REINFORCING CAPACITY SHARING AND MUTUAL LEARNING BETWEEN LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

THE ISSUE

LOCALISATION: EXPLORING A MULTIFACETED AGENDA

Terry Githini, a Partnership & Localisation Advisor with Trócaire, engages with local, national, and international organisations at the annual dialogue meeting on localisation in 2022. ©Photo: Trocaire

The concept of capacity sharing is a relatively new term evolving from a deconstruction of the terms capacity building and capacity strengthening in the context of increased focus on power and discrimination in traditional models of aid.

WHAT IS CAPACITY SHARING?

Trócaire views *capacity sharing* as the deliberate and/or unhindered movement of capacity throughout a system encompassing all who contribute to humanitarian, development, peace and climate action, in the public and private sphere. This includes communities vulnerable to or experiencing crisis. Capacity in this context is understood in all its diverse forms including, but not limited to, experience, technical competency, financial resources, and influence. It is not linear or even necessarily deliberate but rather potentially organic and distinctly multidirectional depending on where capacity demand exists and

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where existing capacity sits. This we assume is always fluid depending on context. Integral is the belief that capacity exists everywhere, and that we all, regardless of identity, have something more to learn. Better still, capacity sharing has the potential to inspire and build synergies so that the collective is greater than the sum of its parts.

We recognize that the concept of capacity building is often interpreted as a top-down, discriminatory, and even colonial process that is project focused and dismissive of skills, experience and relationships at national or local levels. Capacity strengthening recognises already existing capacities and seeks to complement and strengthen these further. Commonly, both capacity building and strengthening are typically associated with unequal power relations, particularly if there are power imbalances in the partnerships between the actors involved.

Ahmed Ibrahim, CEO of Arid Lands Development Focus, speaks at a Kenya Charter for Change meeting with local, national, and international organisations. ©Photo: Trocaire

CHALLENGES RELATING TO CAPACITY SHARING

The following are challenges that should be considered in relation to capacity sharing:

1. The concept of capacity sharing is often conflated and confused with other concepts such as capacity building or capacity strengthening.

2. The full scope and breadth of existing capacity in all of its diverse forms is not always acknowledged and understood within the humanitarian, development and peace system.

3. There is a risk of capacity sharing initiatives being restricted to and delivered in a linear or hierarchical manner if they remain tied and confined to short-term projects or contractual relationships.

4. Unequal power dynamics within the humanitarian, development, and peace system may influence willingness to share or receive knowledge and may result in not valuing capacity equally.

5. The desire to protect intellectual property may present a barrier to the unhindered sharing of capacity for the broadest impact.

PRINCIPLES OF CAPACITY SHARING

Conceptually, we understand capacity sharing to be based on the following principles:

Capacity exists everywhere: Whether visible or invisible, capacity that can and does save lives, reduce human suffering, and enable early recovery in situations of sudden or slow on-set crises exists within individuals, communities, CSOs and NGOs, the public and private sector at the local, national, and international level, in many different forms everywhere.

Capacity sharing does not occur in a vacuum: Capacity sharing should acknowledge, complement, and build upon existing capacity. The process of capacity sharing should not do harm to any individuals, organisations, or institutions involved in it.

Capacity sharing is not hierarchal: Capacity sharing is continuous, multi-directional, and is not limited by either time or space. Its value is determined not by its origin or scale, but rather by how collectively it best contributes to the lives of those vulnerable to or experiencing crisis.

Capacity sharing enables subsidiarity: Capacity sharing should serve the resource needs of decision makers and actors most proximate to and impacted by crises, conflict and/or development challenges. Capacity sharing transforms power relations.

Capacity sharing is caring: The act of sharing or enabling access to capacity is a demonstration of social responsibility transforming and accelerating the power of others, and the collective, to effect change to the benefit of all.

Capacity sharing is non-transactional: The sharing of capacity is not a process driven by gain or reward by those who hold it. It represents an unhindered and unconditional flow of diverse resources whether deliberate or not in response to a specific demand.

Capacity sharing is inclusive: The process of capacity sharing is not an instrument of power. It should not serve to hold influence, nor exclude or marginalise, but rather promote safe inclusion and participation in a systems approach. This requires self-awareness and discipline.

Capacity sharing requires an enabling environment: The sharing of capacity occurs most effectively and has most impact when it is neither forced nor imposed, and there are no undue restrictions on the agency and autonomy of those who may wish to use it.

> EXAMPLE OF CAPACITY SHARING IN PRACTICE – LOCALLY EMBEDDED EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS IN GUATEMALA

An example of capacity sharing in practice took place in San Marcos, Guatemala through the creation of early warning systems (EWS) in areas at risk of flooding. The capacity sharing approach that led to the creation of the EWS drew on existing capacities within Guatemala, including those of the National Coordinator for Disaster Risk Reduction, the government institution responsible for disaster risk reduction (DRR) at the national level. The National Coordinator is the top tier of the DRR system in Guatemala, and it sets the standards that should be followed by municipal and community level coordinators.

Trócaire partners with the organisation Pastoral Social de San Marcos (PSSM), a local Caritas member. PSSM works closely with communities in San Marcos to strengthen DRR mechanisms and set up Community Level Coordinators for Disaster Risk Reduction. PSSM provides support to these Coordinators, including specialised trainings, workshops, and accompaniment in obtaining official accreditation from the National Coordinator. The community coordinators themselves identify whether or not an EWS is needed, based on the contextual knowledge of families living near waterways.

After the needs for the EWS were identified, Trócaire partnered with Galileo University in Guatemala, given their experience in designing, testing, and setting up EWSs. This local expertise was critical in establishing an EWS in the Naranjo River, including monitoring stations at key points in the river basin.

Coordination of delegate of the National Coordinator for Disaster Reduction -CONRED- San Marcos headquarters (Franz Kiss) and local volunteers (Israel Barrios) for the maintenance of cameras and level sensor of the Early Warning System -SAT- for floods in the Naranjo River Basin. PUEBLO NUEVO monitoring station, La Blanca, San Marcos, year 2023. ©Photo: Ana Eugenia Reyna /CARITAS Social Pastoral of San Marcos.

A capacity sharing, research, and collaboration process that took place over months involving communities, municipalities, academics, local authorities, PSSM, and Trócaire resulted in a successful EWS. This system's monitoring stations are equipped with sensors to detect when water levels reach a certain point, which triggers an alert. This is complemented by solar-powered video cameras that provide real time imagery, thus allowing the visual verification of data transmitted by the monitoring stations. The alerts are monitored by volunteers from the Community Level Coordinators and also by the municipality. In the case of a worrying rise in water levels, the municipality can trigger an evacuation notice, giving at-risk communities up to three hours' warning to evacuate.

The EWS on the Naranjo River basin has provided numerous actors with timely, life-saving information. From 2018 to 2019, for example, three major floods occurred. All were detected in advance and evacuation notices were launched by the municipality. Though damages to homes and livelihoods were sustained, no lives were lost.

As a result of this process, a reference manual for the establishment and implementation of EWSs was produced. This has been adopted by the National Coordinator as a key reference document for the setup of EWSs in Guatemala.

This example demonstrates the principles of effective capacity sharing being put into practice. The process to develop the EWSs in Guatemala was based on the idea that capacity existed at numerous levels, including in communities, municipalities, the national government, civil society, and academia. The capacity sharing served a clear need and resulted in effective, life-saving EWSs that supported communities at risk of flooding. Trócaire as an international actor played a facilitative role throughout this process, supporting linkages and creating space for sharing and learning. The model resulted in the creation of a manual that can be shared and utilised throughout the country when developing effective EWSs.

The creation of the EWSs in Guatemala demonstrates the knock-on effects of quality capacity sharing and how multiple actors within the system have a role to play throughout this process. It also illustrates how effective capacity sharing can only occur within an enabling environment that allows for the unhindered flow of knowledge and resources.

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