

Building Disaster Risk Management capacity: key principles

How can programmes aiming to build disaster risk management (DRM) capacity improve their effectiveness? What works and why? What processes are important for ensuring an impact is made and what should the content of such programmes include? This briefing note summarizes findings from a major research project on DRM capacity building, undertaken by Oxford Policy Management and the University of East Anglia on behalf of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

This note is written with capacity-building programme designers and implementers 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. Throughout the research, six principles emerged as critically important: three relating to the process of conducting capacity-building programmes and three relating to the content of such initiatives. These principles are defined and discussed in greater detail in this note, which includes analysis on how well they are being implemented currently, key barriers and recommendations for change. Together, the principles provide a framework to enable those who are implementing capacity-building activities to maximize their effectiveness.

Key principle 1: Flexibility and adaptability

Definition: *The need to approach capacity-building interventions flexibly so that the design of the programme is appropriate to context and responsive to needs (rather*

than applied as an externally-imposed 'blueprint'). It includes undertaking careful assessment of capacity needs, and working with and reinforcing existing skills, strategies, systems and capacities. It also includes understanding and accounting for the political and power dimensions that can undermine or strengthen capacity building.

It is established best practice to tailor development interventions to national and local contexts, and DRM capacity-building interventions are no exception. The research suggests that DRM programme implementers are taking this principle seriously and many are linking their programmes to the context effectively. Across the case study countries, this was the principle that was being implemented most successfully.

In order to tailor a programme to the local context, the implementer needs to have strong knowledge of the socio-economic, cultural and governance context. Organizations that had been engaged in the country for a long period, or that were building on their experiences of disaster-response programmes, tended to be effective at tailoring their programmes.

At the community scale, DRM capacity-building programmes have found that linking with target communities' everyday lives and livelihoods improves effectiveness. People were much more engaged when livelihoods were used as an access point for discussing DRM. Also, programmes are showing innovation and creativity in linking DRM messages and activities with the local culture and everyday practices of target communities,

thereby improving engagement and understanding.

Unfortunately, many implementers of DRM capacity-building programmes are not conducting systematic capacity needs assessments to inform the design of the programmes. When needs assessments are undertaken late or are rushed, it can lead, ultimately, to programme delays and can reduce effectiveness. However, when a capacity assessment is conducted before the launch of a programme, the implementers are able to design the programme to be more fit for purpose, with more realistic time-frames from the outset.

Key principle 2: Comprehensive planning

Definition: *The need to carefully design interventions so that they can meet their objectives and are likely to be sustainable. It includes appropriate scheduling of interventions so that pressure to show visible results does not undermine capacity building. Also critical is planning for the long-term sustainability of capacity gains after the withdrawal of interventions. Comprehensive planning includes a robust system for monitoring and evaluation.*

Often, across the case studies, this principle was not being implemented strongly enough. Typically, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems for the case study programmes were implemented weakly and focused on activities and outputs rather than on outcomes and impact. M&E was regarded, often, more as ‘ticking a box’ for the donor, rather than as an instrument for ensuring that a programme met its objectives. External independent evaluations were rare.

Also, time-scales were identified often as a problem, with many programmes stating that their overall time-scales were unrealistically short. This is not surprising as capacity building requires long time horizons, particularly in relation to DRM where it takes time for new concepts and

the shift towards disaster risk reduction (DRR) approaches to be embedded. However, the research found that capacity-building programmes lasted, on average, for one to three years, with very few having time-scales of more than five years.

Similarly, sustainability was identified as a problem area. DRM capacity-building programmes typically paid insufficient attention to securing the sustainability of capacities developed and programmes rarely undertook systematic sustainability planning or produced exit strategies. Turnover of both staff and target groups was cited as a major problem in all the case study countries, and often undermined capacity gains unless programmes actively designed mechanisms for capacity retention or transfer. Sustainability is more problematic at the local level where there tends to be increased turnover and where funding decisions at a higher level can undermine capacity gains and retention. The creation of national knowledge bases or pools of DRM expertise was found to help with capacity retention.

Key principle 3: Ownership and partnership

Definition: *The need to ensure that those targeted for capacity building have a clear and significant role in the design and implementation of initiatives (which will again help to ensure they are appropriate, effective and sustainable). Ownership is likely to rest on active participation, clear statements of responsibilities, engagement of leaders, and alignment with existing DRM and DRR strategies.*

The research suggests that DRM practitioners are keenly aware of the importance of ownership for effective DRM capacity building. For example, ownership was rated as the most important principle for success overall by research participants. Although programmes are taking steps to ensure those targeted for capacity building are involved in the design and implementation of DRM capacity-building in-

terventions, improvements could still be made to ensure that those targeted have a stronger engagement and greater sense of the value of the capacity-building process and the resulting gains.

Ownership does not happen without effort and deliberate design, whether at national, regional, local or community level: for example, through including government actors in the initial design and subsequent development of capacity-building plans. The soft skills of implementing agency staff were identified as key ingredients for building effective partnerships with government and include patience, persistence, politeness, good communication and mutual respect. In addition, most implementing agencies paid careful attention to aligning their programmes to existing government structures, policies and priorities, which improved ownership. High-level engagement is often vital for securing the effectiveness of capacity-building interventions – without it, there is the potential for capacity built at lower levels of administration to be undermined by changes in personnel, policy direction or approach.

Key principle 4: Attention to functional capacity

Definition: *The need to focus on ‘functional’ capacity building. This means doing more than improving technical skills and resources. It means developing the ability of stakeholders and organizations to take effective decisions and actions on DRM. It includes aspects such as improving coordination, and developing policies and plans. It also includes creating an enabling environment for effective decisions and action, such as developing incentives for good staff performance, and building support among stakeholders to see DRM as a priority issue.*

The research confirmed that greater emphasis should be placed on moving beyond technical training to build functional capacity within society so that effective decisions and action on DRM can

be taken. Evidence from the case studies and the survey indicates that the focus on technical capacity remains strong in DRM capacity-building initiatives. For example, approximately 95 per cent of survey respondents stated that ‘training and skills development’ were activities included in their DRM capacity-building programmes. ‘Information provision to the public’ and ‘provision of new equipment/technology’, both activities oriented to technical capacity, were included commonly in capacity-building programmes also. However, contributions to functional capacity were being made in valuable ways across the programmes studied, including, for example, supporting the development of DRM policies, legislation and coordination mechanisms for decision-making, and mainstreaming DRR in development plans at different scales.

It is not necessarily useful analytically to separate technical from functional capacity building, as is sometimes done in the literature, because, fundamentally, the two are related and reinforce one another; elements of both of them may be present in the same activity. Also, in situations where the starting point for DRM capacity is low, as is the case in many fragile states, it may remain important to prioritize technical capacity as a counterpart for effective functional capacity.

Key principle 5: Integration of actors and scales

Definition: *The need to build capacity to coordinate across scales and to work with other stakeholders. Capacity building can act to bridge capacity and communication gaps that commonly exist between national and local levels. Initiatives can focus on building capacity of networks of stakeholders, and on building local people’s capacity to interact with other stakeholders.*

The literature is clear that building capacities for inter-scalar working is important for DRM effectiveness and this was confirmed by the research. Inter-scalar

working improves the integration of DRM policies and processes, increases sustainability and facilitates upward, demand-led DRM. However, it does not appear to be prioritized in DRM capacity-building interventions. This was the principle that was rated the lowest in importance overall by research participants across the case study countries, and was not an area of particular strength in most of the case study programmes.

Evidence from the survey shows that less than one-third of DRM programmes are approaching capacity building from a multi-scalar perspective, instead choosing to focus on building the capacities of just one scale. In addition, there seems to be a 'missing middle' as the subnational level is overlooked more often in the design of interventions. The clear preference is for building capacities at national level, followed by the community level, with only 7 per cent of survey respondents identifying the subnational or local government level as the targeted focal group for interventions.

Clearly, adjustments are required to address this issue. Programme implementers should pay attention to the 'missing middle' and consider how new capacities at one level will mesh with capacities and processes at both lower and higher levels (for example, how district plans link with provincial budgeting processes). Also, implementers should design their activities to maximize inter-scalar collaboration.

Key principle 6: Contribution to disaster risk reduction

Definition: *The need for a more holistic DRR-influenced approach to DRM capacity. This includes attention to: understanding and planning for long-term changes in risk; moving beyond a focus on short-term emergency management to capacity in disaster prevention, mitigation and long-term recovery; prioritizing the reduction of vulnerability; targeting the needs of vulnerable groups; and addressing gender inequalities in both*

vulnerability and capacity.

Support for DRR approaches is breaking into DRM capacity-building programmes but still has some distance to go if it is to become strongly embedded as a foundational rather than an additional consideration in programme design.

In particular, there is a gap in capacity-building support for prevention, mitigation and long-term recovery, with much more attention being paid to preparedness and response. While 46 per cent of survey respondents stated that the capacity-building programmes on which they had worked involved a combination of DRM aspects, another 44 per cent stated that programmes were oriented heavily to preparedness or response. Fewer than 8 per cent of survey respondents identified prevention and mitigation as the foci of investment within the DRM capacity-building programmes in which they had been involved recently, and only 2 per cent identified recovery as the key focus. There seems to be no fundamental reason why support for prevention, mitigation and recovery should not be factored into, or indeed form the prime focus of, DRM capacity-building initiatives.

Throughout the research, it was clear that DRM capacity-building programmes tend to focus on present risks and vulnerabilities, and little attention is paid to developing capacities to recognize and adapt to long-term changes, including those associated with climate change. Also, although vulnerable locations are often the targets for capacity-building interventions, in the case study programmes, there was little social targeting within geographical areas.

Gender was found to be another area that, typically, was overlooked in DRM capacity-building programmes, except that sometimes quotas for female participation were included. Project implementers commonly misunderstood what gender mainstreaming means and showed little awareness of how, practically, to adapt

their programmes to take into account differential disaster vulnerabilities, perceptions of hazards and risks, and access to resources, roles, skills and decision-making power. There is clearly a need to support the development and uptake of tailored tools and guidance in this area to enhance practice on the ground.

Changing the approach

DRM capacity-building programmes are encouraged to adopt these six principles as an overarching framework for improving the quality and effectiveness of programming across low and middle-income countries. The table below provides some specific recommendations for programme implementers, relating to each of the key principles (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 these principles in much greater depth, and provides many examples of how programmes have implemented the principles and built DRM capacity successfully.

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Principle	Recommendations
Flexibility and adaptability	Ensure capacity-building activities are adapted to the context and offer flexibility in programming. Conduct rigorous capacity needs assessments early in the design stage.
Comprehensive planning	Improve capacity for sustainability planning and implementation of robust monitoring and evaluation systems.
Ownership and partnership	Continue prioritizing meaningful and deliberate ownership and partnership.
Attention to functional capacity	Place greater emphasis on functional capacity, where possible.
Integration of actors and scales	Increase emphasis on efforts to improve inter-scalar communication and coordination. Address the missing middle (district and provincial levels) in capacity-building programmes.
Contribution to disaster risk reduction	Increase the focus on mitigation, prevention and recovery. Improve attention to gender by educating programme staff and addressing it meaningfully in capacity-building programme design.

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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