often overshadowed by technical ones in this case disaster risk reduction.

The seven elements have also proved an asset in connection with teaching at post-graduate programmes at universities and in interaction with different stakeholders in society. The seven elements have been used as a guiding structure during lectures and to guide discussions with stakeholders, locally, nationally and internationally, when talking about capacity development for disaster risk reduction. During these discussions all the seven elements have been identified and recognized as important elements for capacity development for disaster risk reduction.

5. Conclusion

The set of seven elements appears to be useful both theoretically and pragmatically, as there seems to be a need for a capacity development framework for disaster risk reduction focusing on these issues. However, as stated earlier, the seven elements should not be seen as a comprehensive methodology for capacity development for disaster risk reduction as such, but as a reminder of key requisites

for effective capacity development for disaster risk reduction. The seven elements could then form a foundation for the development of such comprehensive methodology, perhaps with the addition of elements that have been left out in our studies so far.

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