WHEN CAPACITY BUILDING FAILS:

THE CASE OF THE NORTH SEA REGION PROGRAMME

A case study

Character count: 51.366

Isabella Leong

isabella.leong@interact-eu.net

Isabella Marie Leong
Studienummer: 20053387

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM FORMULATION

The North Sea Region Programme is a European fund for innovative collaborative projects taking place and involving partners in the seven countries bordering the North Sea. Projects seek funding through an application process (North Sea Region Programme Fact Sheets: 96). The procedures are standardized and an assessment criteria is in place to ensure uniformity in the scoring of the application (North Sea Region Fact Sheets: 96). Each project, in order to be approved and receive funding, must go through an assessment carried out by the staff of the Programme and consequently be reviewed and approved by another programme body, the Steering Committee.

In 2016, the North Sea Region Programme received some feedback from its upper decision body, the Monitoring Committee (MC), asking the Programme to make sure that the assessments of submitted application proposals carried out were of a cohesive nature. This came after 3 rounds of application, through which the assessment of submitted applications was felt as equivocal by the Monitoring Committee. Although some divergences are to be expected between the assessments due to theme, topic or personal style of writing, the application of the assessment criteria defined and approved by the Monitoring Committee is expected to be unequivocal. It was the Monitoring Committee's opinion that there were discrepancies in the application of the assessment criteria and as such the Programme was tasked with addressing this problem (North Sea Region Programme 2017).

In order to address this problem, the Joint Secretariat of the North Sea Region developed an in-house capacity building set of training sessions. The purpose of these sessions was first to uncover these discrepancies (as the Monitoring Committee sees all applications but officers typically only see the applications they themselves are responsible for) and second, allow for a forum to discuss how to adjust the interpretation of the assessment criteria. Eventually these sessions were expected to lead to an agreement on a common set of guidelines for applying said criteria. A total of eight sessions were planned, whereby each criterion of the assessment criteria would be addressed and agreed on. Three sessions were held until the capacity building exercise was abandoned and things resumed as

before. It should be noted that the comment made by Monitoring Committee has since been repeated at each and every steering committee and has so far not been addressed successfully by the Programme.

In this paper, I would like to look more closely at this capacity-building exercise in order to determine the mechanisms that have led to its collapse. In order to do so, I will research the following question:

Why did the capacity building attempt to harmonize the assessment of incoming applications at the North Sea Region Programme not yield the expected outcome?

In this research question, capacity building should be understood as "activities that strengthen the knowledge, abilities, skills and behavior of individuals, and improve institutional structure and processes, so that the organization can efficiently meet its goals in a sustainable way" (Brix 2019: 14). The harmonization of the assessment of incoming applications refer to the processes as described in Brix's definition of capacity-building. "Outcome" in this context should be understood as the consequence of the capacity-building, or in line with the definition above, as strengthened knowledge, abilities, skills and behaviors for the staff involved and improved institutional structure and processes for the Programme, answering the call from the Monitoring Committee to address the divergences found in the application of the assessment criteria.

It is in my opinion important to have an answer to this question, as focusing on the causal mechanisms that led to this collapse can be used in other cases of capacity building – and allow for avoiding a repeat of this failure, thus ensuring empowerment and successful capacity-building. Although I currently no longer work for the North Sea Region Programme, the Progamme itself is preparing for its next iteration, Interreg VI. In this new Programme, a new set of assessment criteria will be developed and used on future project applications. The findings of this research paper will be shared with the Programme, with the hope that it will be put to use and help improve capacity-building sessions related to harmonization of the use of the assessment criteria. This in turn should help ensure

that all incoming applications are treated fairly and equally, notwithstanding which officer carried out the assessment.

This research question will be addressed by contrasting two working hypotheses against interview data gathered from different relevant stakeholders that were involved in these training sessions. It is hoped that through the interview data and through a process of retroduction, the causes for the failure of the training sessions will be uncovered and will be explained through the use of the theories of capacity-building, empowerment and sense-making.

In a first part of the paper, the different theoretical elements of the research paper will be presented, mainly Critical Realism as both ontology and epistemology followed by a quick overview of the theories of capacity building and sense-making in capacity-building setups. Next, the paper will offer some additional background to the research as well as define the research methodology while finally describing findings and discussing these in the analysis and discussion part. This paper ends by making some recommendations for the organization in question, or for any other practitioner finding themselves designing such capacity-building sessions.

THEORY

1. Critical Realism (CR): an ontology

In order to be able to answer this research question, a theoretical framework needs to be put in place. In this case, as I wish to understand the causal mechanisms that led to the failure of the capacity-building sessions, critical realism will be used as a theory of science, following Hoddy's (2019:112) words that "critical realism holds that the development of new knowledge about the social world can be generated through the scientific discovery of objects, structures and generative mechanisms in the domain of the 'real' and the conditions under which these mechanisms are activated". In Easton's (2019: 121) much simpler words, "the most fundamental aim of critical realism is explanation: answers to the question 'what caused those events to happen?'".

Critical Realism is favored in this case as, contrary to positivism, it allows for understanding the socially-constructed elements of the world, while still arguing that the world is indeed real. And contrary to constructivism, critical realism allows for the integration of hard facts based in an immutable reality of the world around us. Therefore, critical realism allows the best of both worlds: it is grounded in the fact that we, and our social systems, are grounded in the real world, while allowing for accepting that our socially-constructed environment is also part and parcel of our lives and can be the cause of many events (Guldager 2015: 169).

Critical Realism is a relatively young theory of science and can be traced back to Roy Bashkar's book titled "A Realist Theory of Science", published in 1978 (Guldager 2015: 161). It was first developed as an answer to bridge the divide between positivists and constructivists (Fletcher 2017: 181) and proposes a way to accept elements of both schools. From positivist metatheories, Critical Realism accepts the idea that the world exists outside of human perceptions and beliefs. However, from the constructionist school of thought, Critical Realism then argues that our understanding of the world around us is socially constructed (Hoddy 2019: 113) and not bound to natural immutable laws. Taking

this deeper, Fletcher (2017: 182) writes that "one of the most important tenets of CR is that ontology is not reducible to epistemology. Human knowledge captures only a small part of a deeper and vaster reality. In this respect, CR deviates from both positivism and constructivism."

Critical Realism as an ontology sees the nature of the world as stratified into layers where three layers are identified: the empirical (experienced events), the actual (events we could experience) and the real (causal or generative mechanisms that control or predict the empirical or the actual) (Hoddy 2019: 112; Armstrong 2019: 573). The realm of the real is populated with intransitive entities while the other two levels of CR contain transitive entities (Armstrong 2019: 573). Transitive entities are shaped by our experiences, by the constructionist elements of our understanding while intransitive elements of the real are closer to positivist theory in that they are considered to be truth-like and immutable. Stigendal and Novy (2018: 207) have articulated this particular distinction as follows: "the real is whatever exists, and that indeed includes knowledge, whether it exists as a potential or as actualized and expressed in an analysis". With regards to this paper, this last sentence is of particular importance as it encapsulates the search for the causal mechanisms that led to the unsatisfactory outcome of the capacity-building sessions held by the organization studied.

2. Critical Realism (CR): an epistemology

While CR holds the position that generative or causal mechanisms exists that impact the domains of the empirical and the real, the question of how to uncover these causal mechanisms is also addressed by CR, although no method is preferred, leaving researchers leeway in determining the best methods to reach these causal mechanisms (Armstrong 2019: 575). Armstrong (2019: 575) describes this as "epistemologically-relative, meaning that the methods used can vary according to the needs of the study".

While positivist research will predominantly demand a deductive approach, and constructionist research an inductive approach, CR research is in most cases done through processes named abduction and retroduction. Abduction refers to a method whereby the researcher will start with a

stated empirical problem and develop theories about the causes or generative mechanisms that have led to this empirical situation (Hoddy 2019: 113). Following this, the theories will be compared to the empirical reality once more and refined, maybe adding elements from different theories in the process (Fletcher 2017: 189) and finally going through retroduction whose goal is to "identify the necessary contextual conditions for a particular causal mechanism to take effect and to result in the empirical trends observed" (Fletcher 2017: 189). In Critical Realism epistemology, there is a movement from the empirical, observed reality to an abstract theorization, confronting this theory/ies with the empirical reality and refining it until the causal mechanisms have come to the fore and the existing knowledge that previously was existent but not actualized is now articulated (Hoddy 2019: 113).

CR holds that theories are fallible "because our knowledge of reality will always be separate from reality itself" (Armstrong 2019: 575). This raises the question of the validity of the research in question as there is no way to ascertain that the conclusions reached are correct. However, authors in this field have argued that although the validity of the conclusions cannot be ascertained, the process of abduction and retroduction brings the theories in use and mechanisms uncovered closer to the truth (Fletcher 2017: 188). Fletcher (2017: 188) further argues that this particular pitfall of Critical Realism can actually be an advantage as it is "useful for change-oriented research in which participants offer competing explanations of a phenomenon and some must be taken as more accurate than others".

From a more philosophical perspective, Cruikshank (2007) has argued that critical realism's claim to allow for fallibilism leads to a shifting set of ontologies, thereby dismissing the validity of any results, as the transitive understanding of reality leads to a set of transitive ontologies, which negates the element of truth one can expect from any scientific research. Cruikshank (2007: 268) further argues that for critical realists, the "focus is on developing new knowledge claims through the critical revision and replacement of new knowledge claims". This thought is at the heart of the CR iterative epistemology, but for Cruikshank, this leads to a shift of focus from the source of knowledge – that is

how do we know what we know – to what he terms the "aboutness" of knowledge (Cruikshank 2007: 268) – that is, what does what we know tell us about what happened.

3. *Capacity-building, empowerment and Sense-Making*

As indicated in the introduction, and following from the epistemology of CR described above, I have chosen two main theories that may provide some understanding of the causal mechanisms behind the failed sessions at the organization studied. These two theories are capacity-building (Krogstrup 2017) and sense-making (Weick 2001). Capacity-building is most often defined as any action or set of actions whose goal is to improve different organizational levels in reaching their targets (Jensen and Krogstrup 2017: 58; Brix 2019: 14). It is a continuous process that encompasses improved skills and competences but also allows for increasing an organisation's or an individual's capacity to identify knowledge gaps and address them (Jensen and Krogstrup 2017: 58). The capacity-building gap is measured as the distance between what an organization wants to change or improve and what resources are available in the organization in order to carry this out (Jensen and Krogstrup 2017: 69).

Jensen and Krogstrup (2017: 58) further identify the core duality of capacity-building in that it plays both at the organizational learning level by developing joint solutions for addressing identified issues while addressing at the same time the individual learning level by increasing competences. These two elements are seen as inseparable and according to Jensen and Krogstrup (2017: 59), lack of either element in the capacity-building equation will lead to failed capacity-building.

Capacity-building is used in processes of change management and is based on internal processes (Jensen and Krogstrup 2017: 59). It seeks, through co-creation, to activate all resources available in the relevant stakeholders in order to reach pre-agreed targets. Capacity-building is contextually anchored and can only take place in the interaction of individuals within a given group (Jensen and Krogstrup 2017: 60).

Capacity-building processes are underpinned by empowerment, whereby new competences developed support the emancipation of the stakeholders who can carry out their tasks more freely and confidently while increased quality is hopefully secured (Jensen and Krogstrup 2017: 64). Empowerment proposes that decision powers be shared to the extent that decisions taken during the change management process, for example, come from involvement and influence of the relevant stakeholders (Jensen and Krogstrup 2017: 69).

From these elements, capacity-building can be written as such:

Context + knowledge gap + co-creation + individual competences and skills + internal processes + group interaction = capacity-building

However, this equation may be a little simplistic as some elements can be seen as weighing more than others. Therefore, it could be argued that this equation may give a better picture of what is required in order to produce capacity-building:

Context (gap + internal processes) + co-creation (influence x learning)/ individuals = capacity-building

This equation will be used later in this paper in order to examine the research question and try to determine the reasons behind the failed training sessions at the joint secretariat of the North Sea Region in their attempt to harmonize the understanding of the assessment criteria and thus answering the criticism expressed by the programme's decision bodies.

Capacity-building efforts are typically underpinned by empowerment processes (Krogstrup and Mortensen 2017: 153), whereby empowerment is the manifestation of a successful form of capacity-building. However, in order to be fully able to make use of capacity-building and empowerment theories, the causal elements linked to the actions of the training sessions need to be addressed. As this is a search for understanding a series of actions, the theory of sense-making (Weick 2001) linked to capacity-building (Degn and Thomassen 2017) will be used.

Isabella Marie Leong
Studienummer: 20053387

Sense-making is a discontinuous process through which organisations explain certain actions retrospectively, typically those that are unusual or did not provide the expected outcome, in order to create a narrative through which members of an organization can make sense of the events in question (Weick 2001: 27; Degn and Thomassen 2017: 108). In this way, sense-making focuses on the relationship between the context provided by the organizational structure and the members of the organization. It implies that sense-making looks at the processes through which individuals can create connections between themselves and their organization and includes such factors as influence these processes (Degn and Thomassen 2017: 105-108). Through this, it is important to note the importance of identity-creation in sense-making. Degn and Thomassen (2017: 111-112) define three elements as the foundation of identity creation: 1. self-enhancement, through which an individual can create a positive picture of oneself; 2. self-efficacy, through which an individual is confirmed in their ability to carry out their tasks/ have the right competences and 3. self-consistency, through which the changes happening to an individual's identity can be reconciled with a previous narrative of the person's identity. Linking this with capacity-building, it becomes clear that any efforts to increase capacity-building efforts in an organization must be supported by a strong narrative that supports all three elements of identity creation as well as offer a strong explanation of the contextual reasons for the capacity-building activities (Degn and Thomassen 2017: 121).

For the research purposes of this paper, two working hypotheses have been developed. The first one examines the design of the training sessions and links to the the theory on capacity-building, focusing on any and all of the elements highlighted in the equation above, with the purpose to provide some insight as to whether the capacity-building sessions could have failed due to the design of the capacity-building sessions. The second working hypothesis leans more towards a grey zone between capacity-building and sense-making, trying to determine whether the participants of the capacity-building sessions would have responded better had they been the ones to identify the knowledge gap (as opposed to the Monitoring Committee).

Both working hypotheses provide a starting point for the analysis, as well as some insight into the empirircal workings linked to the research question, as they both try to provide an answer to the question: why did the capacity-building attempt fail?

4. Methodology and Data Collection

a. Approach: Case Study

In this research paper, the main approach chosen is that of a case study. The varied sources added to the fact that this research is looking at a single instance makes it perfect for such a case study. In addition, case studies offer the possibility for a deep dive into a single problem in order to look for in depth understanding of a phenomenon or situation (Easton 2010: 119). In Easton's own words, "case research allows the researcher the opportunity to tease out and disentangle a complex set of factors and relationships, albeit in one or a small number of instances" - to which the author adds that case research is particularly well-adapted for holistic approach and is well-suited for iterative processes, by which a question can be examined over and over again as understanding grows during the research and interpretation process (Easton 2010: 119).

#### b. Use of Theory: Abduction/ Retroduction and the link to Content Analysis

In order to make sense of the amount of data harvested, it was decided to use an inductive content analysis approach (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). The inductive approach was chosen in this case as there is limited knowledge about the issue at hand, and what can be found is either limited in scope or too general to be of use in this case. The inductive approach allows for moving from the specific instance towards more general yet validated knowledge once it has been concluded (Elo and Kyngäs 2008: 109). In order to use the content analysis methodology, the data is gathered through interviews, review of documents and field notes, and the immersion process begins at this point. From there, a number of categories emerge, which are refined over time (Elo and Kyngäs 2008: 111). The categories lead to generalisations (Elo and Kyngäs 2008: 111) that are then used to verify or falsify the hypotheses

that come from the retroduction method. Finally, through the content analysis and the retroduction, the hypotheses are refined and the causal mechanisms that have caused the capacity-building session under scrutiny to fail should be revealed.

This has however been slightly modified, by including two initial working hypotheses. However, remaining in line with the inductive approach of the case study, the working hypotheses only provide a starting point while trying to understand the data and the findings emerging from coding and categorizing. In this way, even though starting with two working hypotheses, this research remains inductive and not deductive: this paper does not set out to verify or dismiss these two hypotheses, instead these are an anchor in order to navigate large amounts of data.

c. Data Collection, bias and validity considerations

In order to be able to research this question, a number of different sources are available, and cover all interested parties in this question. This can be visualized as follows:
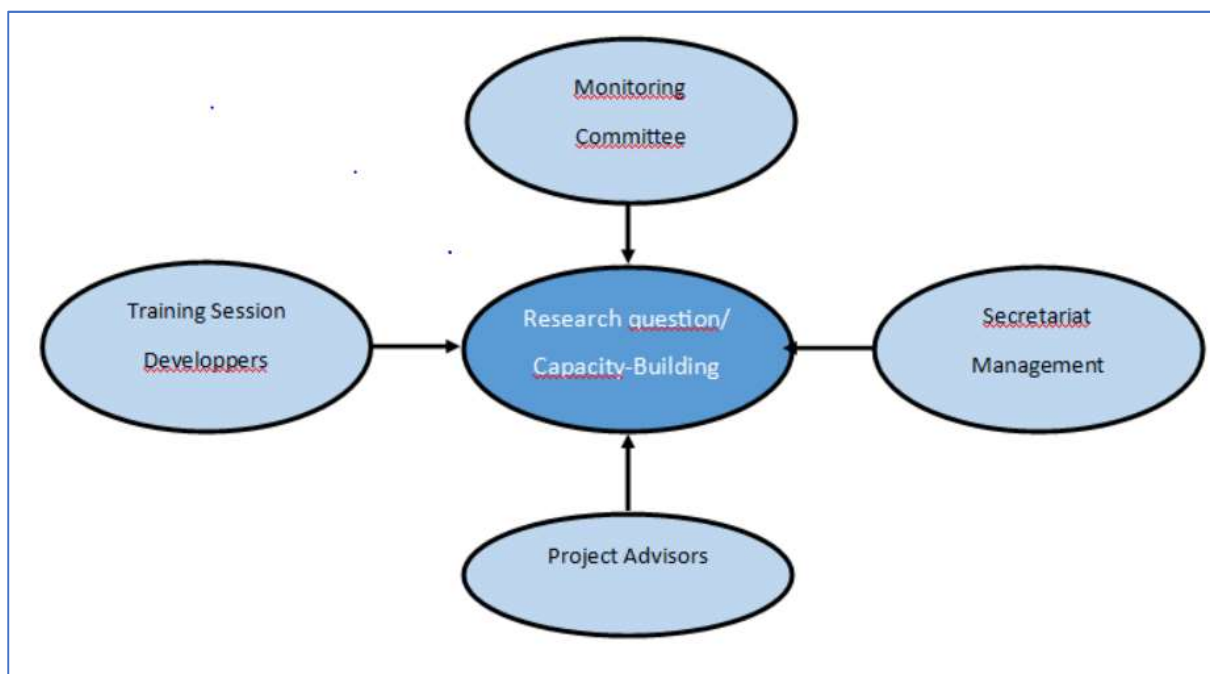
Source: author's own.

To answer the research question, I will rely on various sources of primary data. Data is collected through document review and semi-structured interviews.

Isabella Marie Leong
Studienummer: 20053387

I have had access to the different documents that were generated for the training sessions, including the comparisons of answers and the overall plans for the capacity-building exercise. In addition to this, it was deemed necessary to harvest the memories of the events from the participants themselves as well as from the co-developer of the session. These were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews carried out between April and November 2020, depending on the availability of the different participants. Semi-structured interview format was selected as it allowed for both access to comparable data, stemming from standard opening questions and more open, investigative dialogue that may lead to new knowledge or insights (Justesen and Mikk-Meyer 2010: 55-56). In addition to this, as the researcher was the second session developer, field notes are in this case available. These are in the form of mental notes as well as written documents, oftentimes limited to questions or comments. In the case of this research, three different types of data sources are available, each complementing a facet of the question at hand and once combined can provide a greater progress towards a real and realist view of the research question. Data in this research paper has been both gathered (documents, meeting notes) and generated (interviews): this is also in line with the critical realist approach chosen as the data gathered offers a positivist epistemological aspect as it is real in and of itself while the data generated offers a constructivist epistemological aspect as it is data only available in the interpretation of events of the interview respondents (Hunter 2015: 856).

Access and analysis of these different data sources allow for data triangulation as described in Justesen & Mikk-Meyer (2010:45). This has for goal to reduce the inherent bias of using field notes (Justesen & Mikk-Meyer 2010: 45) and should allow for greater validity of the results of this research. Below is a table to demonstrate the link between the different data sources and their validity in trying to answer the research question.

Type of data source	Bias level	Ethical considerations
Semi-structured interviews	Medium	Corroboration possible, ensuring validity of findings
Field notes	High	No corroboration possible, validity of findings limited to correlated conclusions with other data sources
Documents	Low	Neutral data source, with high validity

Source: Author's own.

In addition to this and in relation to the choice of retroductive methods, the inherent bias of both interviews and field notes is encapsulated in Al-Amoudi and Wilmott's words: "Retroductive judgments provide *possible* but historically contingent explanations of certain states of affairs". This is further explained by Al-Amoudi and Wilmott (2011: 30) as the fact that the knowledge uncovered during research is not fallible only based on bias, but also based on the historical context of the knowledge – as historical context is linked to the "time, place and position of the knower".

Data was collected over time from April to November 2020. The current public health situation gave rise to some problems in scheduling the interviews that explains the long timeline for data collection. Three desk officers, one session co-developer and one manager agreed to the interview. Interviews lasted between 25 and 32 minutes.

Data collection started in April 2020 with an interview of the session co-developer. This was followed by document review and review of field notes in the summer of 2020, while the interviews of the workshop participants (desk officers) took place in September, October and November 2020. Finally, the interview of the managerial level at the organization took place in October 2020. Views of the Monitoring Committee were accessed through review of documents such as meeting minutes and meeting papers.

ANALYSIS

1. Background for the research

In 2017, the organization studied was subject to a so-called "2-step review" that aimed at carrying out an evaluation of one of its core processes, the application process, leading to granting of funding. The North Sea Region itself describes the application process this way: "In most cases there is a 2-step application procedure. Projects first submit an Expression of Interest and only projects which are approved at this stage are asked to submit a Full Application" (North Sea Region Programme Fact Sheets: 96). This review was requested by the Monitoring Committee of the organization, a board that oversees the correct functioning of the organization. In its conclusions, the 2-step review indicated that they noted discrepancies in the application of the assessment criteria, and consequently the quality and rating of the applications, and requested that this be addressed in order to give all applicants a fair and equal chance (North Sea Region Programme 2017).

The management level of the organization tasked two desk officers with solving this problem. Through a brainstorming and planning session, these desk officers created an 8-session course, reflecting the 8 criteria of the assessment process where each criterion would be discussed per session. All remaining desk officers at the organization were given as a preparatory assignment to assess the same application and send their assessments to the organisers. The organisers collated the responses in a spreadsheet and used this document as the basis for discussions in planned weekly sessions. The goal of these sessions was to highlight the variety of responses to the same criteria in the assessment of the same application and was expected to be the starting point for a discussion between the desk officers in order to reach a greater level of common understanding in how to use and apply the assessment criteria, with the end goal of addressing the remarks of the 2-step review and ensure a more unified assessment of the applications, regardless of the desk officer carrying out the work. All

desk officers submitted their assessment of the first criteria and the first session took place. Discussions were lively and it quickly became clear that no consensus could be reached at this point.

The organisers reviewed the outcome of the session and requested that the management attend the next session. This was done with the intention to unlock some of the conflicts that had arisen during the first session. Between the session developers, it was assessed that some decisions should be reached and help the discussions along. The second session took place one week after the first. All desk officers sent in their assessment of the second part of the application form. Again, the organisers updated the spreadsheet and the discussion session took place. This time, the management level was present. The discussions were heated and did not yield any common understanding. Management did not offer any decisions and remained passive.

The organisers once again reviewed the outcome of the session and requested the next part of the assignment. At this point, only some desk officers sent in their assessments. The live session was attended by only a few desk officers and did not yield any new positions on the discussions. After this, no further sessions were held and the exercise was aborted.

The Monitoring Committee comments in the 2-step review were addressed by introducing a character limit on the text fields pertaining to the assessment. In this way, the maximum length of the assessment was harmonized. The process can be visualized below:
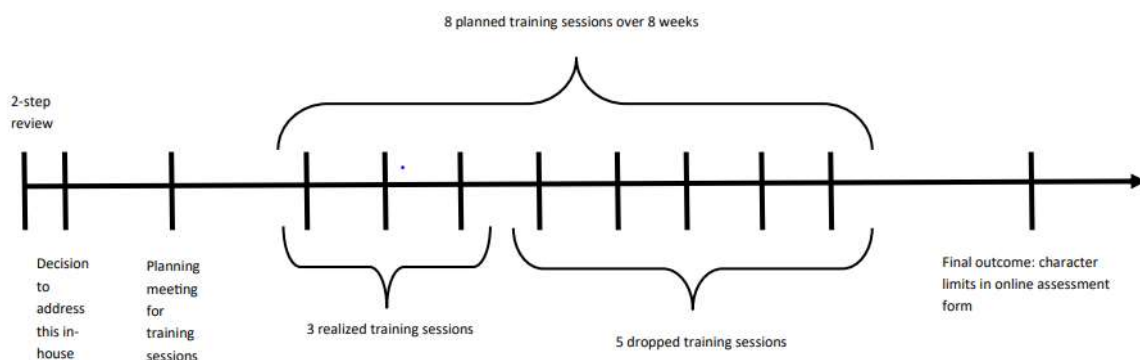
Source: author's own.

2. Content Analysis and the Retroductive Process

To address the research question and find out why this capacity-building session failed, a content analysis has been carried through and served as empirical data for the abduction/ retroduction process. Three desk officers, one session developer and one manager agreed to be interviewed, leading in all to 131 minutes of interview time. In addition, documents related to the training session as well as field notes were reviewed.

According to the methodology described in Elo and Kyngäs (2008: 109), the unit of analysis chosen is interviews. Out of this unit of analysis, a number of categories or "codes" were created. These codes are displayed below and broken down by the source of the unit of analysis:

	Main points				
Desk Officer 1	conflicts	useless	topic	not enough time	
Desk Officer 2	mandate	useless	too late in the process	meeting fatigue	personal style
Desk Officer 3	pointless	personal style	opinions	unclear purpose	
Session Developer	mandate	lack of support	uselessness	late in the process	
Management - Joint Secretariat	useless	rubber stamping	impossible to address	strong characters	

Through these codes, a number of "demi-regularities" (Fletcher 2017:185) appear. These demi-regularities help to identify tendencies that indicate trends in the data coding (Fletcher 2017: 185). Following the identification of these codes and demi-regularities, the methodology calls for aggregating the codes in larger, more encompassing main categories (Elo and Kyngäs 2008: 109). This was done by identifying larger elements in which the codes above can seem to find their place. This can be seen in the table below:

Categories	
opinions	too late/ not enough time
personal style	lack of support
conflicts	uselessness
strong characters	rubberstamping
	impossible to address
	unclear purpose
identity	disempowerment

Source: author's own.

3. Findings of the content analysis

In order to address the research question and find out what caused the capacity-building session to fail, two working hypotheses were identified, prior to the data coding. These were:

1. The capacity-building sessions failed due to incorrect training methods and facilitation techniques chosen, which did not correctly address the knowledge gap.

2. The capacity-building sessions failed due to the fact that the desk officers did not share the views expressed in the conclusion of the 2-step review and so did not acknowledge the need to discuss or build on their skills for assessing applications.

In the first of these working hypotheses, the reason for the failure of the capacity-building sessions is put squarely on external contextual factors. It is linked to an inadequate method chosen by the session developers in addressing this knowledge gap, which would then explain the empirical evidence in the form of failed facilitation (heated discussions, lack of conclusions). Refering back to the equations presented in the theory chapter of this paper, the focus of the first working hypothesis was put on the knowledge gap as well as the internal processes.

The second working hypothesis addresses more squarely the knowledge gap at the individual level and highlights the possibility that the identification of this gap happened too far – in organizational terms – from the actual implementers. In this way, and in line with capacity-building theory, the capacity-building session's failure should be explained by the fact that the desk officers themselves did not recognize the need for refined skills and competences. By not having identified this gap themselves, the participants did not feel ownership to the outcomes and could easily retrench themselves onto defensive positions.

These two working hypotheses provide strong starting points for the analysis, and are in line with the theoretical background chosen in this case study. They allow for rational explanation of the empirical evidence and should be confirmed by the generated data. However, the data generated through the interviews does not at any point provide clear and unequivocal evidence of the validity of the first working hypothesis. Instead, none of the participants mention the training sessions design or the facilitation techniques used. Instead, the participants have focused on different elements, closer to their own professional situation, as will be expanded below.

The data generated through the interview is less clear cut with regards to the second working hypothesis. While none of the participants clearly indicate that they did not feel that the Monitoring Committee was too far removed to clearly understand their working processes, the issue of mandate and purpose kept creeping up. It should be noted that the answers provided by the respondents were not unequivocal and could be interpreted in different ways. For example, one respondent indicated "but what does MC know about this? They've never filled out an assessment before": while literally taken it is a clear indication of some frustration from staff employed by the Programme, it does not clearly address the working hypothesis. Bearing this in mind, however, the answers relating to this second hypothesis have proven to be more open to interpretation in terms of coding and have yielded greater insight, as will be shown in the following discussion and analysis.

Through the data coding, two main demi-regularities appeared, encompassing the most recurrent themes. The first one revolves around the issue of "identity". In this case, the interview respondents identified such elements as personal style, citing for example "that's how I learnt to do it" or even "we can't all write the same way" when asked about why they thought the Monitoring Committee was raising the concern of harmonization in the application of the assessment criteria. From a managerial perspective, one reason for the failure of the capacity-building was identified as lying within the character of the desk officers. Desk officers were described as "strong, strong colleagues", further elaborated as opinionated and strong debaters. All these elements point towards elements of identity, self-identification and identity perception from colleagues. This first demi-regularity is interesting as it links back to the capacity-building equations but does not offer support for the original pre-suppositions of the first working hypothesis. While the first working hypothesis focused on elements of knowledge gap and internal processes, this demi-regularity reveals that the greater obstacle to a successful capacity-building in this case lay in elements of individual competences and skills and group interaction. These findings will be used when developing refined working hypotheses later on in this paper.

The second demi-regularity that emerged from the data coding can be identified as disempowerment. Respondents expressed frustration linked to purpose or lack thereof of the training sessions, exclaiming "but what was the point" or even "I still don't see why we had to do this". The respondents added to this by identifying issues such as timing – either seen as "too late" as three calls for applications had already been carried out - or as not having enough time set aside to meaningfully prepare for the training sessions. Finally, from a managerial point of view, it was indicated that the training sessions were set up in order to address the concerns of the Monitoring Committee but no relevant or useful outcome was expected, thus placating the concerns of the Committee.

The interviews confirmed some minor elements in the working hypotheses, but did not give rise to complete agreement. Based on the demi-regularities above and following the abduction/ retroduction method, 2 new hypotheses are developed.

4. Discussion of the findings

Based on the coding and demi-regularitites identified, the working hypotheses are refined. The first refined working hypothesis is as follows:

1. The capacity-building sessions failed due to the fact that these sessions cast doubt on the participants's professional identity.

With this hypothesis, all three elements of identity-creation are touched on: self-enhancement, self-efficacy and self-consistency (Degn and Thomassen 2017: 112) and can help understand why the participants resorted to defensive techniques and refused to accept the need to address the knowledge gap identified by the Monitoring Committee.

This refined hypothesis puts some emphasis on the context developed around the training sessions. The narrative provided through the document analysis shows that the training sessions were seen as a "have to" rather than a "need to" and in this way, did not support what Weick terms enactment (Degn and Thomassen 2017: 113), and which can be seen as a justification that can be used in order to create a narrative that one can agree to. In this way, the participants could reject the conclusions of the Monitoring Committee and retain their professional identity by remaining "strong, strong colleagues" or referring to their "personal style". The conclusions of the Monitoring Committee, which gave rise to these training sessions, were dismissed as unjustified. In Weick's terms (2001: 27), the actions in this context were not volitional – it was not the participants' idea to carry out this training, were not explicit – it was unclear for the participants at to why they needed to agree to this – and was not public – the training sessions were mentioned in some follow-up meeting papers to the Monitoring Committee but quickly glossed over. This in turn could be explained through Weick's

indeterminacies in loosely coupled organisations (Weick 2001: 42), where he argues that organisations are likely to resist oversight from other parts of the organizational hierarchy that are deemed to be too far removed.

Through the training sessions, it may not have been clear to the participants how their skills and the quality of their work would be improved, and so led to a sense of disempowerment, or what Weick (2001: 27) terms "anomie": a sense of uncaring and laissez-faire, leading to meaninglessness and apathy. Weick (2001: 27) indicates that a strong, committed context usually serves to solve this issue and from the participants' interviews it is clear that this is not the case here.

This conclusion can also be taken quite close to the second refined working hypothesis. This could be formulated as follows:

2. The capacity-building sessions failed due to a lack of committed justification.

Through the interviews, the respondents indicated time and time again that they did not understand the reason why they had to review their practices, and that they did not understand how the Monitoring Committee had reached their conclusions. This would tend to indicate that the training sessions were not supported by a committed, justified action (Weick 2001: 27). In this hypothesis, the focus is shifted from the sessions themselves to the context surrounding them. According to sense-making theory linked to capacity-building, sense-making in these cases is in place in order to offer an understanding of the context and limit ambiguities in the interpretation of the actions taken by the organization (Degn and Thomassen 2017: 105). This lack of committed, justified action can also be seen from the session developer interview, where terms such as "uselessness" and "lack of support" were expressed. This indicates that the lack of committed, justified action was present at the managerial level when passing on the task, and at the trainer level when designing and carrying out the training sessions. This would seem to be supported also at the managerial level where the training sessions were described as needed to placate the Monitoring Committee, later categorized as "rubber stamping". In this interview, it also emerged that the managerial level did not believe in the possibility

to achieve a harmonized understanding of the assessment criteria. It is here possible to see the beginnings of a self-fulfilling prophecy, or as Weick (2001: 26) describes it: "perceptions and actions validate one another in ways that resemble self-fulfilling prophecies". The task that was passed on to the session developers was doomed at the start, it would seem, by not being seen as achievable and by not being supported by a strong narrative. This feeds back into the first refined working hypothesis, where the session developers were not able to frame the capacity-building exercise as a "need to" exercise and cast doubt on the participants' s professional capacity.

5. Impact of the findings

Through this retroductive analysis, the research question has been first examined from two initial working hypotheses dealing with the design of the training sessions and the felt need for the training sessions. Both working hypotheses were dealing with relatively superficial reasons for the failed capacity-building sessions. These two working hypotheses were then confronted with the results of the content analysis, which identified two demi-regularities linked to issues of identity and purpose. This led to two refined working hypotheses where the first one examined the possibility that the capacity-building sessions failed because they cast doubt on the professional skills of the participants while the second refined working hypothesis dealt with a more contextual approach and examined whether the capacity-building sessions failed due to a lack of committed, justified action – that is to say a strong narrative commitment to enacting these capacity-building sessions.
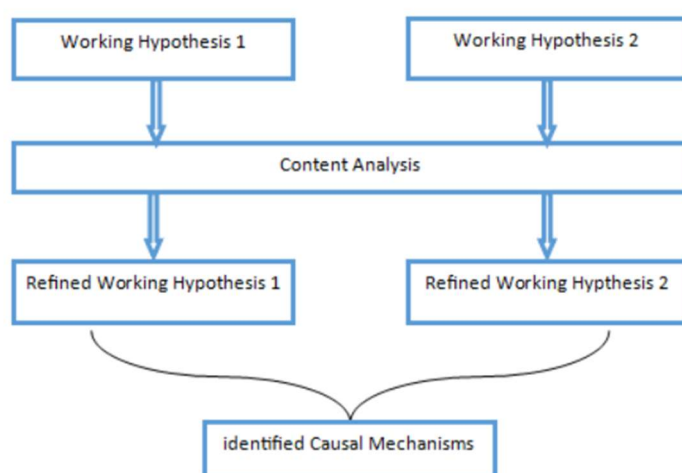
Source: author's own

The figure above summarizes the abduction/ retroduction process that has been applied in this research paper.

From the two refined working hypotheses, some causal mechanisms are expected to appear. In this section, some proposals will be presented and discussed, bearing in mind that critical realism accepts fallibility as part of its epistemology.

Based on the two refined hypotheses, some practical implications can be derived for use by the organization studied.

The study of the capacity-building sessions relating to the application of the assessment criteria has shown that some elements need to be taken into consideration if this is to be improved in a new iteration of the Interreg North Sea Programme. With regards to the design of the capacity-building sessions, the importance of the elements of professional identity cannot be understated. All three elements cited above need to be addressed in order to create a willingness for the participants and worth as to their effort.

However, this is a cosmetic element in many respect, as a deeper causal mechanisms was revealed through this study. For example, although elements of identity are highly relevant, they are embedded in a larger effort at sense-making. In this regard, it is important to highlight the weight that the

managerial level carries. In the case of this paper, the managerial level did not determine a narrative that could be accepted by the training session participants. The manager's reluctance to accept the findings of the Monitoring Committee led to an incomprehension on the part of the participants as to the necessity of the training exercise. Without this committed, justified action on the part of the manager, the exercise seems to have been doomed to fail. It may be worthy for managers in the Programme to examine thoroughly their commitment to the Monitoring Committee's decision or comments, in order to avoid the "anomie" described by Weick (2001: 27) and to ensure the commitment and willingness of the staff.

In addition to this, it would be of interest to the Programme to pro-actively tackle the issue of the application of the assessment criteria already now in the programming phase for Interreg VI. Based on the findings of this paper, it would be advisable for the Programme to develop an understanding of the assessment criteria involving all relevant stakeholders in the assessment and decision process: the Steering Committee, the Monitoring Committee, the staff at the Joint Secretariat and any other relevant stakeholders. Based on the capacity-building theory described above, strengthening these internal processes through co-creation methods would erase some of the distance that is felt to exist between the staff of the Programme and other Programme bodies. In addition, addressing this at this stage, before the project advisors have settled in their areas of speciality should allow for limiting the silo thinking that was one of the comments of the Monitoring Committee. At this stage in the preparation of the new Programme, it should be possible and would be beneficial for the Programme to develop a joint, harmonized understanding of the assessment criteria that would minimize the discrepancies that were found in the utilization of the assessment criteria in the current programming period. It is also worth pointing out that this exercise would benefit from being carried out ex-ante to the first applications being submitted and assessed rather than at a later stage in the Programme. This links back to the issue of identity as addressing this issue earlier on, and prior to the first assessments,

would allow to build confidence in the staff and ensure that they possess the right skills and competences in the new iteration of the Programme.

Finally, the use of co-creation methods with relevant programme stakeholders should allow to create a sense of closer cooperation and limit the sense of oversight from the Monitoring Committee while fostering a greater understanding for the daily tasks that are delegated to the Programme staff.

Isabella Marie Leong
Studienummer: 20053387

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to address the question of why a given set of capacity-building sessions planned and executed at the North Sea Region Programme failed. The end goal of this research being to create a better understanding of the reasons that have led to this inconclusive training in order to avoid carrying out the same mistakes again in a similar setting.

In order to address this question and provide an answer, this paper used Critical Realism. Critical Realism was chosen as a theory of science as it proposes to help uncover causal mechanisms and help provide insights (Fletcher 2017: 181). Critical Realism breaks away from both positivism and constructivism as it does not see the world as a zero-sum game, but allows for accepting that the world we exist in provides real and solid frames while the society and social interactions that have been built into it remain just as relevant as the realist positivist frames (Fletcher 2017: 182).

To help examine the research question, two working theories were chosen: capacity-building (Jensen and Krogstrup 2017) and sense-making (Degn and Thomassen 2017; Weick 2001). Each of these theories has shed some light on the causal mechanisms that led to the failure of the training sessions. From a methodological point of view, the research carried out in this paper has been inductive, although guided by two working hypotheses. Documents were reviewed, interviews carried out and this data was processed through a content analysis (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). From this content analysis, some codes or categories emerged that were confronted with the working hypotheses. From there, the working hypotheses were refined and provided some insights to answer the research question.

Based on the theories chosen and the findings of the content analysis, some elements of answer have emerged. It is possible at this point to say that the training sessions at the North Sea Region Programme did not yield the expected result due to two main factors: 1. the training sessions cast doubt on the professional identity of the participants and led them to defend their positions, resulting in "anomie" – the sense that there is no rhyme nor reason for a given event. In addition to this, and

maybe more insightful, the findings revealed that the sessions failed due to a missing narrative regarding the sessions validity. The management of the organization did not provide a justified, committed action or narrative that the participants of the training sessions could adhere to. This sense of purposelessness emphasized the anomie described above and ushered the reluctance to participate.

This research and the answers it provides have led to some recommendations made to the North Sea Region Programme – and to practitioners in the same situation. These recommendations are:

1. to address the issue of creating a common understanding of a criteria or other assessment tool prior to the first use of the tool in question.

2. to ensure that all relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process are involved in defining this common understanding, ideally in a co-creation process, so as to minimize the organizational distance between different organs or stakeholders of an organization.

3. to provide a strong, committed, justified action to support points 1 and 2. The importance of providing this element seems paramount from the findings of this study and should act as a "red thread" for any such capacity-building sessions.

The results of this paper will be presented to the Joint Secretariat of the North Sea Region Programme in February 2021.

Isabella Marie Leong
Studienummer: 20053387

Bibliography

Al-Amoudi, I. and Wilmott, H. (2011), "Where Constructionism and Critical Realism Converge: Interrogating the Domain of Epistemological Relativism", Organisation Studies, Vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 27-46.

Armstrong, R. (2019), "Critical Realism and Performance Measurement and Management: Addressing Challenges for Knowledge Creation", Management Research Review, vol. 42, no. 5, pp. 568-584.

Brix, J. (2019), "Innovation capacity building: An approach to maintaining balance between exploration and exploitation in organizational learning", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 12-26.

Cruikshank, J. (2007), "The Usefulness of Fallibilism in Post-Positivist Philosophy: a Popperian Critique of Critical Realism", Philosophy of the Social Sciences, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 263-288.

Degn, L. and Thomassen, A.O. (2017), "Capacity-building i et Organisatorisk Perspektiv". In: Samskabelse of Capacity-Building, pp. 105-123.

Elo, S. and Kyngäs, H. (2008), "The Qualitative Content Analysis Process", Journal of Advanced Nursing, vol. 62, no. 1, pp. 107-115.

Easton, G. (2010), "Critical Realism in Case Study Research", Industrial Marketing Management, vol. 39, pp. 118-128.

Fletcher, A. (2017), "Applying Critical Realism in Qualitative Research: methodology meets method", International Journal of Social Research Methodology, Vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 181-194.

Guldager, J. (2015). *Videnskabsterori: En indføring for Praktikere*. Akademisk Forlag: København.

Hammer, S. and Høpner, J. (2018). *Meningsskabelse, organisering og ledelse: en Introduktion til Weicks univers". Samfundslitteratur*: Frederiksberg.

Hoddy, E.T. (2019), "Critical Realism in Empirical Research: Employing Techniques from Grounded Theory Methodology", International Journal of Social Research Methodology, Vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 111-124.

Hunter, A. (2015), "Data Collection: Interviewing". In: International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, 2nd edition, vol. 5. Elsevier: Amsterdam.

Jensen, J.B. and Krogstrup H.K. (2017), "Capacity-Building i den Offentlige Sektor". In: Samskabelse og Capacity-Building, pp. 57-74.

Justesen, L. and Mikk-Meyer, N. (2010), *Kvalitative Metoder i Organisations- og Ledelsesstudier*, Hans Reitzels Forlag, København.

Krogstrup, H.K. (2017), *Samskabelse og Capacity-Building i den Offentlig Sektor*, Hans Reitzel Forlag: København.

Krogstrup, H.K. and Mortensen, N.M. (2017), "Opbygning af Kapacitet til Samskabelse og Brugerinvolvering". In: Samskabelse og Capacity-Building, pp. 149-169.

North Sea Region Programme (2017), MC papers. Internal document available upon request.

North Sea Region Programme Fact Sheets, available at: https://northsearegion.eu/media/15501/231120-all-fact-sheets-combined.pdf, pp.1 – 163.

Weick, K. (2001), *Making Sense of the Organization*, Blackwell Publishing: Oxford.

Stigendal, M. and Novy, A. (2018), "Founding Transdisciplinary Knowledge Production in Critical Realism: Implications and Benefits", Journal of Critical Realism, Vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 203-220.