



# Challenging disparities in capacity development for disaster risk reduction



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## ABSTRACT

Although capacity development has been identified as the means to substantially reduce global disaster losses, it is a challenge for external partners to facilitate the development of sustainable capacities for disaster risk reduction in disaster-prone countries. The purpose of this study is to investigate potential gaps between how leading professionals approach such capacity development and guidelines found in available theory. The analysis of data from thirty-five qualitative semi-structured interviews reveals that there are gaps between theory and practise, as well as between the practitioners, in all seven elements identified in available theory. There is ambiguity regarding terminology, different views about the meaning of local context, ownership and capacity assessment, as well as contradicting opinions of the role and responsibilities of external partners. Focus is on training individuals, while other requisites are often ignored, and there is a general lack of understanding of what results to assess and how to monitor and evaluate projects.

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## 1. Introduction

Statistics indicate an increasing number of disasters caused by natural hazards in the world [1], and the international community is realising the need to increase global efforts to reduce disaster losses. The majority of these losses occur in the developing world, causing a major threat to sustainable development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals [2–4]. The final document of the 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction, only a month after the Indian Ocean tsunami, specifies a roadmap for how to substantially reduce disaster losses by laying down three strategic goals and focusing efforts on five priority areas for action [5]. This Hyogo Framework for Action also specifies capacity development within the five priority areas as the tool

for meeting the goals [5]. It mentions the word capacity in relation to development, building, or strengthening more than 25 times [5], but never specifies or explains how to develop capacities for disaster risk reduction.

The contemporary key word of capacity development is “ownership” [6], which implies that primary responsibility and ownership rest with internal partners,<sup>1</sup> while external partners<sup>2</sup> have supporting roles [5,7]. However, in practise the division of roles and responsibilities may often be vague and understood differently by different partners. There is for instance a tendency of external partners to have a “right answer” or know better approach to capacity development which is not tailored to fit the needs of the targeted organisation or country [8]. External partners are often recruited for short periods, do

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<sup>1</sup> An internal partner is a partner belonging to the organisation attempting to develop its own capacity.

<sup>2</sup> An external partner is a partner belonging to an organisation attempting to support the development of the capacity of another organisation.

the work themselves, and leave before any institutional memory can be created. There is also an inclination to ignore established systems, strategies and capacities, thus creating parallel structures [3], and projects usually decline soon after external expertise is withdrawn [9]. Capacity development projects for disaster risk reduction focus frequently on training individuals without paying enough attention to organisational issues, structures, and how such organisations interact with each other [8,10]. With staff turnover, the little capacity that may be developed is lost.

There seems to be gaps between guidelines given by available theory and how capacity development for disaster risk reduction is done in practise. The purpose of this study is to investigate these gaps in order to inform recommendations how to close them and thus improve the effectiveness and sustainability of future capacity development for disaster risk reduction projects. The study intends to meet that purpose by answering the following research question: How do external experts approach capacity development for disaster risk reduction?

## 2. Theoretical background

There is no consensus among stakeholders as how to define capacity development or disaster risk reduction [11]. Hence, the same terms are defined in different ways by different organisations, resulting in a detrimental “Babelonian Confusion” of *terminology* [12]. Capacity development is here defined as “the process through which individuals, organisations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time” [13]. The two terms *capacity development* and *capacity building* are sometimes used interchangeably, while others describe them as different. For instance, the “building metaphor suggests a process starting with a plain surface and involving the step-by-step erection of a new structure, based on a preconceived design” [8]. This implies that capacity is something that is built by outsiders from a clean slate [14], and do not consider existing structures and plans. Capacity development, on the other hand, is something that must grow from inside and be based on existing capacities [14]. Although the term capacity development will be used in this study, it must be open to whatever term the informants choose to use, knowing that the connotation for them may be the same. Disaster risk reduction is defined as the process to “minimise vulnerabilities and disaster risk to avoid (prevention) or to limit (mitigation and preparedness) the adverse impacts of hazards” [15].

To design a project for capacity development for disaster risk reduction, it is important to first analyse and understand the *local context* [8], including general political, social, cultural, economic, physical and environmental factors [15,16]. One needs to consider not only the facts that people live in hazardous locations, but why they live there [17]. It is also important to understand that communities are not homogeneous, but made up by diverse groups with different vulnerabilities, capacities and needs [4,18]. There are in other words no

“one-size-fits-all” solutions that can be used everywhere and in all situations [6,14], and it is also essential to understand the relationships and dependencies between individuals or organisations [14].

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 [5,7]. Although there is a broad consensus that lack of ownership is an important reason for the failure in many projects, there is a lack of consensus on what ownership means. This is further complicated by concepts changing meaning over time [6].

Ownership is here referred to as creating and owning ideas and strategies, development processes, resources and the result of the development process [14]. Taking ownership is something that is voluntary and cannot be imposed by someone else [6,18]. Capacity development is thus a process that must grow from the inside [8,19], with or without the help of external partners. Involving people through participatory approaches is essential for establishing ownership and commitment [18,20]. In addition, the engagement of strong and knowledgeable leaders is important in order to recognise and allocate needed resources such as time, funds, equipment and personnel [21].

In order for capacity development for disaster risk reduction to be effective, the purpose must be clear. It is therefore necessary to focus on the analysis of risks the internal partners are facing and the analysis of capacities, which are currently available to manage them. This is in general capacity development literature often referred to as *capacity assessment* [22,23] and has the purpose to identify what capacities already exist and what additional capacities may be needed [6]. It has also been suggested that a capacity assessment consist of asking basic questions, e.g. why capacitate, capacity for whom and what [23], and then address more specific questions regarding DRR. However, it is important to be mindful of that changes may cause resistance, and even create tensions amongst groups in society [24].

When working in partnership, clear and mutually agreed *roles and responsibilities* for all partners are necessary. External partners can take on different roles, ranging from providing technical services to facilitating the capacity development process. Which role is to be taken should depend on what the internal partner needs and what the external partner is able to provide [21]. However, whatever type of support provided, it should never undermine local ownership [6], always be based on existing capacities, and be aligned with national disaster risk reduction processes [10]. This is closely related to power relations, which heavily influence any international development cooperation [25]. The role of the external partner should be to create awareness, motivate and engage people, resulting in the internal partner taking responsibility and ownership of the process [26]. Mannervik [27] concludes that “a person who does not have access to information cannot take responsibility. A person who has information cannot resist from taking responsibility”.

Capacity development entails addressing challenges on various levels, i.e. legal and institutional frameworks,

systems of organisations, organisations, and human and material resources [28], which may be presented under other headings [14,29]. This requires implementing a *mix of activities* [23], since changes at one capacity level often require changes at other levels too [10,30]. For example, it has been shown that educating people is not sufficient if the organisation is not able to utilise their acquired skills [14,31].

Some literature refers to this as a “systems approach” or “systemic”, which highlights the need to understand the connexions between challenges [32], as well as between capacity development activities on the various levels [8,10]. The idea behind such systems approach is in other words “to look at the whole first, in relation to its parts” [10]. External partners must thus support the internal partner in a coordinated and transparent way to avoid duplication and gaps (harmonisation), and be guided by the internal partner and base their support on that partner’s development strategies, institutions and procedures (alignment) [7].

Although developing capacities takes time and should be integrated into development policies and planning [5], capacity development for disaster risk reduction should mix long-term with short-term activities that provide early wins and promote further investments [33]. Regardless of timeframe, exit strategies should be developed [3], connecting the project to existing development plans [34].

The purpose of *monitoring and evaluation* is to measure the progress and the results, determining whether the project has caused any actual change towards the overall objective, continuously (monitoring) or periodically at predetermined points in time (evaluation) [35]. Monitoring and evaluation is about measuring the quality of the project, the process itself, and the relations among partners in the process [35]. However, evaluations at the end of a project have often short-term perspectives which usually miss to assess long-term impact [3], resulting from projects being directed by budgetary time cycles or annual budgets. Another problem with evaluations is that they often assess output, not impact [3], e.g. counting how many people have taken part in a training. To be able to monitor and evaluate impact, baseline data and indicators are needed to measure its progress [3]. Twigg [3] recommends participatory monitoring and evaluation processes that are owned by local partners. This is consistent with the principle of ownership and important to facilitate *learning* from what worked or not in the project.

The theoretical background for this study entails in short seven key elements for capacity development for disaster risk reduction: (1) terminology; (2) local context; (3) ownership; (4) capacity assessment; (5) roles and responsibilities; (6) mix of activities; and (7) monitoring, evaluation and learning. These elements are mentioned frequently in available literature, and are therefore considered as theoretically important, with terminology as the initial exception. Terminology was not identified as an element to consider until the first interviews were carried out. The great variety of interpretations of the concepts of capacity development and disaster risk reduction among the informants spurred further literature review. Although the seven elements are related to each

other in different ways, the ambition of this study is not to interlink them specifically, but rather to focus on the characteristics of each element. The interrelations between the elements are however also important and deserve further research.

### 3. Methodology

To answer the research question, how do external experts approach capacity development for disaster risk reduction, qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 35 international professionals, with different backgrounds and involved in different ways as external partners in capacity development activities. The data were then compared and contrasted between informants and with the theoretical background presented above. The choice of qualitative interviews gave the possibility to get in-depth information [36], while semi-structured interviews were relatively less time-consuming than unstructured interviews [37], which was vital as the informants had busy schedules. Advantages of this type of interviews, over more structured questionnaires, are the possibilities to repeat or to rephrase questions when needed and that it is easier to get a feeling for which questions are difficult to answer [37].

The selection process of the informants was divided into two parts: (1) the selection of which organisations to approach, and (2) the selection of individuals within those organisations. Since the researchers previously have been working for MSB, and have maintained strong links to the organisation, it was interesting and convenient to include MSB and its close partner organisations in the study. The informants were then selected, focusing on MSB projects managers and field staff involved in ongoing capacity development projects for DRR, as well as DRR or capacity development advisors of Sida, Swedish Red Cross, IFRC, UNDP, UNISDR and OCHA. After each interview, snowballing was used to identify further informants. The selection of informants was influenced by their organisational affiliation, experience in disaster risk reduction and/or capacity development, age, gender, and location. It was in other words a purposeful selection [37,38]. An attempt was also made to include informants from different parts of the world and to get as diverse range of experiences as possible. 37 percent of the informants were women and 63 percent were men, ages ranging from late twenties to early sixties. Their work experiences were from governmental agencies, NGO’s, different UN organisations, the Red Cross Movement and universities.

Thirteen face-to-face interviews and twenty-two telephone interviews were conducted, taking on average 1.5 h each. All the interviews were conducted in English with the help of an interview guide [37]. The interview guide was consolidated, but not pre-tested before the interviews started. After two interviews an additional question was added to the interview guide. The two persons that already had been interviewed were contacted again to answer the additional question.

The interviews were divided into four parts. The first stage focused on establishing the informant’s background and their overall understanding of disaster risk reduction

and capacity development. The second stage focused on success factors and challenges related to capacity development for disaster risk reduction, while the third stage focused on project related issues (their role and responsibility, the working process, problems and recommendations, what and how to measure results). Finally, the fourth stage focused on a casual conversation rounding up the interview. The questions of the interview guide are presented in Table 1 below. It is important to note that the seven elements were never specifically mentioned during the interviews, although the third stage of the interviews was influenced by some of them in an attempt to make sure that they were covered in each interview. The interviews were recorded to ensure nothing was missed [37], and complemented by scratch notes focusing on documenting the impression, how much probing was needed, and if the informants seemed to be nervous or vague when answering the questions [36,37].

The data from the interviews were grouped under different themes and analysed [36,38] in three steps. First, the transcriptions from the recordings were transferred and structured into a matrix, where the answers from the interviews could be compared. Second, all answers to a question were then analysed to identify keywords and themes. Third, the data were compared and analysed in relation to the seven elements. Both qualitative and quantitative data were recognised.

The main limitation of this study, in addition to the inherent subjectivity of the researchers when collecting, analysing and interpreting this type of data, is that only external partners and how they approach and understand capacity development for DRR is studied. The study

focuses only on capacity development for DRR in relation to disasters caused by natural hazards, not by conflicts. There is also a risk of informants sugar-coating their descriptions of ongoing capacity development projects, as they may want to avoid answers that could have a negative impact on the project and partnership. Moreover, the limited number of informants, as well as how they were selected, poses limitations on how the findings can be generalised. For instance, snowballing risks getting the same type of people and information [37]. However, the study does not claim to be statistically generalisable for all external partners, but focuses on generating a deeper understanding of how the selected external partners approach capacity development for DRR, which open up possibilities for wider analytical generalisation [38,39].

#### 4. Discussing the empirical findings

The empirical findings from the interviews are presented and discussed in relation to the seven areas, which were identified in the theoretical background.

##### 4.1. Terminology

It is clear among the informants that there is ambiguity regarding how to define disaster risk reduction and capacity development. This is expressed in the sense that the informants defined it vaguely or in broad terms, and avoiding the question. Some thought it was a tricky question or explained that the terms are just “buzz

**Table 1**  
Interview guide.

Stage 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is your background?</li> <li>2. What is your position?</li> <li>3. What is your current work?</li> <li>4. What is disaster risk reduction for you?</li> <li>5. What is capacity development for you?</li> <li>6. Are you involved in a capacity development project for disaster risk reduction at the moment?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Yes—describe it. What is your role?/No—latest project, describe it.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
Stage 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. According to your opinion what are the three most important factors to capacity development for disaster risk reduction to make it sustainable?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <i>Probing</i>; can you tell more about this? What do you mean? For example, how do you ensure ownership rests locally? Could you give specific examples?</li> <li>8. Are there other factors according to your opinion that is important as well?</li> <li>9. What is the main challenge in capacity development?                   <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Are there more challenges?</li> <li>b. How can you deal with the challenge?</li> </ol> </li> </ol> </li> </ol>
Half time	10. After 40 min approximately, the informant was asked how they felt about the interview and if they had any questions.
Stage 3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. How do you look upon your role?</li> <li>12. How do you look upon your responsibility?</li> <li>13. How do you interact to achieve stated objectives?</li> <li>14. What results do you assess?</li> <li>15. How do you assess results and learning?</li> <li>16. When capacity development projects within disaster risk reduction do not work or do not come out successfully, what is the reason?</li> <li>17. What do you think works best in capacity development for disaster risk reduction at the moment?</li> <li>18. You have a person in front of you. He or she is going to support an organisation to develop capacities for disaster risk reduction. What recommendation/s would you give to her/him before leaving?</li> </ol>
Stage 4	19. Exit strategy, showing appreciation, and asking how the informant experienced the interview.

words” and “meaningless terms and intellectual constructions”. Some informants relate disaster risk reduction back to the Hyogo Framework for Action as being theoretical, with no actions or not being operational. One third of the informants confirm that there is a confusion regarding disaster risk reduction and what it means in practise.

Regarding capacity development one informant says, “for many people capacity development is like an abstract thing, it is not clear how to do it”. One third of the informants say that capacity development means to develop something further that already is in place. The other informants did not give a detailed explanation of what capacity development means to them. According to several informants capacity development should be seen as activities at different levels. However, more than half of the informants highlight that capacity development is only seen as training of individuals. Nearly half of the informants use the term capacity building instead of capacity development, with seemingly equivalent meaning.

The discussion on whether to call it capacity building or capacity development adds on to the confusion what capacity development really means. One reason for this Babylonian confusion could be that many of the available definitions are academic, complicated and over-elaborated, used differently by researchers and practitioners [3] and often adopted to fit an organisation’s mandate and goal. Hence, depending on background, former experience and what organisations people belong to, the informants relate to and interpret terminology differently. Another reason can be the limitations of our own language. There are no direct translations between languages, which is confirmed by one informant. It is also possible that the terminology has changed over time, but not really the practise; “we are just repackaging things” or “selling old wine in new bottles” according to two informants. Terminology often also relies upon abstract concepts, which are difficult to translate into objectives and practical activities [6,31]. Unfortunately, capacity development may often even be used as a slogan rather than a meaningful concept to improve understanding of the process due to the lack of clarity or knowledge [40].

#### 4.2. Local context

By far the most significant consideration to capacity development for disaster risk reduction mentioned in one way or another by all informants is to understand the local context. The importance of understanding the baseline information is emphasised, such as risk profile, structures and relationships, social, cultural, economical and political context. However, there is neither a unified approach to what understanding the local context means, nor clarity in the process of how to do that. Some informants stress the risk and the hazard profile, other emphasis culture and religion, or the political, social and economic situation, or a combination of these factors. Some informants understand local context as the institutional set-up, organisation, values, needs, problems, and identify which stakeholders should be involved. It is acknowledged by one third of the informants that not

enough time and funds are spent on preparation, pre-planning and research to understand the local context, resulting in the foundation and baseline information often being missing.

One of the main contributors to this problem today is the available set of funding mechanisms, which was emphasised by more than half of the informants. There may also be a wish to start up the project as quickly as possible and not take the time for the necessary studies. Understanding the local context takes time and capacity development projects for disaster risk reduction are often short term due to the fact that disaster risk reduction is regularly under humanitarian funding. These projects are normally 15–24 months, which is a short period of time if the intention is to understand the context and to change institutional arrangements, attitudes and behaviour. It seems in other words more important that funds are spent within a specific time period compared to ensuring the quality of the project [6].

However, it is not right to only blame funding mechanisms for the failure of understanding the local context. It is up to the involved partners to make this a priority, which is not always done. There seems to be few incentives for anybody to criticise the funding system, as nobody is willing to “rock the boat” because of their own risk of being replaced, losing their jobs or funding [41]. Another reason for not sufficiently analysing the local context can be the lack of methods/tools and uncertainty in how to interpret or understand the results. If the external partners do not understand the context they are working in, the project is likely to be based on mere assumptions and not on the actual situation, increasing the risk of parallel structures being created and standard blueprints being used [3,14]. These often include a lack of local ownership, unclear objectives and the risk of not understanding what capacities exist and what capacities need to be further developed.

#### 4.3. Ownership

More than half of the informants think local ownership is one of the corner stones for capacity development for disaster risk reduction. At the same time, lack of ownership is also considered as one of the main challenges according to one third of the informants, which were the same informants that had acknowledged the importance of it. According to the informants, ownership means that the local partner should be in charge of the development, be committed, and be in the driving seat of the process of improving their own capacity. One informant says “capacity development has to come from within; it can never be driven from the outside”. Nevertheless, nearly half of the informants do not discuss ownership at all.

Having a participatory and transparent approach is recommended by one fifth to promote and ensure local ownership. To engage internal key actors and link people at different levels are considered as crucial functions for the external partner, according to nearly half of the informants. Closely connected with ownership is the commitment and willingness to allocate resources, investing in time, money, energy and brains according

to two thirds of the informants. Four informants think that ownership can be generated if there is good support from leadership and noted it is important to identify champions.<sup>3</sup>

External partners want to do a lot of projects and want to be involved. One informant expresses, “there is a mad rush to do projects, the fashionable thing, and we all must have a project on that. You just want it because funding is available”. Branding is important for external organisations, which means being involved and seen in many projects will generate even more funding and projects. In this rush “we fail to align our efforts with those of the country”, said one informant. There is also a tendency among external partners to bring in capacity from outside, generally viewing their ideas to be the best solutions. This indicates that one of the main reasons for lack of local ownership is that supporting organisations and external partners and consultants propose projects with objectives that are not defined together with the internal partners. There is a belief that it is possible to transfer solutions from outside rather than consider the local context as a starting point [14]. That kind of approach results in ownership resting with the external partner [3]. The projects become donor driven rather than demand driven.

Another reason for lack of ownership is that ownership is often used as a concept but it is not always clear what it means [6,14] or how it can be generated. For example, there is uncertainty in who should draw up the project proposals, and monitor and evaluate projects. One informant says; “ownership was very much with us, the external partner, due to the time schedule, we did a lot of things to be able to follow the time schedule”. Lopes and Theisohn [6] confirm this behaviour, in which external partners take over tasks justifying it with an attitude of getting the work done. A more productive relationship would have the internal partners first set their own priorities and needs, and then seek external assistance [41].

#### 4.4. Capacity assessment

More than one third of the informants state that it is important to understand and identify the current capacities for DRR of internal partners and what their needs are in relation to capacity development. This is also considered a main challenge. A few informants explicitly say that we should develop and strengthen existing capacities. Other informants do not bring up the issue. One of the challenges for understanding capacities and needs are that “we do not have the same goals or we have different objectives” and the aims do not correspond to the needs according to more than a third of the informants. This challenge is the cause of the failure of many capacity development projects, as external partners misunderstand their internal partners’ capacity needs [43].

The capacity assessment should thus be an interactive process between the involved partners.

Sometimes external partners rush into a project and do not take the time to understand what the risks are, to identify what the needs are, what capacities already are in place, and thereby set the appropriate objectives. One fifth of the informants mention available capacity assessment tools, but that these tools are not generally tailored for capacity development for disaster risk reduction. Only a few informants specifically mention the importance of doing a capacity assessment. The reason for this could be that capacity assessment tools are not known by many people, and it is adapted specifically for disaster risk reduction by even fewer. Other informants may consider capacity assessment as important, but do not explicitly call it that.

#### 4.5. Roles and responsibilities

More than half of the external experts see their role as facilitators, advisors or coaches. Others have difficulties answering what role or what kind of approach they have as an external partner. Their roles can be everything from contributing with knowledge and expertise, identifying and understanding needs, making partners aware of their capacities, linking people, asking questions, etc. Other informants take on different roles telling partners what is best for them to do, helping partners to ensure effective use of funding, etc. One informant says “my role is to ensure to get visible results, maybe not the result that is best for the country, but the result that will be good for our organisation”. Two informants say their role is not a decision making role, but dwell on how to present suggestions that could influence how things proceed. Five informants emphasise that it is essential in an early stage of a project to understand and be clear about what you are going to do, not to do, and what you expect from the partner. One informant says: “my aim is not to be needed anymore”.

A problem that was brought up by one fifth is the power balance between the internal and external partner. One informant says, “you come with resources, and the recipient will not say no when you say you want to help, it is hard to be on the same level”. Lusthaus et al. [40] confirm this while stating that unequal power relations are a common feature in capacity development projects. Ideally there should be equal roles between the cooperating partners.

There does not seem to be a consensus or clarity on the roles that external partners can effectively play for capacity development for disaster risk reduction. In fact, one informant questioned whether external partners know how to develop capacities for disaster risk reduction or not. One explanation can be that this is not something that has been considered sufficiently by external partners. Recruitment and training tend to focus on technical skills rather than discussing what kind of role and approach one should have. According to two informants there is a tendency that disaster risk reduction people have a humanitarian response mindset, to be a service provider, rather than a capacity development mindset. The reason

<sup>3</sup> Champion: “Influential person interested in disaster risk reduction, who is willing to take action to make disaster risk reduction a public priority” [42].

for this push towards becoming a service provider rather than a capacity developer may be linked to the project management cycle and the funding mechanisms.

The perceptions of roles determine where ownership rests. A few informants suggest a coaching approach to be appropriate for capacity development, but what that means is not always clear. Hess and Motes [21] suggest coaching as a useful strategy for capacity development, and Curman [44] explain that a coaching approach is about listening and asking questions. It is about developing existing capacities and to help them help themselves. “The question is the answer! To let them answer their own questions” [26].

More than half of the informants underline the importance of soft skills, and when informants give recommendations for capacity development for disaster risk reduction they emphasise personal skills and personality while nobody highlights technical skills for disaster risk reduction. There are many studies that indicate emotional intelligence being twice as important as technical knowledge [45]. Emphasis is placed on the abilities to build trust, have patience, facilitate change, and to be sensitive to the overall agenda, values and intentions. However, the project management cycle does not normally facilitate these vital aspects, not even to take the time to get to know the partners.

#### 4.6. *Mix of activities*

One third of the informants acknowledged that capacity development entails a mix of activities, which address issues at different levels, with short and long-term perspectives, and with different types of “soft and hard” activities. The other informants were not as specific what the activities should look like. However, more than half of the informants say that capacity development for disaster risk reduction is not only about training individuals, or a one-time event. Several informants say that projects should have a continuous long-term perspective, not just a few activities. On the other hand, the most common answer among the informants about what works best in capacity development for disaster risk reduction is training and education. However, a problem with the training provided by the international community is that it is not aligned with the teaching and learning institutions in the country, says one informant.

A few informants say that focus is often on the individual level and less on organisation and other levels. Another informant confirms that what UNDP refers to as the enabling environment is quite a fuzzy concept. Only three informants mention that these levels are interdependent, and should be integrated, and there is a need to have a holistic and a system approach. Another recognised problem with disaster risk reduction activities, according to one fifth of the informants, is that disaster risk reduction activities have been treated in isolation and have not been integrated within other sectors, e.g. health, water and sanitation.

Training seems to be a common activity or the solution when dealing with capacity development for disaster risk reduction. A problem with training activities is when

these are not institutionalised [32] and not connected to other capacity levels, as changes at one capacity level often require changes at other levels too [10]. According to a few informants, there has been a tendency to focus on Hyogo Framework for Action’s priority five, the preparedness.

One reason why there is a focus on training could be that training is rather easy to set up and conduct, which is in line with what one informant expresses “we have tons and tons of training modules available in DRR at the global level”. This indicates a clear case of what Tendler [46] calls “projectizing and micro-izing”, in which organisations “produce a stream of bite-sized and discrete projects”, driven by their modus operani “to organise their work around designing and funding projects”, forgetting or ignoring other aspects needed to facilitate real development. According to McEntire [47], another reason why disaster risk reduction activities are rather short term is a wish among political leaders to have quick visible solutions and gains in order to keep their political status to the public and hopefully be re-elected for the next mandate period. Another reason is that capacity development projects for disaster risk reduction are under humanitarian funding and these projects are usually short-term. According to Ahrenfelt [48], it takes about two to five years to make reasonable big changes in an organisation, which also most disaster risk reduction activities require. UNDP [49] takes it even further and suggests that capacity development projects need five- to 10 years. It is broad consensus that 15 months is too short to be able to conduct most disaster risk reduction activities [50].

However, it is important to have a mix of both short and long term activities. The short term and visible activities, according to Kotter and Cohen [51], create early wins that are important. The early wins provide faith in the effort, and positive feedback that the project is going on, and is on the right track [51].

#### 4.7. *Monitoring, evaluation and learning*

One third of the informants has difficulties giving a clear answer on monitoring, evaluation and learning, or think it was a difficult question. One informant says “it is the 64 million dollar question”. The evaluations that are done today are rather useless according to one informant; it is just “reportability” to donors. The most common thing to assess is the number of people trained. This is confirmed by more than one third of the informants. Several informants express that “this is one of our weak areas” or “we are working on it”. Though, nearly half of the informants say indicators are important in order to measure the impact. The other half of informants does not mention indicators during the interview. One third says that these indicators should be endorsed by all involved stakeholders and compared with the baseline data. According to one fifth of the informants there are no good indicators today for capacity development for disaster risk reduction, we go for things we can measure. Four informants mention the dilemma that it is difficult to measure

long-term outcomes of disaster risk reduction activities, as you do not have a disaster to measure it against.

There is not a unified answer who should monitor and evaluate projects and results, everybody from the internal partner, external partner, or jointly, to someone outside the project. One fourth highlights the importance of sharing experience and lessons learnt, and unfortunately this is seldom done. One informant says “I was disappointed with the Davos workshop August 2008. I have worked in DRR since the 80s, I was in Yokohama in 1994, and in Davos we were concluding exactly the same things. Oh my goodness, we really did not make a lot of progress”.

It seems that there are no clear procedures or resources for monitoring and evaluation of actions taken. Hess and Motes [21] conclude that the most challenging area in capacity development is to allocate time and resources to reflect on services provided and on the partnership. It is more important to show quick and visible results to the donor, than it is to see whether it is sustainable after five years. A reason for this according to one informant is that “we get evaluated on how much we deliver”. One informant says that we tend to forget to ask; “You have trained so many people, and then to ask, so what?”.

In order to determine what indicators to use, it is essential to be clear about what is meant by disaster risk reduction, and from that determine what the acceptable level of risk is. This is frequently not done. The acceptable level of risk should be the benchmark for disaster risk reduction activities and therefore determine what the most appropriate indicators will look like. The systems today are not interested in answering why a project worked or failed according to one informant. Hess and Motes [21] confirm that sometimes there is a lack of interest in the evaluation process from funders, which can result in lack of motivation in allocating resources and time to monitor and evaluate projects properly. One informant says: “today, not much is happening after the projects are finished, you look for what funding is available and move on to the next project”. People do not have money and time for reflecting. In the very end it is needed to ask why has capacity been or not been developed and have the activities been able to reduce risk and why.

There are different opinions regarding who should monitor and evaluate the results. Hess and Motes [21] confirm, due to lack of clarity, that there are misunderstandings regarding who should be responsible and who should monitor and evaluate the project. The reason why answers are not unified could be that they had different perspectives on what should be evaluated. One informant expresses that it depends on what the purpose and expectation of the evaluation is; is it how funds are spent or ...? As an external partner it is important not to build a result framework and processes around own initiatives, confirms one informant.

Several informants highlight the importance of identifying and sharing lessons learnt, which is seldom done. It can be a sensitive issue sharing lessons learnt from projects that fail, which may be a reason why this is not done. Even if done, far too often there is no transfer of lessons learnt to the next project and there are no

incentives for doing it, explains one informant. These may be the reasons why there are so few shared success stories about disaster risk reduction, which is a pity. Douglas Adams and Mark Carwardine seem right when stating that “[h]uman beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so” [52].

## 5. Conclusion

So, how do external experts approach capacity development for disaster risk reduction? Although it obviously is a question too complicated to fully answer after only involving 35 international professionals, the study reveals that there are gaps between theory and practise in relation to the seven elements. These gaps need closing to facilitate real and sustainable results in the future. While the informants are aware of many shortcomings and success factors for contemporary capacity development for disaster risk reduction, the results of the study indicate substantial discrepancies both among the informants, as well as between their practices and the available guidelines in theory.

First of all, there is a high degree of **terminological** ambiguity regarding what disaster risk reduction and capacity development mean in theory and practise. Such differences in understanding may have a negative impact on the effectiveness of projects due to misunderstandings between partners concerning what to do and how to do it. There are also different notions of understanding the **local context** and its importance for project planning and implementation. Often there are not enough studies and pre-planning done to understand the local context. Funding mechanisms can, in fact, undermine capacity development due to lack of flexibility, pressure to show visible results and thus the lack of time to understand the local context and ensure local ownership.

There are different perceptions among the informants regarding what **ownership** actually means and the importance of local ownership is not always acknowledged. Many projects are still considered being driven primarily by donor interests, with the external partner in the driving seat and minimal or superficial local involvement. The tools and methodologies for capacity development, such as **capacity assessment**, are generally not adapted to the context of disaster risk reduction and are often not recognised by people within the disaster risk reduction community. A major reason for this is that the disaster risk reduction community is absent from the capacity development dialogue in the development community. There is a rather common understanding among informants that the primary **role** of the external expert is to be a facilitator, advisor or coach. However, there are diverse opinions regarding what that exactly means, ranging from being a technical service provider to being the facilitator of capacity development processes. Having soft skills and understanding power relations is essential to succeed according to most informants.

Capacity development projects are often too short in duration due to the fact that disaster risk reduction is still



primarily seen as a humanitarian issue and not as a development issue. Focus is on training individuals, mainly in preparedness for response or risk assessment and awareness raising, and not on having a holistic and systematic approach with a **mix of activities**. There is limited understanding of how to proceed from risk assessment to actually reduce disaster risks.

There seems to be a lack of procedures for what results to assess and how to monitor and evaluate projects. Indicators are considered important to be able to measure impact, but it is generally perceived that there are not many good indicators today, and softer issues are often missing. There are also different opinions about who should **monitor and evaluate** projects. Sharing experience and **lessons learned** are considered important, but not commonly done. There is in other words uncertainty regarding what projects work and which do not, as well as the reasons for the success or failure.

There is an emerging understanding on what capacity development means and how to do it, but this work is taking place in the development sector. There are many skilled individuals within capacity development and within disaster risk reduction, but currently there is no coherent system or effort to bring these two sets of skilled people together. There is a need to bridge the two disciplines, capacity development and disaster risk reduction, which would strengthen each discipline and lead to more effective and sustainable projects in the future. It is therefore recommended to have an open and continuous dialogue among partners concerning the meaning of key concepts, not necessarily to agree on common definitions, but for understanding the differences between how all partners define them. It is also recommended to have mixed teams, with capacity development and disaster risk reduction competencies, as well as both internal and external partners, bringing different knowledge to the table. The partners should allocate sufficient time and resources for facilitating a detailed understanding of the local context, and should adopt a holistic approach with an adequate mix with short and long term, as well as soft and hard activities, focused at different levels. It is in other words recommended to develop and disseminate better processes, methods and tools to be used by the partners to jointly assess current disaster risk reduction capacities and capacity development needs, set mutually accepted and understood objectives and design, implement, monitor and evaluate efficient and sustainable capacity development projects.

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