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Seven elements for capacity development for disaster risk reduction

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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 a theoretical framework with seven elements for capacity development for disaster risk reduction that has been tested 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 the framework 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 effective path to follow for increasing the impact and sustainability of projects.

Keywords: Capacity development, Capacity building, Disaster Risk Reduction, Risk, Disaster

1. INTRODUCTION

Disasters are not evenly distributed in the world. Developing countries are bearing the brunt of the death and destruction (UNDP 2004, pp. 9-27; Twigg 2004, p. 2; Fordham 2007, p. 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, pp. 76-77; CADRI 2011, pp. 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, p. 7; Twigg 2004, p. 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structures and processes (Twigg 2004, p. 289) and the decline of project results soon after external expertise is withdrawn (UNCRD, & SEEDS 2002, p. 1).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 (DAC 2006, p. 3; UNDP 2007, pp. 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 a lack of a guiding framework for capacity development for disaster risk reduction.

The purpose of this conference paper is to present a framework with seven requisite elements for effective capacity development for disaster risk reduction and give examples on its application. 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.

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, p 13). The same terms are defined in different ways by different organisations (Thywissen 2006, pp. 10-11; Twigg 2004, p. 12), and concepts are often used interchangeably, e.g. capacity development and capacity building (DAC 2006, p. 9; Schulz et al 2005, p. 13). The used terminology relies often upon abstract concepts that are difficult to translate into objectives and practical activities (Eade 1997, p. 2; Lopes, & Theisoehn 2003, p. 1; UNDP 2007, p. 3). Hence, the same terms are defined in different ways by different organisations, resulting in a detrimental “Babelonian Confusion” (Thywissen 2006, pp. 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, p. 55; DAC 2006, p. 17), including general political, social, cultural, economic, physical, and environmental factors (Wisner et al 2004, pp. 49-52; Coppola 2007, pp. 146-158; UNISDR 2004, p. 16) and to understand the relationships and dependencies between individuals or organisations (Schulz et al 2005, p. 31). However, there is often a lack of such analysis, increasing the risk of creating parallel structures (Twigg 2004, p. 289; Schulz et al 2005, p. 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 partners and that external partners have supportive roles (UNISDR 2005, pp. 4-5; OECD 2005, pp. 3-5). Involving people through participatory approaches is essential to establish ownership and commitment (Anderson, & Woodrow 1998, p. 28; UNDP 2007, p. 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, p. 12). However, there is lack of consensus on what ownership means (Lopes, & Theisoehn 2003, p. 29; Schulz et al 2005, p. 23) and the lack of local ownership in capacity development is still a main reason for the failure of many projects (Lopes, & Theisoehn 2003, pp. 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, pp. 21-24; UNDP 2008), but there is a lack of methods/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' capacity needs (Ebrahim 2007, p. 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, p. 117). Whatever role taken, it should never undermine local ownership (Lopes, & Theisoehn 2003, p. 29), but instead create awareness, motivate and engage the internal partners in taking ownership (Whitmore et al 2003, p. 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 "fix-it" or "right answers" approach to capacity development (DAC 2006, pp. 3-4).

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, p. 4), it is necessary to address challenges on all of them by implementing a mix of activities, on short and long term (UNDP 2008, p. 23; UNDP 2009, p. 25). The reason for this is that changes at one level often require changes at other levels too (CADRI 2011, p. 9; UNDP 2007, p. 13; Coppola 2007, p. 300), as the levels are interdependent (UNDP 2007, p. 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, pp. 5-7; DAC 2006, p. 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, p. 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, p. 353) as a result of projects often being directed by budgetary time cycles or annual budgets (UNDMTP 1997, p. 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 and institutional, social and cultural, physical and environmental, and economic context of the project, including who are its stakeholders.
- (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, 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.

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 is to analyse how external partners approach capacity development for disaster risk reduction and to compare and contrast between them and with the theoretical framework.

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 all areas of the applied theoretical framework, the seven elements. A scientific journal article has been submitted based on this study.

3.2 Gap analysis

During 2011 a consultant for MSB (a Swedish governmental agency active in international humanitarian assistance and development cooperation), Joanne Burke, 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 was 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. A scientific journal article is in writing based on this study.

4. ADDED VALUE TO INTEGRATIVE RISK MANAGEMENT

The seven elements presented in the theoretical framework have proven useful as a framework 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 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 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. CONCLUSIONS

The framework with the 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. In other words, additional descriptive research is needed and we are currently engaged in a study of high-level decision makers in the international community and their views on the challenges for capacity development for disaster risk reduction.

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