Systemic problems of capacity development for disaster risk reduction in a complex, uncertain, dynamic, and ambiguous world

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The international community has been engaged in capacity development for decades, sometimes under different names or with a slightly different focus. So far, these efforts have failed to bring significant and sustainable change. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 specifies capacity development as the means to reduce disaster losses substantially. The purpose of this paper is to offer a better understanding of the reasons behind the poor results with capacity development for disaster risk reduction (DRR). Twenty qualitative semi-structured interviews with high-level decision makers in the international community indicate systemic failure that requires a complete overhaul of the aid system. When analysing the discrepancies between principles for capacity development (ownership, partnership, contextualization, flexibility, learning, accountability, long-term, and sustainability) and the actual performance of actors operating in a complex, dynamic, uncertain, and ambiguous world, five interrelated problems emerge: (1) Clashing principles; (2) Quixotic control; (3) Mindset lag; (4) Lack of motivation for change; and (5) Power imbalances. Understanding and addressing these systemic problems is fundamental to the success of capacity development. It is not enough to blame the actors who implement capacity development activities for DRR, nor to merely rename it, yet again, after another few years of continuous frustration.

1. Introduction

Capacity development is a critical aspect in international development cooperation. It has been emphasized at a number of global conferences and in high-level fora over the years [1–3] and has been highlighted in the current Agenda 2030 for sustainable development [4]. Although the term *capacity development* belongs to the 21st century [5], a more or less identical agenda was proposed in the 1990s using the term *capacity building* [6]. Most of its fundamental elements can be traced back to the start of organized international development co-operation in the 1950s [7]. The international community has, in other words, been engaged in capacity development for decades, using different names and with slightly different focuses [5], i.e. institution building [8], institutional development [9], capacity strengthening [10], and capacity building [6]. There are well-established principles for how to implement capacity development, such as ownership, partnership, alignment, and harmonization [1–3]. Yet, capacity development has generally not been successful and effective in practice [11,12,13].

Disaster risk reduction (DRR) is an integral part of Agenda 2030, which also acknowledges the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 [4]. There are also several frameworks arguing for the importance of integrating DRR into response, recovery and development, such as Build Back Better [14] and Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development [15,16]. Capacity development is explicitly mentioned in the Sendai framework as the means to substantially reduce disaster losses [17], as in the previous global frameworks for DRR [18,19]. These global frameworks have been increasingly successful in attracting support for DRR at the global, regional and national levels, but have had less success in encouraging change at local levels [20,21,22]. Moreover, capacity development for DRR has so far struggled to bring significant and sustainable change [21,23,24].

Scott and colleagues [25,26] point out a lack of scientific research on capacity development for DRR. Several influential books and policy reports identify challenges for capacity development in general [11,12,27], but these generally have little empirical backing or fail to recognize the reasons behind the challenges. In the DRR community, there is a lack of uptake of well-established concepts and principles for how to think about and practice capacity development [28]. Most of the

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Table 1
Interview guide.

Part 1	1. What is your position?
	2. What is your background?
	3. What is your view on capacity development? *a. Probing*: Can you say more about this? What do you mean?
Part 2	4. What are the challenges for effective capacity development? *a. Probing*: Why is it like this? What do you mean?
	5. What should we do to overcome these challenges?
Part 3	6. Summary of key issues. Anything else to add? Showing appreciation and asking how the participant experienced the interview.

thinking has been outside the DRR community in arenas where DRR has not been part of the dialogue [29]. Recent scientific studies show substantial discrepancies between established principles (or elements) and actual performance with respect to capacity development for DRR, e.g. ownership, partnership, local context and capacity assessment, mix of activities and methods, monitoring, evaluation and learning [28–30]. However, these studies do not propose any explanations for why these discrepancies exist. Understanding the reasons for these discrepancies is important when attempting to identify key challenges that undermine the effectiveness of capacity development for DRR and in general, regardless if following all principles would automatically lead to successful capacity development or not.

The purpose of this paper is to offer an understanding of the reasons behind the poor results of capacity development for DRR by exploring these results from the perspective of high-level decision makers in the international community. Acknowledging the decades of experience of these key professionals, this paper is based on the assumption that many of the problems are known and that there are informed ideas about how to solve them. The research took the form of an inductive descriptive study by means of qualitative interviews to inform a systemic critique of contemporary capacity development for DRR. To meet this purpose, the study intends to answer the following research question:

- Why are there discrepancies between established principles and actual performance with respect to capacity development for DRR?

2. Methodology

In an effort to answer the research question, data were collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews with 20 high-level decision makers in the international community. The selection of qualitative interviews gave the opportunity to obtain in-depth information [31,32] about capacity development for DRR based on the interview participants' experiences and perceptions. Open and explorative types of questions made it possible to follow up on the participant's answer, to probe for additional information or to confirm information [33]. Qualitative interviews also make it possible to repeat or to rephrase questions when needed, making it easier to get a sense of what questions are more difficult to answer [34] and to verify that the interviewer has understood the meaning of the participant's answers correctly [33]. Due to the participants' busy schedules, semi-structured interviews were preferable since they are relatively less time-consuming than completely unstructured interviews [34].

Participants were specifically selected for their position, organizational affiliation and experience in capacity development and/or DRR. High-level decision makers have the ability to influence the international aid system due to their positions and were selected for their specific knowledge and experience [33] by means of purposeful selection [34,35]. The participants were selected through several processes of parallel snowballing or chain sampling [31,35] that initially started with four participants identified from the authors' professional networks, i.e. United Nations, Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and a donor organization. Snowballing was an effective way to reach high-level decision makers otherwise difficult be to reach. In total, 26 high-level international decision makers were contacted, of which 20

responded. Five of the participants were women and 15 were men, their ages ranging from their forties to sixties. The participants had diverse backgrounds with experience in capacity development and/or DRR. They had the following profiles: United Nations Special Representatives, directors of United Nations, head of ECHO and top-level management of other regional organizations, high-level managers at international donors and development banks, presidents or directors at various parts of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, large international NGOs, and private sector.

The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission to ensure consistency and accuracy [34] and to allow the interviewer to focus on the participant during the interview. Twelve face-to-face interviews and eight telephone interviews were conducted between May 2012 and January 2015, each between 39 and 74 min in duration. All the interviews were conducted in English with the help of an interview guide [31,34] in three parts (Table 1). The first two questions focused on establishing the participant's position, academic background and work experience. These questions were relatively easy to answer and allowed the participant to become comfortable with the interview situation [31]. This was followed with a grand-tour question [36], asking about the participant's view on capacity development for DRR. The purpose was to find out how the participants understand capacity development, their respective positions and their roles in capacity development. The second part focused on challenges with respect to capacity development for DRR and how to overcome them. The last part concluded the interview with a casual conversation about the key issues from the interview. The interviewer asked the participants if they had anything further to add and about their impressions of the interview [33]. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The analysis started during the interview, with field notes documenting impressions, themes and making connections within and between themes [31,32,34]. The transcribed interviews were hand-coded on paper to enable the authors to "touch the data" [37]. Most of the coding was inductive and emerged during the analysis process. However, a few codes were prefigured before the analysis started, i.e. deductive coding [31,38]. This included position, academic background, work experience, general understanding of capacity development, challenges and solutions. The hand-coded interview was then transferred to NVivo®, which assisted in organizing and sorting data. Codes were adjusted where needed, since data could be interpreted from different angles and perspectives, and data could apply to more than one code. The 20 interviews were therefore reanalysed and recoded by the authors from new perspectives and refined accordingly [33], resulting in two overarching themes with principles and actual performance on one hand, and fundamental challenges on the other. Information saturation was achieved after 15 interviews.

3. Results

The results of the study paint a rich picture of capacity development for DRR and its challenges, with many closely interlinked and patterned parts. However, two overarching themes emerged from the interviews, and they provide the structure of this section. The first theme is the tension between a set of principles for how capacity development for DRR should be done and the actual performance of how capacity development for DRR is done. These principles include ownership,
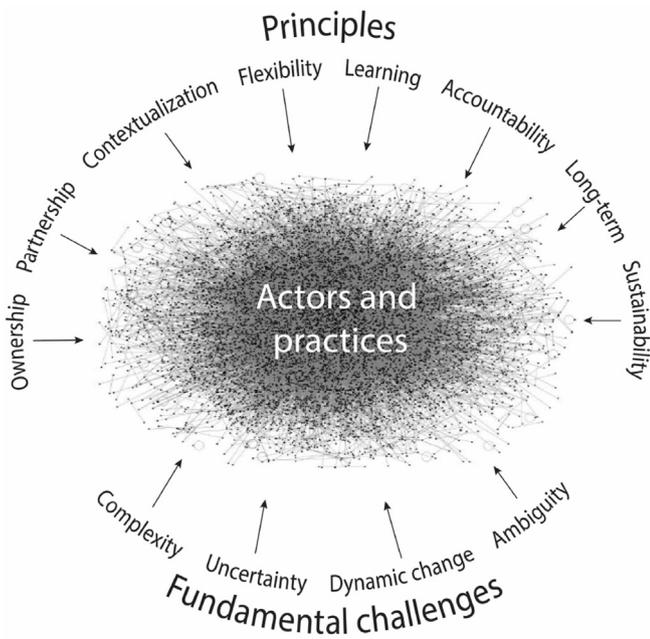
Fig. 1. Principles and fundamental challenges for capacity development.

partnership, contextualization, flexibility, learning, accountability, long-term, and sustainability (Fig. 1). Secondly, the participants highlighted four fundamental challenges that are intrinsic parts of the process and context of capacity development for DRR, i.e. complexity, uncertainty, dynamic change, and ambiguity (Fig. 1). As described in the following sections, it is in the tension between these principles and fundamental challenges that actors involved in capacity development must perform and work (Fig. 1).

3.1. Principles vs performance

3.1.1. Ownership

Almost two thirds of the participants explicitly stated the importance and even obviousness of ownership. They see capacity development as an internal process that cannot be imposed from the outside, but should be locally driven. For example: "This is not rocket science and literature, research and experiences have been recording this before", or "we have introduced ideas like ownership, which is so obvious that it should not even require terminology". However, the participant who made the latter remark continued by stating that local ownership is an impossibility in a world where donor governments set their priorities and conditionalities based on their own interests and prerogatives. Moreover, because projects have traditionally been donor-funded, not enough attention has been paid to getting the internal partner to fund activities. This leads the project to be considered as something external and not the business of the internal partners actually responsible, said one informant.

Several participants pointed out that it takes time to develop local ownership, which external partners[1] rarely allocate. One participant commented: "Ownership needs time to develop, it may take three to five years, but there is generally not time or patience to wait for this to happen". Eight participants stated that external partners and consultants instead do the work to get it done in time. This is, according to several of the participants, based on a problematic attitude that "we know, we have capacity and we want to develop you" and on the illusion there is not much local capacity and that they can tell people

what to do. Participants pointed out that external partners cannot build capacity on their own and that this "paternalism has no place, it's got to stop". External partners "try to sell something to somebody that they do not want", coming in with resources that the internal partners[2] cannot say no to.

Thirteen participants mentioned the need to have inside leadership and champions, and to keep advocating for capacity development for DRR to ensure political will, ownership, resources, attraction and commitment in this area. This investment in good leadership and good governance takes a long time, said one participant. Ultimately, it comes down to the decision makers to allocate the necessary time and resources, according to three participants. One participant suggested a lack of national political will as the primary reason why capacity development projects for DRR are not successful. There are also too many other important things to which to allocate time and resources, so when countries prioritize among the five most important things to do in a given year, DRR comes out at the bottom. Three participants pleaded for an internal desire to develop capacity, a commitment to implement, and ability to use the tools and skills in a way that is independent from the external partner. There must be political momentum to build not only for today, but also for the day after tomorrow, otherwise it is just lip service.

3.1.2. Partnership

Twelve participants addressed the need for partnerships. This is nothing new, according to one participant, but it is a key outcome of the Rio + 20 conference and the Busan Aid Effectiveness Agenda. One participant suggested that capacity development initiatives have been successful when such relationships have been long-standing and allowed to evolve as change happens. Another participant mentioned the ability to work at interfaces between organizations and outside professional sectors as a difference between success and failure. It is a mindset, according to three participants, while two participants pointed out partnership development as a scarce skill that can be developed. Three quarters of the participants declared the ability to listen and bring stakeholders together as a critical skill for external partners. Being empathic, respectful, and open to learn improve the chances of success. One participant for example said: "The capacity for empathy is very much an attitudinal issue, how you speak with people and that you are interested in their experience". In addition to listening, two participants also highlighted the ability to facilitate a collective expression of experience, even using the term "social engineering" to explain its importance for sustainable capacity development. The participants questioned the extent to which external actors are trained in these attitudes. Eight participants called for more profound changes in mindset concerning roles and modes of interaction by for instance recognizing the limitations of international organizations, working at interfaces, and having the external partner as a coach instead of a doer. However, "it is a very different thing to move from being able to recognize the problem that offers solutions on an intellectual level, to living those solutions on a behaviour level", as one participant explained. The same participant continued: "It is rewiring your mental pathways, neural connections, it is not an easy thing to do", suggesting that we should learn from cognitive science and psychology about how people and organizations change.

One participant pointed out that we have to understand the motivation and incentives needed for people to work together in partnerships with high levels of mutual accountability and trust. Another participant explained the challenge, as individuals and organizations are driven by different motivations and are sometimes in competition, either consciously or unconsciously. One participant suggested the following way forward:

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[1] An external partner is a partner that belongs to an organization that is attempting to support the development of the capacity of another organization.

[2] An internal partner is a partner that belongs to an organization that wants to develop its own capacity.

"We should try to create incentive structures for the actors to actually come together, which means trying to formulate carrots and sticks. Actors showing clearly that they can engage in joint programming with other actors should get better funding or bonuses. Actors that do it alone or do not cooperate enough and isolate themselves should get less funding. Maybe they should be named and blamed".

3.1.3. Contextualization

Fourteen participants highlighted that capacity development is context-specific and that there is a need to understand the current situation before it would be possible to address it. This is hardly surprising, considering that alignment and context-specificity is highlighted in high-level fora of aid effectiveness. One participant said, "the absolute critical starting point is that people have loads of capacities and we should never underestimate them". Two participants stated that self-assessment is a good starting point, while three participants suggested that an external partner might be helpful to unpack and analyse what is going on, if requested by the internal partners. However, several participants declared that external partners rarely give adequate attention to the local context because it is expensive and labour and time intensive. They also stated that external partners rarely know how to identify and understand it.

One participant mentioned the "expert's blind spot", which prevents experts from really seeing the local needs apart from their own professional interests and priorities: "we are so concerned with doing a good job, being professional, do training courses that experts create a blind spot, which is local needs and local context". Moreover, several participants thought that the available guidelines and tools are outdated or prescriptive, focusing on external blueprint solutions that further promote the blind spot. One participant explained that, "we use standard recipes too much because we are forced to by the way the system is developed". This is further explained by another participant who pointed to the uncertainty about final funding for the project as a key reason for poor fundamental capacity assessment. This leads to little understanding of culture and a lot of time pressure. One participant suggested a way forward by creating informal interfaces with the internal partner:

"So instead of leaving the place we went back to the office and we sat and we had a cup of tea. And during the time we had the cup of tea, some of the most critical information came that were not discussed before. Because we are sitting in a kind of culturally acceptable context, we are demonstrating our interest but just not visited the place and asking the questions we want. We are also taking the time for you to speak to us and that was extremely interesting".

3.1.4. Flexibility

Thirteen participants expressed in different ways that capacity development is a flexible, systemic, interdependent, emergent and nonlinear self-organizing process. One participant stated that it is important to see capacity development as a holistic and more chaotic process, where success largely depends on flexibility and constant adjustments. Another participant highlighted the ability to anticipate what is happening, to be agile, and to adapt to changing circumstances. However, six participants explained that funding come with conditions that restrict flexibility. Three participants added that this makes people anxious and unwilling to think or do anything outside the original plan. The participants described some donors as very strict and resistant to change, and one participant explained that, "there is a real desire for control in the system that makes it very difficult to develop capacity effectively. Control is a big thing, nobody likes to give up control". When money passes from donor to UN to NGO, each organization adds its own conditions to the funding, said the participant. Thus, by the time the money actually reaches the front line, there is little room for the people engaged in capacity development to respond to changes and

context flexibly. These "cascading conditionalities" are a really big problem, according to another participant, but it is hard for donor bureaucracies to relinquish control, to cut their conditions, and to allow their resources to be used in ways that are defined by local people. This way of micro-managing aid is not a healthy strategy, according to several participants. However, one participant pointed out that there are relatively new donor countries that do not want to be old fashioned and state conditions for aid as Western donors have done.

The most effective way forward, according to one participant, is to give up control and let the local population and the local context drive how money is spent. Capacity development is not about control, it is about responding to what occurs and to realize we cannot control things. Yet, "how many people in our system are willing to walk into a situation and not control the outcome?", said the participant. Another participant advised that actors should try to bring together different efforts for capacity development without trying to control them, but just try to understand them.

3.1.5. Learning

Eleven participants emphasized the importance of learning and feedback loops for more effective capacity development and avoiding future mistakes. The participants highlighted that capacity development is about mutual learning and being open to change. Three participants stated that capacity development is about learning by doing: "you act, you interact, you learn, then you act again, and you learn again". Another participant even defined capacity development as "having the time, mandate and capacity to focus and to develop those capacities through learning, analysis and practice". Therefore, learning should be taken seriously. It should be built into the design of the programme from day one. There should be an interest in what others have been doing, one participant said. This participant added that, surprisingly often, we do this as if it has never happened before.

Seven participants mentioned that there is a need to analyse what really worked, what did not work, and to document mistakes. One participant said, "without the compelling and evident case, capacity development for DRR becomes a bit abstract and less convincing". Two participants suggested that there is a need to tell stories or to have Rolls Royce projects that you can point to, learn lessons from, and bring to the consciousness of people so that they do not reinvent the wheel. Three participants feel that there is no clear benchmark for what constitutes successful capacity development and we do not learn from our experience. Another participant focused more on how the aid system restricts the performance of professionals, stating that "we have to actually engage in making the system work better and we cannot just sit here and say they should do better".

3.1.6. Accountability

The results indicate important issues of accountability. Nine participants stated that the capacity development agenda is project- and result-focused, with linear sets of activities over a predetermined period of time until the end of the project without much follow-up. Capacity development is often managed in project management cycles, which do not correspond well with the more organic processes described above, according to one participant. Many participants mentioned too short time spans as a fundamental obstacle for capacity development. They added that involved actors tend to expect results in too tight timeframes. Actors are rushed for time and donors set deadlines far too close, according to one participant. Several participants argued that this short-termism in terms of allocated funding and pressures to demonstrate visible results fundamentally undermines capacity development. One participant said, "Here is 500 000 dollars and within a year you have to show results and you will try to get a square box going to a round hole". Another participant said:

"Capacity development is not some stupid log frame, plan, and training courses. It is a space where the external and internal partner's expertise

and resources meet. We do not know and cannot predict, control, nor can you plan what emerges when those two perspectives meet on equal terms. That is very uncomfortable for organizations and people who been used… who been in the position of control and certainty."

According to one participant, the world has changed and there is an increasing demand for more accountability to the donor concerning the decisions made and the money spent. This was echoed by three participants who described that many people feel that their day-to-day reality has become more about priority countries, accountability, decisions, and project management, and less about a real interface with communities and vulnerable people. The external partner often comes with the funding and must produce results within a few months or a year because they are paid and expected to perform. This shifts the focus to themselves, according to two participants. One participant even explicitly raised the question about who external partners are accountable to; beneficiaries, internal partners, or donors?

3.1.7. Long-term

All but two participants stated explicitly that capacity development is a long-term commitment, but enough time is rarely allocated. Two participants explained with frustration that, "we like to do things that are done in a year", or "you do a couple of workshops and that is it", all the while knowing that true capacity development takes much longer. One participant stated that "one needs to understand that there is a value in building slowly and really not getting the applause because it may not be visible until your death so to say". This is particularly problematic, according to one participant, when the timeframes of key decision makers often only stretch to the next election. This is further exacerbated by staff turnover and the impatience of international actors, who according to one participant "are so impatient, essentially we expect things to happen in five, ten years that used to take 40 years. Talking about developing capacity in one year is of course a contradiction in terms". This rush is not only based on the short-termism of the funding system, but also on the self-image of professionals:

"Everything is urgent, but really, most of our work is a context where we can actually take a little bit of time to think before we spend the money and we do not have to rush around to the degree we do. It is psychological, for individual humanitarian aid workers and DRR specialists, there is this kind of feeling we have to move quickly. This sense of urgency that prevent us for really thinking".

Seven participants stated the ongoing struggle around the world to mobilize resources for long-term DRR investments. Twelve participants pointed out the divide between humanitarian and development aid as a particular challenge for capacity development for DRR. Although a development issue, such capacity development is mainly done by humanitarian actors. One participant explained that all the "building bridges, closing the gap from humanitarian to development, all this, everyone has been talking for decades about this but not very much is actually happening". Although the participants mentioned a positive change in recent years, most of the funding for DRR still come from the humanitarian side with short-term perspectives. "It is stuck, it is lost in the middle, it is not emergency response and not really recovery, it is something else. It is a little wishy, washy thing, you know. It is very small, miniscule and not really as sexy as or important as it should be".

3.1.8. Sustainability

Eight participants stated the need not only for capacity creation, but also for utilization and retention to make capacity development sustainable. What is needed to facilitate the utilization of capacity in practice, once created, are often neglected, according to one participant. For instance: "It is often nothing wrong with the law, but they lack the capacity to implement their own legislation. They probably use some fancy consultant to do the law, but you can support them in the execution". Three participants explicitly mentioned the need to take

into account issues with retention. For instance, "we have forgotten to think about the maintenance of the system. If you want to develop the capacity you have to develop the capacity to make sure this capacity will be kept up to date". Three participants suggested that this could be done by involving local universities and another suggested institutionalizing relevant education instead of ad hoc and short-term training or workshops. This is particularly important with staff turnover and uptake of staff in international organizations. Many trained people disappear in this way: "international organizations come and hire all the best national staff and very well-functioning local organizations would suddenly be stretched". The question is, according to one participant, "how do we create an industry rather than just training a bunch of experts"? One frequent mistake, according to one participant, is that training is often is done in an international language. Therefore, the organization is immediately restricted to a cadre of usually quite junior, inexperienced, and mobile staff, who often move on to other jobs. Seven participants acknowledged that capacity development is often by default thought of as training. Five participants mentioned that training is good, or not negative, but that it is only one component of capacity development. Capacity development goes beyond external partners providing training.

3.2. Fundamental challenges

3.2.1. Complexity

Most participants acknowledged that capacity development is about simultaneous self-organization at different levels, e.g. the individual and organizational level. However, activities are often treated in isolation and not connected to the whole, said one participant. Another participant exemplifies this by saying: "If we really want to develop capacity, it has to be a system, not just one-off training". The participant continued by explaining that training is not bad, just not sufficient on its own. Successful capacity development requires many interlinked activities, of which training is one. Two participants suggested that a key problem with capacity development is not only that the activities are not linked to each other, but also that they are not supporting each other. Several participants claimed that the focus is often on individuals and the technical capacities. They pointed out the need for the more functional and soft capacities as well. One participant explained that, "malfunctioning organizations are deskilling. You know, you come in smart, energetic, talented, full of energy into an organizational set up. It will kill you. Either you leave or you adapt if you want to survive". Moreover, there is an assumption that what is done at the national level will automatically trickle down to the local level. This is a flaw according to one participant, what might work globally or nationally may not work or even hamper implementation locally. Three participants explicitly mentioned that the world is not linear, with processes taking place sequentially, which sometimes is difficult for people to accept. "Textbooks, guidelines, tools, of which we have plentiful in the Red Cross are too much based on a sort of ideal classroom situation where you can do things in a linear way", said one informant.

3.2.2. Uncertainty

Neither individuals nor organizations like uncertainty, and it is frightening to have uncertain outcomes or not to know how things will end because the meeting or project is a product of what the local people are saying or doing, said two participants. More relevant to the DRR sector, several participants blamed a common trade-off between certain costs, reducing the risk and uncertain consequences of disasters that may never happen. One participant explained:

"Why would you invest for disaster that might happen in 100 years when you will be dead? People hate to think about this. There is a reluctance and people will say that tackling those risk would be too expensive and maybe they will not happen in the next 1000 years, so why bother"?

On a more fundamental level, bureaucracies do not like to respond

to the local context, since it results in a lot of uncertainty, said one informant. Two participants explained that this is why organizations do a lot of training. "Training is certain, it is understandable, you can measure it and thereby less uncomfortable". In the face of a rapidly changing world, one participant suggested that people should get used to feeling more uncomfortable more often, and need to give up the delusion of being experts. The participant summarized by stating that we need to realize that capacity development involves a lot of uncertainty and a lot of discomfort.

3.2.3. Dynamic change

The context for capacity development is changing and power is shifting in favour of developing countries, according to nine participants. One of the participants explained that it is most misleading that we keep operating as if international assistance is the key to development while this is no longer the case, if it ever was. Many countries have developed significantly and they now have capacities that they did not have 40 years ago. They are now middle-income countries, which demand changes to the whole system for capacity development. Nine participants pointed out that many countries in the world now have sufficient resources to do everything themselves: "Vietnam for example, they have declared they want to finish all these aid relationships". One participant declared that it is an illusion that there is not much capacity within developing countries, pointing out cases with great capacity in DRR. One participant even questioned aid altogether: "Why have Latin-American countries succeeded? Well, I think it is partly because they have not been part of aid dynamic. They have been left to their own to a larger extent".

The participants highlighted that external contributions have to change and international organizations cannot deliver projects in the same way and to the same extent. The world has evolved and we need to evolve with it, according to one of them. The shrinking operational role of international organizations in many places is requiring them to rethink what their role and added value is, said another. On a question on what external partners could do if we do not need doers anymore, one participant answered "as little as possible", with a laugh. Other participants pointed out the need to think beyond the traditional set of actors, shifting the focus to national and regional partners, and recognizing the limitations of international organizations. One participant summarized the challenge as follows:

> "We do need to realize that things are changing and I would say they are changing rapidly. The development industry and humanitarian industry needs to adapt to these changes and to change the mindset on what development cooperation is".

However, one participant pointed out that the aid bureaucracy does not change quickly enough and that the methodologies, concepts, techniques and insights that guide capacity development have not changed enough, questioning the effectiveness of the dialogue on aid effectiveness:

> "There is no pressure on them to change … and there is no explicit statement that they should actually be at the cutting edge. You can ask yourself what happens after if you go to an aid effectiveness meeting in Busan for example. The message was very clear there. Do the heads of DFID, Sida, USAID go back and tell the people we have to rethink how we do what we do …".

3.2.4. Ambiguity

A quarter of the participants suggested that there is a much ambiguity around the concept of capacity development and that it has become an "abused phrase" and "catchword for almost everything". It has become a sort of "umbrella panacea", according to one participant, while another participant stated that "we do not know how to do it". Another participant explained that it is a vague term that is "over-used by most people who have no clue what it means", regardless of whether

it is an internal or external partner. Furthermore, the participants mentioned that the words and meaning have changed over time and with different development paradigms. Being a very broad term, there are different answers to the questions of what it is, especially from people from different disciplines. According to one participant, "if you talk to a development person you get one answer and if you talk to a humanitarian person you get another. There is a need to have these two cultures to meet in some way". Finally, one participant questioned whether it matters what we call it: technical assistance, capacity building, capacity development or capacity strengthening.

4. Discussion

When analysing the results in pursuit of a better understanding of the reasons behind the poor results of capacity development for DRR, five main themes emerged with respect to the discrepancies between established principles and actual performance. These structured the discussion and included: 1) clashing principles; 2) quixotic control; 3) mindset lag; 4) lack of motivation for change; and 5) power imbalances.

4.1. Clashing principles

All eight principles for capacity development identified in the results are well known in the available scientific literature, though under slightly different names [28–30]. However, the results of this study show that they are connected and, at times, clash; most pertinently in relation to misguided accountability and a temporal discord, which are further discussed below. These clashes constitute the primary reason for the poor results of capacity development for DRR, as the actors must prioritize to adhere to some principles and not others.

4.1.1. Misguided accountability

There is misguided *accountability* to donors instead of beneficiaries[3] that is clashing with all the other principles, either directly or indirectly. Although high-level fora on aid effectiveness stipulate the importance of *accountability* to the beneficiaries, the system does not allow this. The focus is instead on predictability, log frames, deliverables, and reporting back to the donor [29]. Consequently, *ownership* and *flexibility* clash directly with such *accountability* when the external partner does not want to give up control of the funded activities due to the perceived increased risk of the project not delivering what is expected. *Learning* clashes directly with this *accountability* too when the emphasis of monitoring and evaluation is on predefined visible deliverables and not on what was learned and the actual impact, as acknowledged elsewhere [39]. There are also indirect clashes between principles due to dependencies. For instance, there is a clash between *accountability* and *long-term* engagement due to the latter's dependence on *flexibility*. Working *long-term* requires *flexibility* to adjust and respond to changes and contingencies that become increasingly difficult to anticipate the longer the timeframe.

The misguided *accountability* to donors also indirectly undermines *sustainability* through the latter's dependence on local *ownership*, *contextualization*, *long-term* engagement, and *learning*. However, *sustainability* is not only about these other principles as such, but also the type of activities included in capacity development interventions. This becomes particularly clear when considering the almost universal focus on capacity creation, while little attention is given to capacity utilization and retention, which are also requisites for capacity development to generate sustainable change [28]. Training without any activities to allow the trainees to use their newly acquired knowledge and skills or

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[3] The term beneficiary is commonly used in relation to international development cooperation to refer to the people or organizations benefitting from the project results, which can be different from the internal partners engaged directly in it.

opportunities to institutionalize the supply of trainees to meet future demands, is simply useless in terms of capacity development. It could at best serve to meet some urgent demands, often under the guise of building surge capacity, but never develop any sustainable capacities. It is clear that this misguided *accountability* generates an intense need for control that undermines all principles for capacity development.

4.1.2. Temporal discord

There is also a temporal discord where capacity development requires *long-term* processes and engagement, while the system requires short-term feedback. *Ownership* and *partnership* require trust that take time to develop. *Learning* requires time, because of the lag between assimilation and accommodation of information [40]. This detrimental structure of temporal discord is further exacerbated by its institutionalization into short-term funding cycles, which are particularly common for DRR, with most funding coming from humanitarian instead of development assistance [28]. This leads to actors voicing frustration with a lack of funding to do more than short-term quick-impact projects like training and workshops, while the issue may have less to do with the amount of money than the time available. Much more can be done with the same amount of money in flexible long-term low-intensity interventions, rather than static, short-term and high-intensity projects. *Contextualization* also requires time, which is particularly challenging in the initial period when funding is uncertain. *Contextualization* is also undermined by the expert blind spot where the specific interests, mindsets and perspectives of the involved external experts influence what they see, how they describe the problem, and the objectives of the capacity development intervention [41]. This is particularly problematic when the initial scoping is underfunded and rushed, not enough time is allowed to facilitate local *ownership* and working *partnerships*, and when there is little *flexibility* to adjust the initial plans that are largely designed by these disconnected and single-minded external experts.

4.2. Quixotic control

The unrealistic and impractical need for control that permeates the entire system for capacity development undermines all principles for its effective implementation. Donors drive the agenda with priority countries and funding requirements passed on to each actor in the aid chain and dictate what can be done with the money. However, it is important to note that even the biggest donors are accountable to somebody else, normally governments, which in turn are more or less accountable to the taxpayers, fuelling demands for flag waving and showing visible results within tight timeframes. For each step along the aid chain, the provider of the funding adds conditionalities for the receiver, which aggregate and increasingly restrict the use of the money. These cascading conditionalities finally reach the actors responsible for actually doing the work, essentially crippling their ability to work towards most of the principles for capacity development, with devastating effects on effectiveness.

There might be several reasons for this quixotic control. First and foremost, the world is *complex, dynamic, uncertain, and ambiguous* [5,42,43,44]. The results refer to these fundamental challenges that create the ultimate framework within which all actors in capacity development must exist. It appears, however, that most actors are overwhelmed with *complexity* and they adopt linear thinking to simplify things [45,46]. This is often done by applying familiar blueprint solutions that unfortunately ignore actual cause and effect relationships, what Gasper [47] refers to as logic-less frames or lack-frames, or using planning tools in ways that reify linearity [48,49]. The result is projects with sets of activities that are possible to control, but that rarely generate any real and sustainable impact, since other connected issues are obscured and unaddressed [50]. This is further complicated by the seemingly ever-increasing rate of *dynamic change*, which is unfortunately also largely ignored by actors having to present detailed plans of all activities from the start to get funding. The system and its actors are hardwired to see the world as static and the future as an extrapolation of the past [51], adding cognitive aspects to the issue of control. Moreover, the overall trajectory of contemporary global changes unfortunately seems to increase disaster risk, disqualifying all options of doing nothing.

It is not only *accountability* to the donor that undermines *flexibility* here, but paradoxically enough, also the level of participation. The more people there are who participate in the design process, the more complex and time-consuming the decision making, and therefore the less flexible the plan becomes when implemented. This is what Gasper [47] calls "lock-frame", which fixes the involved actors on the initial plan through a distributed network of control, regardless of what happens around them.

The largely ignored *complexity* and *dynamic change* generate *uncertainty* in terms of what will really happen throughout the course of a capacity development project: Will it be funded? What unforeseen events may impact it? What are others doing around us? What is the staff turnover? This *uncertainty* increases exponentially with increased timeframe. The results point out explicitly that actors simply dislike *uncertainty* and experience it as uncomfortable. This is in line with Boulding [52], who argues that people engaged in planning generally dislike uncertainty, but that decision makers dislike it even more, therefore, usually neglecting it. He warns us of the risk of instead producing "illusions of certainty" that conceal uncomfortable uncertainty behind pretty dressed up plans that can seemingly be controlled. This not only affects the types of activities included in capacity development projects, but is also the main reason for the short-termism that hampers capacity development in general.

There is hope on the horizon in the Doing Development Differently dialogue [53], but this movement is still marginal and not influential enough to change the system. However, as long as the focus is on maintaining control and ignoring uncertainty, there is no chance for capacity development to be effective. What is needed is a complete change of mindset among all actors.

4.3. Mindset lag

It is clear from the results that there is a lag between the rapidly changing context of capacity development and the pace of change in the mindsets of the actors involved. This mindset lag undermines the effectiveness of capacity development, since most external partners still continue to work as they have done. They focus on priority countries, are resource-driven, pushing for their predefined objectives with blueprint solutions, and doing the work themselves, blaming the disinterest of internal partners on culture, lack of capacity, corruption, etc. Largely a contemporary version of White Man's Burden [54]. Although this way of working has not been effective from the start of organized development cooperation in the 1950s [7], external partners must realize that the countries they work in are very diverse and very few places are still like they were in the 1950s, or even ten years ago.

The results suggest that external partners must change their mindset and develop their capacity to listen and develop partnerships, instead of maintaining the attitude that they can build capacities almost on their own. For instance, instead of the all too common ad hoc short-term training that many external partners keep focusing on, it is time to realize that many developing countries have universities with the capacity to institutionalize the needed DRR education [55]. It is time to rethink the roles involved in capacity development and how the different partners interact, as also suggested by Motes & Hess [56] and Hagelsteen and Becker [29]. The goal should be to rebalance relationships to facilitate local *ownership*, fruitful *partnership*, and a range of other principles for the capacity development discussed above. However, this is particularly challenging with respect to capacity development for DRR, since such initiatives are often initiated in the aftermath of a particular disaster, with relationships already being forged under

humanitarian circumstances. If not as between victims and heroes, at least as between those without sufficient capacity and the well-funded and equipped experts who come to help. These unbalanced relationships tend to persist, as the technical DRR experts traditionally have a background as humanitarian workers and the projects are managed in a similar rushed and performance-oriented manner. This is partly because the experts are usually funded by humanitarian funding, but it is also because the external partners rarely take time to have that proverbial "cup of tea" with the internal partners. Girgis takes this one step further and points to the value of spending non-professional time together to develop capacity through friendship [57], alluding to the vital importance of trust between partners in capacity development [5]. Instead, most capacity development initiatives focus on technical aspects, less on functional aspects, and not at all on the softer aspects [28] necessary for *ownership*, *partnership*, and other principles. This is difficult to address, since capacity development projects are not monitored and evaluated against criteria for such aspects. It effectively steers the focus away from what is needed the most for actual capacity development instead of mere technical assistance.

Although this study focuses on systemic problems, it is interesting to also note potential cognitive challenges impeding these essential changes in mindset. The fundamental challenge of *ambiguity* hampers change as there are no clear-cut truths and different perspectives exist simultaneously, making it difficult to determine what choice is best to make. For example, there is confusion about the meaning of key concepts, which has led to misunderstandings between partners [58]. This in turn has a negative impact on the effectiveness of capacity development for DRR [59]. This Babylonian confusion [59] hampers constructive communication that is fundamental for *learning*. The problem is further exacerbated by the human tendency to assume that others share similar beliefs (projection bias) [60], or to expect others to agree with oneself (false consensus effect) [61]. Moreover, in situations of *uncertainty* and *ambiguity*, incoming information that contradicts established views causes psychological discomfort. This results in human beings subconsciously selecting, organizing, or distorting the information to match their preferred and existing beliefs (cognitive dissonance) [62] and avoiding situations that increase such dissonance [60]. The more entrenched people's preferences, ideas, policies or ideologies are, the more liable to these cognitive challenges they become. Overcoming these challenges to completely change the mindset of the entire aid industry is difficult and demands motivation.

4.4. Lack of motivation for change

In addition to the lack of motivation for capacity development and for DRR in general [51], the results also indicate no real motivation to change the current ineffective practices. There is a clear disconnect between what people say and what they can do, but there are no incentives to change, as the wheels keep turning anyway. Internal partners may be resistant to change as power rests with local elites who reap benefits from the current system [63]. The same goes for external partners, who get exorbitant contracts and status, and for their organizations, which fund immense bureaucracies with the profit from running the current system. External partners are traditionally heavily engaged doers, requiring much time and even more money. Although the need for such support has been dwindling at an increasing pace for years as local capacities have improved in governmental agencies, universities, and the private and voluntary sectors, the system is still bent on providing it, even if more coaching and facilitating roles would be much more productive [5,29,56]. The reason is obvious. Without the intensive engagement of external partners, many international experts would be unemployed and many international organizations would wither. Moreover, giving up control and leaving the driver's seat to internal partners not only have potential financial and status implications, it is also about relinquishing power.

4.5. Power imbalances

There are inherent power imbalances in the system as donors have the power and not the internal partners. Not only do the actual donor agencies at the top of the hierarchy have power, but anybody controlling funding along the aid chain. These powerful actors are capable of forcing their will onto the actors below, which is what [64] refers to as the first dimension of power. In addition, they also have the ability to set the agenda for what can be talked about and addressed, which is the second dimension of power [64]. Finally, they can also influence the very desires, preferences, and motives of the less powerful to suit their interests, referred to as the third dimension of power [64]. However, the power in the system of capacity development stems not only from control over funding, i.e. induced authority when the powerful can make the less powerful obey voluntarily if that would lead to some reward [65]. It can also be rooted in the legal and institutional frameworks – codified or not – that determine rules, roles, responsibilities, etc. [66], or in the in the recognition of specialized knowledge and skills of experts, i.e. competent authority [65]. Although new donors are emerging and expertise is growing in developing countries, the power balance is still heavily distorted in favour of donors and external partners in the global north. As long as these donors remain unwilling to relinquish some of that power, be it financial, institutional, or competence-based, the other actors would always be answering to them primarily.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to offer an understanding of the reasons behind the poor results of capacity development for disaster risk reduction (DRR) by exploring these results from the perspective of high-level decision makers in the international community. The research suggests systemic problems in the aid system as the underlying explanation for the discrepancies between established principles and actual performance during capacity development for DRR. Most actors know these principles well, although they are commonly criticized for not applying the principles in practice and blamed for the poor outcomes. However, the results of this study show that the problem has little to do with the competence of individuals, as they generally do whatever they can to work according to the principles. The fundamental problem is instead that some principles clash when applied in a complex, uncertain, dynamic, and ambiguous world. These fundamental challenges, combined with systemic requirements and cognitive biases, generate an intense need for control that is inherently incompatible with all principles. This quixotic control prompts cascading conditionalities that permeate the aid chain, essentially crippling the ability of the actors to actually implement activities to work towards the principles for capacity development, with devastating consequences for effectiveness. The obvious solution is to refocus accountability towards beneficiaries, but such a shift is obstructed by mindset lag, lack of motivation for change and power imbalances.

The actors are not internalizing the radical and rapid changes in recent decades, but are instead maintaining their traditional perspectives, roles and blueprint solutions. This is particularly true since actors are susceptible to an "expert blind spot", which limits what is seen in terms of local needs and context. Although the results call for a complete change of mindset and roles within the entire aid industry, there is lack of motivation for any change as long as the wheels keep turning, generating benefits for powerful actors and profits for the bureaucracies in control. This boils down to inherent power imbalances in the system, where donors and external partners have the power, not the internal partners. Relinquishing control means relinquishing power, which is an indispensable but intricate change that has to occur for capacity development to be effective.

For capacity development to be the expected instrument to substantially reduce disaster losses, a complete overhaul of the aid system

is needed. It is not enough to blame the actors implementing capacity development activities for DRR, nor to merely rename the concept again after a few more years of continuous frustration. The principles for capacity development are well known: ownership, partnership, contextualization, flexibility, learning, accountability, long-term, and sustainability. They need to be taken seriously, but have not yet been successfully translated into practice. The main clashes must be resolved for that to happen, assuming that capacity development is the actual primary goal of the system. Capacity needs to be seen as an emergent property that can only be developed through a flexible, adaptive and locally driven process of change and learning, based on how the context and existing capacities evolve. However, the aid system must be fundamentally rebooted to allow for that, rather than maintaining the focus on the misguided accountability upwards along the aid chain. International organizations must wake up and see that the world is changing rapidly, while power needs to be redistributed downwards along the aid chain. Actors must accept that they have to live with complexity and uncertainty. Activities cannot continue to focus more or less exclusively on capacity creation, and then not only on ad hoc training, but must also include capacity utilization and retention. Roles and the ways partners interact have to be reconsidered, and local universities need to be included in this process.

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