

# **In the eye of the beholder, a thesis about different viewpoints concerning successes and challenges in a capacity development initiative in the field of disaster risk reduction**

**Effective implementation of a capacity development initiative is suggested to be dependent on the combination of specific technical expertise and soft skills of its participants. Soft skills are, but not limited to, organizational relationships, power asymmetries, understanding culture, and the merging of different values and goals. Soft skills are often not acknowledged, which leads to unsustainable results. Unsustainable results are for example project takeover, unplanned personnel rotation and conflict.**

A capacity development initiative is in its simplest terms a partnering cooperation between two organizations. The two organizations consist of a local organization with an aim to increase its own capacity and a partnering external organization with enabling qualities. These enabling qualities could be knowledge, access to funds or other resources. Together the local -and external organization plan, fund and implement the initiative.

The purpose was to add scientific value by getting a better understanding of the implementation stage of the capacity development process. This was achieved by listening to the internal views regarding success factors and challenges within an external partnering organization and how they influence capacity development initiatives for disaster risk reduction.

MSB (Myndigheten för Samhällskydd och Beredskap) manages capacity development initiatives in the field of disaster risk reduction and was chosen as a partnering external organization. The thesis studied two capacity development initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa where MSB was the external partnering organization. Eleven MSB-informants were found to be suitable for an interview. Out of the eleven contacted, eight informants were interviewed. Informants in the external organization ranged from unit director, project manager, project coordinator and implementer.

A distinction was made between informants depending on where they worked. Informants working at the implementation area are referred to as operational informants or informants at the operational level. Operational informants include implementers and project coordinators. Informants working with monitoring and project management on the initiative at the headquarters are referred to as strategic informants or informants at the strategic level. Strategic informants include project managers and unit directors.

The interviews were semi-structured. First, the informant introduced themselves and how they got the opportunity to be involved in the initiative. Secondly, the informant explained their role in the initiative. The third stage focused on what the informant recalls as success factors and challenges, and the reasons behind these. The fourth and final stage focused on what the informant perceived to be lacking in the project management, and what could benefit project success or mitigate challenges.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed word by word. The data was then collected, categorized and analyzed. From the interviews six topics were identified.

1. Understanding local context
2. Establishing trust in the local organization
3. Implementing with low local capacity
4. Continuity challenges
5. Work environment in the external organization
6. Internal challenges within MSB

When analyzing the six topics above it was realized that operational and strategic informants often perceived successes and challenges differently. The identified reason to why this occurred was that the strategic and operational informants had different roles, responsibilities, and worked in different environments. These different viewpoints also lead to consequences such as internal conflict in MSB and staff leaving the initiative prematurely. Five themes were perceived by operational and strategic informants to be success factors with corresponding challenges. Below is a short summary of these five themes.

### **Soft skills**

All informants expressed soft skills as a success factor when establishing good relationships and gaining trust between operational informants and individuals in the local organization, enabling the operational informants to understand the local context better. Examples of the soft skills mentioned were commitment to the initiative, humbleness, understanding the local language, and having an open mind without prejudices.

Good working relations does not seem to be a priority in the internal cooperation between the strategic and operational levels in MSB. As it is important to establish a close relationship between MSB and the local organizations, it is equally important to establish good relations internally in MSB. The lack of soft skills internally in MSB lead to difficulties in the internal dialogue in the organization. One operational informant described the internal communication with the strategic level as pushing a big cube into a tiny round hole.

### **Local context**

Operational informants considered understanding of the local context a success factor. At the same time, operational personnel said that strategic informants were unwilling or had few opportunities to use the local context in the decision-making process. A suggestion to ease the knowledge transfer of the local context from operational to strategic level is to install a board meeting with representatives from all members of the MSB implementation group. In doing so, it might open opportunities for operational informants to contribute and share knowledge about the local context.

### **Accountability**

The strategic informants generally felt accountable to project documentation and results while the operational informants felt accountable to the local organization. These different accountabilities lead to clashes between operational and strategic levels. One example was the use of informal communication between operational informants and the local organization. Operational informants saw the informal communication as a success and a result of trust and good relationships. The strategic, however, perceived the informal communication as a challenge that negatively affected transparency. The different accountabilities resulted in internal conflict between the strategic and operational level.

### **Commitment**

Operational and strategic informants thought that commitment and participation from the local organizations were essential for the implementation of the initiative. However, both operational and strategic informants mentioned the challenge of reoccurring lack of commitment in the local organization. One response to the lack of commitment was an indirect takeover of the initiative. Operational and strategic informants saw the takeover to be successful as it addressed the challenge of low local commitment. No one was concerned with sustainability-issues when taking responsibility away from the local organization. Another response to the low commitment and preparedness was the strategic decision to scale down the capacity development activities. The scale down was seen as a success by both strategic and operational informants. Linking project takeover and scale downs to

success is concerning, as it shows a tendency to value quick-fix measures. An organization using quick-fixes may have rigid accountability or a short-term organizational mindset.

### **Continuity**

Staff rotations occurred in MSB at both the strategic and operational level. Discontinuity due to staff rotation was seen by both strategic and operational informants as a challenge. Staff rotation led to loss of knowledge and relationships with the local organization at the operational level and incoherent management at strategic level. Staff rotation at operational levels was due to the clash of accountabilities and the feeling of being excluded from giving input to the decision-making process.

On an ending note, considering the discussed themes above, the thesis recommends four conclusive points.

1) The external organization must acknowledge that different accountabilities exist internally in their organization. Strategic informants felt accountable towards reporting, whereas operational informants felt accountable towards the local organization. Without acknowledging the different viewpoints there is a risk of conflict inside the external organization. 2) The external organization must actively facilitate internal communication and learning during implementation. Without addressing these the initiative risks exclusion of useful local context in its decision-making process. 3) The external organization must understand the value of relationships between organizations and within its own. Internal communication relies upon good personal relationships between individuals. The external organization must see relationships, internally and between organizations, as a prerequisite for communication and learning. There is a risk of staff rotation if the external organization does not acknowledge the value of personal relationships. 4) The external organization must acknowledge the importance of local ownership. Any response made by the external organization during implementation cannot create dependencies between the local organization and its external partner. Dependencies will negatively affect the prospect of sustainable results.