

Capacity building in road safety: What do practitioners think?

Mark King^a, Marina Alexander^a

^aCentre for Accident Research and Road Safety – Queensland (CARRS-Q), Institute for Health and Biomedical Innovation (IHBI), Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

Abstract

The Decade of Action for Road Safety emphasizes the need to build road safety capacity in low and middle income countries. The term “capacity building” was borrowed from other areas of development activity, and in road safety is restricted mostly to training. This presentation reports qualitative research undertaken with the aim of exploring the experiences and opinions of road safety practitioners involved in capacity building activities in low and middle income countries. The findings indicate that there is a need to conceptualize road safety capacity building more clearly, and as a longer term process rather than a short term program.

Background

In recent years, with the recognition that road traffic crashes are a significant cause of death and injury in low and middle income countries, capacity building has become a common objective in programs aimed at improving road safety in these countries. At the same time there is no clear statement as to what is meant by capacity building in road safety. In the development field, the concept of capacity was articulated in the 1980s, and has since been debated and reinterpreted, for example one school of thought advocates the use of “capacity development” as the preferred term, because “capacity development” implies the lack of existing capacity – which is usually untrue - and the need for Western intervention – which has colonialist overtones. In road safety there has been little debate about such issues, and road safety capacity building tends to take place in brief and focused training programs. As such, a community of practice may have arisen, in which a shared understanding of road safety capacity building has evolved mostly as a set of activities rather than as a development process. The purpose of the research reported here was to explore the experiences and opinions of road safety practitioners involved in capacity building activities in low and middle income countries to ascertain whether such a shared understanding existed, what it comprised, and whether the participants felt a need for better articulation of road safety capacity building, and changes in practices.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 12 road safety professionals who were identified as being directly involved in capacity building work in a low or middle income country. Most were based in Australia, though some were Australians based overseas. They were interviewed via phone, Skype or face-to-face for about 45 minutes, and subsequently asked to verify the transcripts of the interview.

Results and Conclusions

The transcripts are currently being analysed thematically. Initial impressions suggest that the way that capacity building in road safety is funded, in short term, focused programs, means that the activities involve training individuals. Broader perspectives, such as institutional capacity, tend to be limited to occasional overview exercises rather than programs. Participants felt this situations should be improved, if possible, and some noted that their own capacity building objectives were constrained by the client institutions and project parameters. Recommendations for a more considered approach and further research (including research with recipients) are made.