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Capacity Building for Peacebuilding



MEDRC

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For peace process practitioners transboundary environmental issues such as water, climate change and desertification present a broad array of potential peace initiatives, from international declarations to guiding principles to treaties to shared management and diplomatic contact.

The Stabilization Mechanism Research Brief Series contributes more widely to the overall field of knowledge for environmental cooperation in the service of peace.

Capacity Building for Peacebuilding

Cooperation and collaboration around natural resources and shared environmental concerns can have important spillover effects, which may lead to cooperation on other issues. Capacity-building initiatives, if used well, present pathways wherein cooperation around the environment toward peace and security can be facilitated. This brief focuses on approaches to capacity building for peacebuilding.



Capacity Building for Peacebuilding

Capacity-building is a critical component of many development cooperation programs. From a peacebuilding outlook, capacity building should contribute to laying the structural foundations for longer-term stability and peace. It stands to be a vehicle through which greater inclusivity can be advanced, opportunities for dialogue outside of formal negotiation channels can be maintained and cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder consultations can be held. Achieving this, in practice, however, is complex and often falls short. This brief considers several environmental peacebuilding capacity-building initiatives from a practitioner's point of view.

Principles of Good Practice in Capacity Building for Peacebuilding

Ideally, bottom-up participatory initiatives and top-down adaptive initiatives should be utilized in tandem to facilitate peacebuilding. In practice however, there is no clear-cut approach to effective capacity-building approaches for peacebuilding.

That said, there are principles that have emerged as preferred in facilitating capacity-building initiatives toward and enabling environment for peacebuilding that are recommended, including

- Prioritizing relational approaches that support relationship and trust building through long-term accompaniment.
- Facilitating processes and procedures that value and enable co-creation, learning and adaptation that support inclusion across different linkages of society.
- Strengthening the capacities of governance institutions and the cooperation structures, should they be available in a conflict environment.
- Supporting and building political space for civil society to operate autonomously.
- Capacity building should not ignore or be insensitive to the political environment.
- Advancing multi-level capacity-building action to support adaptability and scalability across formal and informal spaces of capacity building. This should aim to ensure capacity-building action is adaptive and scalable as required to the context.

So, what approaches to capacity building for peacebuilding could be considered to advance these principles of good practice?

Hierarchical Top-Down Capacity-Building Approaches

Typically, capacity-building initiatives have been framed by a centralized authority, and often involve building institutional or community capacity based on a predetermined set of objectives or priorities. Top-down approaches are often characterized by a lack of participation and ownership by the individuals and organizations being developed. In response to these limitations, some top-down approaches to capacity-building initiatives have begun to adopt an adaptive mediation approach in practice.

Adaptive mediation places focus on nonlinearity, the centrality of resilience and local ownership in peacebuilding processes. In acknowledging the complexity of peacebuilding processes, adaptive mediation regards the principal role of external mediation as one of neutral facilitation. In order to support contested parties in peacebuilding, third-party involvement, including in capacity building must modulate initiatives according to the feedback that is received from all of its activities. Facilitating positive peacebuilding processes through adaptive mediation approaches requires a deep understanding of the local context. As an approach, adaptive mediation is becoming increasingly hailed as a scalable and comprehensive approach to inform capacity-building initiatives rather than the traditional top-down capacity-building approach [1].

An example of this top-down approach to capacity-building being applied to foster an enabling environment is MEDRC's capacity-building initiatives in support of its core mandates. Although MEDRC's institutional framework demands a adopts a top-down approach to capacity-building initiatives that aligns with its core mandates, the manner in which MEDRC facilitates capacity-building echoes an adaptive mediation approach.

Using natural resources as a pathway for adaptive mediation is anchored in the idea that building and restoring cooperation over natural resources and the environment is important for both peacebuilding and governance. This approach requires rebuilding trust and relationships between stakeholders and communities. It also calls for improving the technical capacity of decision-makers and local stakeholders to advance new approaches to environmental governance and innovation.

MEDRC is the only lasting multilateral track for dialogue out of five Working Groups that emerged from the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991. An international organization with diplomatic status by international agreement, MEDRC engages in politically-steered capacity-building programs. Through supporting stakeholders to develop better technical cooperation capacity, MEDRC's capacity-building initiatives are directed from high-level political inputs provided by technical and diplomatic representatives. The participation of a diplomatic official alongside a technical expert from each member country ensures that politics and diplomacy are central to the organization and that there can be an ongoing understanding between technical and political expertise both internally and between countries. Steered by high-level consultations on water security priorities, the capacity-building initiatives correspond to MEDRC's priority areas, which are structured to be complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Given the centrality of co-equal partnership and parity of esteem to its institutional foundations, MEDRC's capacity-building initiatives facilitate confidence-building between MEDRC and its member states. In practice, this means that MEDRC does not facilitate any bilateral activities between any of its member states. Instead, its bilateral capacity-building programs are between MEDRC and member countries of the organization that are on the OECD-DAC list for overseas development assistance (ODA). Ensuring that parity of esteem and co-equal partnership remains at the forefront of capacity-building initiatives places parameters on the scope and scale of capacity-building initiatives and emphasizes the centrality of local ownership [2].

Central to capacity building for peacebuilding is how to interpret and institutionalize flexibility in programming so that capacity-building initiatives are able to adjust to local contexts whilst aligning with broader peacebuilding goals. Being steered by high-level political points of departure that aim to enhance national water sector institutional and community capacity, means that MEDRC's capacity-building initiatives need to be able to adjust iteratively. In order to support such iterative changes effectively, trust and relationship building is imperative. There is a personalized dimension to the linkages that connect key institutions with communities and enable a positive trickle-down effect from environmental peacebuilding initiatives aimed at capacity-building. Different levels of society may be connected through specific personalities or institutions that can mobilize efforts around a common idea. This relationship and trust building is supported through the organizational structure of MEDRC. Capacity building in this hierarchical yet adaptive form limits the scope of MEDRC's capacity-building initiatives but allows for programming guided by the needs of local stakeholders and representatives.

Given the multifaceted nature of conflicts, approaches to capacity-building for peacebuilding need to establish a comprehensive understanding of how initiatives at different levels of society, and their linkages, can foster sustainable peace. Despite the promise of adaptive approaches adding more local agency and ownership in steering top-down capacity building, the top-down approach may not be the best fit for positive peacebuilding. The nonlinearity and complex uncertainty of peacebuilding means the risk of poor inclusivity in top-down capacity-building initiatives remains.

Consider, for instance, the limitations to the hierarchical approach to capacity-building present in the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in addressing the capacity disparities between riparian nations. Increasing tensions around hydropower developments, groundwater extraction, agriculturally-driven deforestation and sand mining demand that cooperation around transboundary water is advanced toward an enabling peacebuilding environment [3].

Although technical and diplomatic representation is supported through the institutional structure of the MRC, the top-down structure has enabled asymmetrical capacity disparities between riparian nations to continue rather than be addressed. State-centric environmental securitization interests have primarily been advanced through the MRC instead of basin-wide ecological benefits. This top-down approach to capacity-building does not have the required political commitment from all riparian nations. Although a regional hegemon and the upstream country to the Mekong River basin, China is not engaged in the MRC. The absence of China in the MRC makes moving beyond high-level political deadlocks around transboundary water management difficult and prevents moving toward a point where capacity disparities institutionally and between communities can be adequately addressed through the MRC. Without the political will present and held to account through the institutional set-up of the hierarchical framework that directs capacity-building initiatives, the relational aspects necessary to bridge different national and societal capacity needs through initiatives are hindered. While some top-down frameworks may be adaptable and inclusive enough to advance different levels of capacity-building, this is not guaranteed nor is it easily achieved.

Bottom-up Participatory Approaches to Capacity Building

An approach to enabling more inclusivity across the different levels of society and their linkages, particularly at a community-to-community level in conflict settings is a participatory approach. Participatory approaches to capacity-building prioritize the co-production of knowledge and analysis that then informs initiatives that are led by the local communities. The local ownership and agency that is facilitated by a participatory approach enable informal channels for relationship and trust building between divided groups. If sustained, participatory approaches enable decision-making and benefit sharing to be considered at the community level early on in the peacebuilding process. If such participatory approaches are not designed in a conflict-sensitive manner, capacity-building initiatives risk contributing negatively to peacebuilding and may exacerbate friction or conflict.

If done in a conflict-sensitive manner, bottom-up participatory approaches to capacity-building can advance processes of self-organization through which communities and institutions can garner greater resilience.

Consider the participatory approaches in capacity-building initiatives being used in Fiji by Transcend Oceania and Conciliation Resources. In response to emerging conflict from internal displacement and strained governance caused by climate change, Conciliation Resources and Transcend Oceania actively facilitate the development of civil society capacities to navigate the challenges that are arising from climate change. Through prioritizing processes that strengthen relationships across power divides, the participatory approach currently being used in Fiji has had positive effects in building greater resilience among the community in adapting to climate-related disasters. By applying approaches to dialogue used in the traditional Fijian method of dialogue, Talanoa, a capacity-building initiative was used to provide psycho-social support to a number of communities that faced severe disaster and damage from the late 2019 and 2020 cyclones [4]. Through facilitating dialogue in a manner so deeply rooted in the local customs, the capacity-building participatory approach supported a platform for divided communities to come together and discuss shared experiences.

To strengthen the relational capacity between the State and the communities in addressing these shared concerns, Transcend Oceania has also been facilitating platforms of dialogue between the affected communities and national leaders. In 2021, for instance, a side event was organized at COP26 to raise community voices at national and international levels. In 2022, another policy advocacy event was organized which led to thirty community representatives engaging with the local government and communities. This platform led to more sustained dialogues between the communities and national leaders following the event.

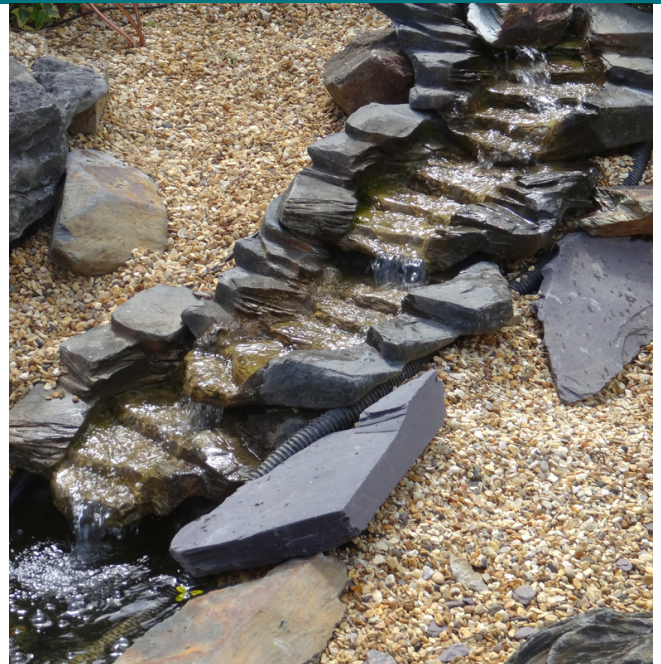
Capacity-building in the form of participatory approaches can enable inclusivity to the broader peacebuilding processes but it is essential that politically, the highest levels of government, are also fully aware of and in support of such participatory approaches. Without directing participatory approaches upwards in capacity-building approaches, the links between community and institutional capacity-building for positive peacebuilding diminish. Consider, for instance, the impasse that emerged between the community and State in Darfur with bottom-up capacity-building approaches resulting in local agreements that were not met with top-down political processes that further complement the community and institutional capacity-building [5].

An example of where multi-level capacity-building initiatives contributed to creating an enabling peacebuilding environment is the use of a biological conservation expedition in Colombia as a vehicle for capacity-building that brought conflict actors together. In the aftermath of a signed peace agreement between FARC-EP and the National Government of Colombia, violence was still present in a number of areas in the Amazon where a power vacuum was left and where deforestation rates began to rise as a result of poor implementation of some of the peace agreement measures. In response to this, a number of social organizations, public institutions and international cooperation efforts came together to conduct capacity-building training in the Zona De Reserva Campesina (ZRC) [6]. The ZRC, being located in a buffer zone that was heavily affected by the armed conflict, presented a territorial space where a biological expedition was of interest to a number of actors. The varying capacity-building training initiatives that extended from the biological expedition required community participatory monitoring which contributed to social cohesions and advanced a community of practice between conflict actors. The longer-term outcomes saw further institutional and community capacity-building as income generation options and the capacity of service providers rose. It also supported the advancement of compensation for victims under the Special Peace Jurisdiction mechanisms.

Natural resources and shared environmental issues present a promising entry point for adaptive mediation and peacebuilding efforts. There is a growing understanding of how peacebuilding and the environment can complement each other and may undermine peace if left unaddressed. Environmental peacebuilding presents different opportunities for engagement depending on what stage the context is at on the peace and security continuum. Determining how to effectively facilitate capacity-building programs is challenging. Nuanced sensitivity and awareness need to be extended in all phases of the design, development and implementation of capacity-building programs.

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