Beating the training obsession: making capacity development for disaster risk management matter

Becker, Per

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BECKER, Per (Lund University)

The last ten years have seen a sharp increase in externally supported capacity development initiatives for disaster risk management. However, not all of them have generated sustainable results. The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the current focus on training as the main tool for capacity development in the context of disaster risk management, and to argue for the necessity to address capacity development more holistically if it is to have any lasting effects on our increasingly precarious future.

Introduction

Our world is in a precarious state. We witness increasing disturbances, disruptions and disasters, resulting from local calamity and global tribulation, and all but very few scientists anticipate more trouble in the future (IPCC 2012). Influential voices of the international community cry out the need for addressing issues of risk and unsustainable development, and many of them frame the way forward in terms of capacity development or building (e.g. United Nations 2000; ISDR 2005; IPCC 2012; UNCSD 2012). In other words, while a community, organisation or society must develop its own capacities to be resilient, external actors can play important roles in supporting such development.

The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the current focus on training as the main tool for capacity development in the context of disaster risk management, and to argue for the necessity to address capacity development more holistically if it is to have any lasting effects on our increasingly precarious future.

Capacity development in the past

Although the concept of capacity building did not come into wider use until the 1990s and capacity development roughly a decade later, similar ideas have been around since more or less the start of organised international development cooperation in the 1950s (Smillie 2001:8). The focus of these conceptual predecessors, such as institution building (Esman 1967; Esman & Montgomery 1969) or institutional development (e.g. Whyte 1968), was also on developing capacities to meet various development objectives on different levels. They provided comprehensive guidelines for how external actors could facilitate such developments (e.g. Esman 1967), but were in practice too often equated with technical assistance or cooperation in which external actors regularly assumed prominent roles as drivers of change (Moore 1995:91). This, in turn, frequently led to activities that were basically designed and implemented by external actors and not generating much sustainable results (Oxenham & Chambers 1978).

As theory underwrote the ideas behind these early concepts of capacity development, while practice failed, the solution was the reinvention of them under the name capacity building. Then, after another decade of insufficient results, the ideas were again reinvented under the concept of capacity development. There are obviously conceptual differences between these concepts, since scientists, policymakers and practitioners learned continuously over the decades, but not to the extent indicated by the proponents of the new concepts. It is clear that most of the arguments for the new concepts are made by describing the predecessor in terms of how it was applied in

practice, while presenting the new concept in terms of how it is described in theory. For instance, capacity building is now described as having a narrow scope, focusing on building capacities from scratch, being mainly concerned with external actors' activities, and having short-term focus, while capacity development is described as having broader scope, focusing on developing existing capacities, being mainly concerned with creating local ownership, and having long-term focus (CADRI 2011:14). This is not at all a fair comparison, but more of putting words into the mouths of our forerunners to make us appear as having progressed more than we actually have. Capacity building is not at all having a narrow scope if reading Deborah Eade's (1997) influential work, nor is it focusing on building capacities from scratch. Even Whyte's (1968) early writings on institutional development highlight the importance of local ownership, and Gant's (Gant 1966:219-220) definition of institution building clearly prescribes long-term focus. It is true that we have learned a lot over the years, but it is simply not a good idea to disregard the roots of much contemporary knowledge.

Capacity development today

Many influential voices of the international community are currently crying out the need for addressing issues of disaster risk, and many of them frame a way forward in terms of capacity development for disaster risk reduction (e.g. ISDR 2005; IPCC 2012; UNCSD 2012). In other words, while developing countries must develop their own capacities for disaster risk reduction, external actors can play important roles in supporting such development. However, when looking at the current state of capacity development for disaster risk reduction, a rather disheartening picture emerges:

> *"While the importance of capacity is widely recognised, how it emerges, how to develop and evaluate it and how to sustain it is for many less clear. There are a number of experiences, tools and resources that are now available in the field of disaster risk reduction and relate to capacity development. Lessons of past experience, for example, point to many inappropriate approaches with short-lived impacts on the part of development cooperation partners. There is however the need for many to better familiarise with the link between capacity, its development and disaster risk reduction. The evidence and knowledge available within the disaster risk reduction community on how to support the development of capacity "in practice" is still not widely systematised and shared, although examples do exist" (CADRI 2011:7-8).*

This statement from CADRI provides a sobering perspective of the contemporary position of internationally supported capacity development for disaster risk reduction. Spahn et al. (2010) state that capacity development brings forward major challenges when implemented in practice, as visible in their study on Tsunami preparedness in Indonesia. They note that there exists a need for clear institutional arrangements at different levels, making way for a more streamlined and effective development process. Spahn et al. (2010) then continue by stating that due to a lack of information and knowledge on DRR, local actors often have limited influence and ability before or during a disaster.

There are of course individuals and organisations involved in capacity development that are on top of its challenges, but it is unfortunately so that many others must abandon considerable parts of their habitual mode of thinking concerning capacity development for it to have any lasting effects on disaster risk reduction. For instance, contemporary capacity development for disaster risk reduction is predominantly adhoc, short-term,

projectisized and micro-ized (Hagelsteen & Becker 2013). It is mostly equated with training of individuals (*Ibid.*), which of course often may be necessary but is rarely sufficient when their organisation is not capable to utilise and maintain their newly acquired knowledge and skills (Eade 1997:31; Schulz *et al.* 2005:61). In other words, training is an important instrument for capacity development, but can never develop sustainable capacity for disaster risk reduction if not properly institutionalised within the country or region in question (Becker 2009:19; Hagelsteen & Becker2013:10).

Capacity development must instead entail a combination of activities, addressing challenges concerning human and material resources, organisation, systems of organisations and legal and institutional frameworks (Becker *et al.* 2014). It must be holistic and long-term. Instead, contemporary capacity development for disaster risk reduction most often comprises ad hoc bits and pieces. Short-term activities here and there to get quick visible results to serve political purposes (McEntire 2007:398), which unfortunately may even undermine the overall capacity for disaster risk reduction in developing countries. Although quick positive feedback is important for creating commitment in a particular initiative (Kotter & Cohen 2002:127-141), such short-term activities should always only be a first phase of a more long-term agenda. Alas, what drives much capacity development today are referred to as "projectizing" and "mico-izing", in which actors "produce a stream of bite-sized and discrete projects", driven by their own modus operani "to organize their work around designing and funding projects", forgetting or ignoring other vital aspects needed to facilitate real capacity development (Tendler 2002:2-4).

Capacity development in the future

Considering the challenges for capacity development for disaster risk reduction, the future for vulnerable people in developing countries appears bleak at best and unbearable at worst. Without sufficient human and material resources it is difficult to reduce disaster risk. However, having the necessary resources do not in any way guarantee success. Effective disaster risk reduction requires also organisation. Not only within organisations as such, but also between them in the larger institutional framework. Here legislation, policy and other formal institutions become important in providing persistent and predictable guidelines for behaviour and interaction among individuals and organisations that facilitates coexistence and collective activities by reducing the need for constant negotiation (Handmer & Dovers 2007:30). Norms, values and other informal institutions have similar utility as formal institutions, though lacking the same formal sanctioning. Developing sustainable capacity for disaster risk reduction requires in other words comprehensive purposeful initiatives that address all these levels if necessary. It is thus a truly daunting task, but one that we cannot shy away from or reduce to ad hoc short-term projects just because more adequate approaches are difficult.

Influential guidelines for capacity development state that it concerns countries' own development processes, is an ongoing process of change that requires time, depends on the countries' own development level and path without set formulas or blueprints, and relates as much to broader societal challenges and systemic issues as to training, skills development and technology transfer (UNDP 2009; CADRI 2011). In other words, although outside stakeholders have important roles to assist disaster-prone developing countries achieve their own development objectives, there must be clear local ownership of the capacity development process as such (*Ibid.*). This is fully in line with the principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2009), but not at all always

implemented in capacity development initiatives. A common rationale for such deviations away from fundamental principles among external partners, though tainted by both orientalism and ideas of white man's burden, is that the internal partner is too weak, not capable or willing to shoulder the responsibility, etc. However, it may be fair to assume that what is experienced as lack of capacity or willingness could also be a symptom of internal partners being reluctant to have their work co-opted by outsiders, their plans overrun by short-term but well-funded projects, their agendas filled with activities that they have had little influence on from the start, etc. Regardless of what is actually going on in such circumstances, it poses a classical chicken or the egg causality dilemma that needs to be resolved. I firmly believe that it can be resolved by explicitly involving another type of institutions that are designed for long-term change. Perhaps the most stable type of institutions in the developing world, as many of them have outlived regime change, armed conflict and disaster. I think about universities, which do have a crucial role to play in developing sustainable capacity for disaster risk reduction.

This idea of the importance of universities is not taken out of the blue. For instance, when contemplating the reasons for the success of the disaster risk reduction programmes of countries like Cuba, it is clear that the capacities for research and education within the country play central roles (Thompson & Gaviria 2004). With inhouse ability for scientific knowledge production and dissemination concerning disaster risk reduction in a disaster-prone developing country itself, it is possible to contextualise knowledge and solutions and to maintain a critical mass of people applying them in practice. I believe the great Thomas Huxley was right when stating that "[t]he great end of life is not knowledge but action" (Huxley 1877/1882:89). However, "a person who does not have access to information cannot take responsibility", but a "person who has information cannot resist from taking responsibility'' (Carlzon 2008, my translation from Swedish). Contextualised knowledge is thus key to everything. It is the key to designing cost-effective ways to organise disaster risk reduction that are appropriate to the challenges of each particular country. It may take some time, but a steady stream of well-educated individuals will also eventually spur changes in legislation and policy, and even in norms and values as new ideas take precedence in the minds of the population.

The good news is that there are functioning universities in most developing countries and some of them have already departments or centres focusing on disaster risk reduction. For instance, the Disaster Management Training Centres at Ardhi University in Tanzania and Mulungushi University in Zambia, University of Antananarivo in Madagascar, Universidade Técnica de Moçambique (UTM) in Mozambique, African Centre for Disaster Studies (ACDS) at North-West University in South Africa, etc. It is obviously so that not all universities can pride themselves of excellence in research and education. However, the institutions are there and it is fair to assume that they will continue to be there long after any internationally supported initiatives have ended. Supporting universities to develop their capacities for knowledge production and dissemination is therefore a long-term strategy that is likely to have sustainable results. Many donors already acknowledge this and support universities in a whole range of topics. These initiatives are important and I believe the international community should consider scaling up the support to develop capacities for scientific knowledge production and dissemination concerning disaster risk reduction. One very good example of such initiative is the USAID supported partnership of African universities called Periperi U. However, such networks could be made even more effective for

capacity development if more explicitly focusing on peer-to-peer learning. Not only in the form of south-south cooperation within specific regions, but also by including universities from developing countries outside the region, as well as from affluent countries which also have a lot to learn from the experiences and expertise of colleagues in developing countries. Sharing curricula, finding partnerships, comparing data, etc.

In other words, the way forward for capacity development for disaster risk reduction requires the international community to not only acknowledge that it is a planned long-term process in rhetoric and policy, but to adjust its actual activities accordingly. Supporting universities in developing countries to develop their capacities for research and education in disaster risk reduction, by supporting networks of peer-to-peer learning and south-south cooperation, is an important strategy for facilitating sustainable development.

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