

Building Disaster Risk Management capacity: a strategic approach

How can national governments and the international community take a more strategic approach to building disaster risk management (DRM) capacity in low and middle-income countries? What are the current trends in activity and how can a more strategic approach be taken? This briefing note reflects on the modalities, strengths and weaknesses of DRM capacity-building interventions, drawing on findings from a major research project undertaken by Oxford Policy Management and the University of East Anglia on behalf of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The research aimed to understand more about what works and why.

This note is written with DRM policy-makers as the target audience.

The research involved six country case studies (in Ethiopia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Philippines, Haiti and Mozambique), an online survey and an extensive literature review, each of which was important for distilling lessons learned on how to build DRM capacity effectively.

Key messages

- Key advances are being made in the way in which support for DRM capacity is implemented, including around enhancing ownership, tailoring to the context, building functional capacity and improving the impact of training.
- However, overall, the research findings create a picture of an uncoordinated, piecemeal, 'projectized' approach to DRM capacity building, rather than of a long-term, systematic and coordinated approach. There is potential for international agencies to work together more closely to build system-wide change in order to make

coherent strides towards disaster risk reduction (DRR).

- A key barrier to effective DRM capacity building is that initiatives tend to be very short; on average, programmes are less than three years in duration and very few are more than five years in duration.
- Many implementers of DRM capacity-building programmes are not conducting systematic capacity needs assessments to inform the design of the programmes, or are conducting them too late in the design cycle.
- DRM capacity-building programmes are not focusing enough on securing the sustainability of capacities that have been built.
- The quality and robustness of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for DRM capacity-building interventions is often weak.
- DRM capacity-building initiatives pay insufficient attention to the need to link DRM mechanisms across scales, with subnational government levels being overlooked in comparison to national and community levels.

DRM capacity building – under the spotlight

The rationale for capacity-building initiatives is that they should generate a greater sustained capability to plan for and undertake DRM, such that the risk to lives and livelihoods from disaster is reduced. An effective capacity-building initiative is, therefore, one that produces outputs that contribute to this change. The research findings show that, in many ways, a progressive approach to capacity building is being enabled by governments, donors

and implementing agencies. Nevertheless, the research also revealed several persistent shortcomings in how support for strengthening DRM capacity is being approached. Below are listed some of the key themes that emerged across the case study countries. A number of shortcomings should be addressed urgently to ensure that a more effective system for producing global DRM capacity can emerge. Recommendations are summarized at the end of the document.

Areas of strong performance

The research found that capacity-building programmes are performing well in a number of important areas. For example, fostering a stronger sense of ownership and tailoring programmes to national or local contexts are emphasised often as principles that need greater attention in development practice, but the research found that, frequently, these principles were incorporated well into the design and implementation of DRM capacity-building programmes. Similarly, many capacity-building programmes are finding innovative and effective ways to conduct training, and are demonstrating positive steps towards strengthening the functional, not just the technical, capacities of organizations to take effective DRM decisions and action; this includes growing support for mainstreaming DRR within development planning.

A coordinated, system-wide approach is needed

Overall, the pattern of interventions in capacity building by international agencies tends to be of small, piecemeal and fragmented programmes, rather than of coherent systems for building DRM capacities across low and middle-income countries. Greater coordination of effort may enable capacity building to proceed on a more system-wide basis, reaching all at-risk populations and ensuring that mechanisms of prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery are applied

coherently across sectors and regions in order to strengthen the system as a whole.

Coordination inevitably presents challenges but, given that most capacity-building interventions are seeking to work with existing and emerging national strategies for DRM/DRR, it is logical for agencies to work together. Across the case studies, however, the research team seldom observed such close coordination. For example, there was little planned harmonization of methods and no widely used toolkits. Donors and agencies should consider how they can work more closely together on coordinated programmes of system-wide, multi-scale capacity building within countries. This is likely to require rethinking financing for capacity building as current budgets for DRM capacity-building programmes remain relatively small, with large programmes (for example \$20 million+) rarely established.

Time-scales should be lengthened

It is well known that time-scales across all capacity-building programmes need to be lengthened but this is even more important for DRM as changing entrenched mindsets and embedding (often entirely) new concepts and terminology take a long time. However, DRM capacity-building programmes generally have very short time-scales – 73 per cent of survey respondents stated that interventions in which they had been involved recently lasted between one and three years. Only 6 per cent of survey respondents reported having been involved in programmes lasting more than five years. Programmes studied during the case studies had an average length of 2.97 years, with the longest (out of 15) running for five years. Several of the programmes, although contracted as stand-alone projects, could be described best as sequential phases of the same donors' engagement, but often encountered gaps between phases; this was problematic for continuity and reduced effectiveness.

Lack of sufficient time-scales is a chronic challenge for DRM capacity building and exacerbates other identified common challenges such as the lack of appropriate assessments to inform programme design, the lack of attention to creating sustainability strategies and the inability to cope with the turnover of stakeholders. Sufficient timetabling enables programme stakeholders to enhance both technical and functional capacity and shift towards a more holistic approach to DRM.

Capacity needs assessments require greater prioritization

Contrary to well-documented best practice, it is often the case that capacity needs are not assessed systematically and the assessments are undertaken late in the design stage. This creates a danger that capacity-building initiatives become, to some extent, pre-fixed by external priorities and less able to adapt to the specific contexts of the interventions.

Though systematic capacity needs assessments can become squeezed out because of time pressures (sometimes from the supporting donor), when needs assessments are undertaken late or are rushed, it can lead, ultimately, to programme delays because the demand emerges for a redesign. When capacity assessments are conducted before the launch of a programme, the implementers are able to design programmes more fit for purpose, with more realistic time-frames from the outset.

Planning for sustainability needs more attention

Sustainability, although well emphasized in the literature, is still not being tackled effectively in many DRM capacity-building programmes and, generally, formal sustainability planning is not taking place. For example, none of the case study programmes had developed a comprehensive exit strategy.

Programmes have to design mechanisms actively for technical capacity retention or transfer, otherwise, gains are undermined by staff turnover. Gains in functional capacity (such as strengthening policy and planning structures, management and coordination mechanisms, leadership and support for DRM) are more likely to be sustained but this, also, requires effort to build an enabling environment (for example, through fostering leadership and motivation for change).

Sustainability can be more problematic at the local level where there tends to be increased turnover of staff and where funding decisions at a higher level can undermine capacity gains and retention.

The potential for M&E is not realized yet

Rigorous M&E systems are not typical on the ground, even though they are well accepted as best practice. In particular, independent evaluations of programmes are rare. Where they do take place, often, the quality and robustness of M&E procedures can be improved substantially. In particular, programmes need to shift from monitoring activities and outputs to measuring outcomes and impact.

Typically, M&E is viewed as a donor requirement rather than an opportunity to improve programme effectiveness and, therefore, donors need to work to incentivize improved M&E practice. Often, remote M&E guidance and support from headquarters is required and can work effectively when capacities on the ground are weak. M&E frameworks and tools work best when they are flexible and the programme implementer has scope for tailoring them to the programme. To assist with this, a flexible, outcome-oriented M&E framework is available at www.ifrc.org/en/get-involved/learning-education-training/research/capacity-building-for-disaster-risk-management.

Programmes should focus on linking scales and targeting subnational levels

Although the literature is clear that building capacities for inter-scalar working is important for DRM effectiveness, this does not appear to be prioritized in most DRM capacity-building interventions. Also, there seems to be a ‘missing middle’ in capacity-building support as, often, the subnational government level is overlooked in the design of DRM capacity-building interventions, with programmes tending to focus instead on the national or community level.

Inter-scalar working is important for improving the integration of DRM policies and processes, increasing sustainability and facilitating upward, demand-led DRM. Where capacity-building initiatives do build in attempts to strengthen capacities in this way, the results can be valuable and there is clear potential for this aspect of capacity building to be replicated elsewhere. Programmes should, therefore, pay attention to creating coordination mechanisms across scales and ensuring that provincial and local government levels are not forgotten. They should consider also how new capacities at one level will mesh with capacities and processes at both lower and higher levels: for example, how district plans might link with provincial budgeting processes.

Changing the approach

There is potential to shift DRM capacity building to a more strategic outcome-focused mode. This would entail coordinated DRM programmes which were oriented to building functional and enabling capacity for DRR, working across national systems at multiple scales, and ensuring long-term funding, a close alignment to capacity needs assessments, effective M&E and well-defined exit strategies.

Policy recommendations

(see table below)

Readers are referred to the full Synthesis Report (available at: www.ifrc.org/en/get-involved/learning-education-training/research/capacity-building-for-disaster-risk-management) which discusses the evidence and recommendations in much greater depth.

The research was conducted with funding from the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID), the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

Theme	Policy recommendation
Taking a coordinated approach	International agencies should work together to shift current DRM capacity support to a more strategic, coordinated model, with system-wide programmes aiming to strengthen capacities within countries.
Accommodating longer time-scales	Improve stability and sustainability of capacity building for DRM by extending programme lengths to 5–10 years.
Improving capacity needs assessments	Adapt funding and procurement processes to enable robust and continuous needs assessments to inform capacity-building programmes. Support implementing partners to conduct capacity needs assessments prior to programme design.
Considering sustainability	Much greater emphasis needs to be placed on creating the tools, and ensuring they are applied, to improve thinking around and planning for sustainability at the programme and national level.
Strengthening M&E	Donor agencies should encourage the improvement of M&E systems, particularly through the incorporation of outcome and impact-level M&E and the inclusion of external evaluations.
Linking up the levels	Ensure that the subnational level is not overlooked and that resources are made available for building capacities at the provincial and district levels.

Who we are

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest volunteer-based humanitarian network. Together with our 189 member National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worldwide, we reach 97 million people annually through long-term services and development programmes as well as 85 million people through disaster response and early recovery programmes. We act before, during and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people. We do so with impartiality as to nationality, race, gender, religious beliefs, class and political opinions.

Guided by *Strategy 2020* – our collective plan of action to tackle the major humanitarian and development challenges of this decade – we are committed to ‘saving lives and changing minds’.

Our strength lies in our volunteer network, our community-based expertise and our independence and neutrality. We work to improve humanitarian standards, as partners in development and in response to disasters. We persuade decision-makers to act at all times in the interests of vulnerable people. The result: we enable healthy and safe communities, reduce vulnerabilities, strengthen resilience and foster a culture of peace around the world.



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