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A Great Babylonian Confusion: Terminological Ambiguity in Capacity Development for Disaster Risk Reduction in the International Community

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ABSTRACT: Society is becoming increasingly dynamic and complex, and therefore more vulnerable. It is thus important that society is resilient in order to be able to protect citizens and critical functions in the wake of disasters. It has been suggested that disaster risk reduction (DRR) is key in establishing resilience, and that adequate capacity in DRR is vital to reduce the effects of disasters. DRR and capacity development involve many individuals and organisations, and previous studies have indicated discrepancies in how individuals and organisations perceive key aspects of DRR and capacity development. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the potential for misunderstanding of the key concepts of DRR and capacity development, focusing on a homogeneous group of international experts and on documents from nine capacity development projects for DRR. Thirty-five qualitative interviews and content analysis of the project documentation revealed substantial conceptual ambiguity, indicating significant differences in the way in which the respondents perceive and define key concepts. The findings also showed that there is still a gap with respect to how these concepts are understood and communicated in the project documentation. This high degree of terminological ambiguity is likely to cause misunderstanding and have a negative impact on the effectiveness of capacity development projects for DRR.

Keywords: Terminology, Disaster risk reduction, Capacity development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is becoming increasingly dynamic and complex, and it has been pointed out that societies must be resilient in order to be able to safeguard their citizens and critical societal functions in the face of disasters (e.g. Becker et al. 2011). The majority of losses arising from disasters caused by natural hazards occur in low- and middle-income countries, posing a major threat to sustainable development and to the achievement of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (UNDP 2004, p. 9-27; Twigg 2004, p. 2,9; Smith, & Wenger. 2007, p. 240). It has been advocated that disaster risk reduction (DRR) is key in establishing resilience (e.g. Birkmann, & von Teichman. 2010), and that capacity development for DRR is vital to substantially reduce losses resulting from disasters (UNISDR 2005). While the importance of capacity development is being increasingly recognised, recent studies have revealed problems impeding the actual implementation of capacity development in DRR (Hagelsteen, & Becker. 2013; CADRI 2011, p. 7-8; GNCSDR 2009; Becker 2009).

Both DRR and capacity development involve many individuals in different kinds of organisations, and there are indications of discrepancies in how they perceive the key aspects in this field (Hagelsteen, & Becker. 2013, p. 7-8, 11). In a study on the United Nations' contribution to the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action, Oelreich states that "Disaster risk reduction is not a self-explanatory term" (Oelreich 2011, p. 14). The Hyogo Framework for Action mentions the word "capacity" more than 25 times in relation to developing, building, or strengthening DRR (UNISDR 2005), but does not specify or explain how the capacity for DRR should be developed. The results of another study including 63 respondents from international NGOs from 18 different countries indicate a lack of a common definition of "capacity building" (Lipson, & Warren. 2006, p. 2-3). In addition, the link between capacity development and DRR is also unclear (UNDP 2007, p. 3). The terminology used often relies on abstract concepts that are difficult to translate into objectives and practical activities (Eade 1997, p. 2; Lopes, & Theisohn. 2003, p. 1; UNDP 2007, p. 3). Some concepts are often used interchangeably, e.g. capacity development and capacity building (OECD/DAC 2006, p. 9; Schulz et al. 2005, p. 13), and the same terms may be defined in different ways by different organisations. Thywissen (2006, p. 10-11) calls this multitude of terms "a Babylonian (sic) Confusion", and we believe it is both interesting and important to study the potential for the misunderstanding of key concepts. The purpose of this paper is therefore to investigate the potential for conceptual misunderstandings concerning DRR and capacity development within a relatively homogeneous group of external partners involved in capacity development initiatives for DRR. To achieve this, we aim to answer the following research question:

How do experts from different countries perceive and express the concepts of disaster risk reduction and capacity development, and in what way are these concepts and terms used in documentation on capacity development projects for disaster risk reduction?

2. METHODOLOGY

Two separate studies were conducted as outlined below.

2.1 Interviews with 35 international experts in DRR and/or capacity development

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 35 international experts involved in DRR and/or capacity development in order to obtain an understanding of what the concepts of DRR and capacity development meant to them. The interviews were part of a wider study, but the part considered here included two basic open questions: “What does disaster risk reduction mean to you?” and “What does capacity development mean to you?”. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The respondents were identified through purposeful selection (Bernard 2006, p. 189; Blaikie 2000, p. 205) and through snowballing from them. About two-thirds of the informants were men (63%), and the ages of the respondents ranged from late twenties to early sixties. They had work experience from governmental agencies, NGOs, various UN organisations, the Red Cross Movement and universities.

2.2 Content analysis of nine international capacity development projects for DRR

The documentation from nine international capacity development projects for DRR from a governmental agency undertaken between 2007 and 2013 were analysed to gain an understanding of the way in which terminology was used in the project documentation. The analysis was guided by the following illustrative questions: Are key terms clearly defined, e.g. capacity development, capacity building and specific thematic terminology related to disaster risk reduction? Is there consistency in terminology throughout the project documentation? Are abbreviations explained?

3. DISCUSSION

The findings from the 35 interviews revealed substantial differences between the way in which the respondents expressed the two concepts of DRR and capacity development. They defined them vaguely or in broad terms, some stating that they were “tricky questions” or explaining that the concepts were “abstract” or just “buzz words”, or “meaningless terms” and “intellectual constructions”. Some informants referred to the Hyogo Framework for Action as being theoretical, with no actions, or not being operational. One-third stated that there is confusion regarding DRR and what it means in practise, while two-thirds gave little explanation of what capacity development meant to them. One informant said: “For many people, capacity development is like an abstract thing, it is not clear how to do it”. Although several respondents stated that capacity development should be interpreted as activities at different levels, more than half of the informants pointed out that capacity development is only regarded as a training exercise. Nearly half of the informants used the term “capacity building” instead of “capacity development”, with seemingly equivalent meanings. Several respondents avoided one or both of the questions, and a few of them explicitly refused to discuss them.

The analysis of the project documentation revealed an overall ambiguity across the projects with respect to how key terms and concepts were described and conveyed in the documentation. There was an overall lack of references to key terms, and of definitions of abbreviations in the documentation on both DRR and capacity development. Additionally, there were discrepancies in the use of project management terminology in that terms were not defined, were used inconsistently, or were used interchangeably, i.e., “project purpose” and “project objective”, or “programme” versus “project”. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that there is a shared concept or understanding of what the term and concept mean (James, & Hailey. 2009, p. 11).

The cause of confusion or lack of consistency concerning terminology may be that people generally tend to underestimate the importance of using terminology correctly, and may assume that two different parties have the same understanding of key concepts such as capacity development and DRR. They may, therefore, fail to ensure they are talking about the same thing (James, & Hailey. 2009, p. 11). It is easy to assume when starting such a project, that everyone involved is in agreement regarding the terms used, but when the activities are to be implemented it often becomes apparent that the various partners do not have a common understanding of what should be done, or how it should be done. This may be due to a lack of knowledge, and an unwillingness to reveal this, and thus losing face. Other reasons for this confusion may be that the definitions and concepts are academic, complicated and over-elaborated (Twigg 2004, p. 12), making it difficult to translate them into objectives and practical activities (Eade 1997, p. 2; Lopes, & Theisohn. 2003, p. 1). There are sometimes problems in translating terms between languages, and the meaning of terms may also change over time. Finally, concepts may be used as slogans, rather than meaningful concepts due to a lack of clarity or knowledge (Lusthaus et al. 1999, p. 9).

4. ADDED VALUE FOR THE POST 2015 FRAMEWORK FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

If capacity development is vital in DRR to substantially reduce the losses resulting from disasters, then it must be made clear what capacity development means in practise, and it should not be taken for granted that partners in different organisations and countries have the same understanding of the concepts involved. The lack of a common conceptual understanding will undermine opportunities for learning, for change, and for the development of capacity in DRR. If the concepts involved are not clearly defined, it will be difficult to assess whether the DRR measures were successful or not.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Terms such as “DRR” and “capacity development” are often used loosely. The results of the 35 interviews and documentation from nine international capacity development projects for DRR indicated that terms and concepts are used interchangeably, and that the various concepts of DRR and capacity development are not adequately or uniformly defined. This study focused on a relatively homogeneous group of experts and documentation from a single governmental agency, and it is likely that substantial discrepancies in conceptual understanding will also be found in the more heterogeneous groups often involved in capacity development for DRR. It is evident that the concepts are interpreted or perceived in different ways depending on the values, beliefs, practices, and organisational and educational background of the person using them. This high degree of terminological ambiguity is likely to cause misunderstandings between partners concerning what to do and how to do it, which will have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the proposed measures. There is thus an urgent need to discuss and clarify the concepts involved in DRR and capacity development if we are to improve our preparedness to cope with disasters in the future.

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