

Why Local Knowledge is Important

Local knowledge and the debate about participation

Understanding local knowledge is not enough: it is only a means to the inclusion and participation of local people in disaster management and preparedness activities. As such local knowledge can be an entry point for promoting local people's participation with 'higher-level' institutions in those aspects of disaster risk prevention and management for which they have a comparative advantage (Battista and Baas 2004, p 8).

This paper does not discuss participatory literature in detail, but the rediscovery of local knowledge is concomitant with calls for flexible and adaptable management systems and the new discourse in the development field on a 'participatory', 'bottom up', and 'farmer first' approach. The catchwords of this approach are 'governance', 'empowerment', 'devolution', 'citizen science', 'community-based management', 'empowerment', 'self-reliance', 'decentralisation of decision-making', 'adaptive management', 'co-management', and the 'subsidiarity principle'. Hazard research has been relatively slow off the mark in engaging with these broad debates (Few 2003), but they are entering the humanitarian aid and disaster risk reduction fields (e.g., 'community-based risk reduction', 'community-based hazard identification and mitigation', and 'participatory hazard mapping') and an increase in community participation in disaster management is being called for (Linkenbach-Fuchs [2002], as well as on early warning research and systems (Schware 1982 [West Bengal]; Parker and Handmer 1998 [England]; ILO 2002 [India]; Pratt 2002 [Kenya]; ISDR 2004). The success of these participatory approaches lies in their generality, which enables them to link risk reduction with the issue of development as a whole (Few 2003).

Participatory approaches to disaster management and preparedness often pre-suppose a basis in local knowledge and practices because communities in disaster-prone areas have accumulated a lot of experience over time (Battista and Baas 2004, p 10). These approaches also recognise that local people are the primary actors by default when a disaster strikes. From a local knowledge perspective, according to Battista and Baas (2004, p 29), it is more interesting to examine recurrent shocks that gradually increase the vulnerability of communities. Exceptional disasters require external means, beyond normal coping strategies.

Local knowledge as a tool for change

According to the participatory discourse, taking local knowledge into consideration in terms of practices and contexts can help implementing organisations improve their planning for and implementation of disaster preparedness activities; and it can help improve project performance and project acceptance, ownership, and sustainability specifically. This means that understanding, accounting for, and respecting local knowledge contribute to cost-effectiveness in the long-term, from both a financial and a social point of view– especially in the context of complex, changing, and growing hazards.

Firstly, from a financial point of view, economies of scale are based on the assumption that people perform better on some scales than on others and that different resources are found on different scales (Berkes 2002, p 317). Solutions in resource management, development, and disaster management need to go beyond the dichotomy between local versus state management levels and integrate cross-scale institutional linkages. Understanding local knowledge and practices can help identify what is needed and acceptable locally and how people's participation can be solicited to ensure their support for external action. Building on local knowledge and practices (i.e., capitalising on local strengths), when it is relevant to do so, can decrease dependency on external aid. Local people provide continuity and can monitor the actions taken (Wisner and Luce 1995, p 344).

Secondly, from a social point of view, taking local knowledge and practices into account promotes mutual trust, acceptability, common understanding, and the community's sense of ownership and self-confidence. Understanding local knowledge, practices, and contexts helps development and research organisations to tailor their project activities and communication strategies to local partners' needs. It also enables development research organisations to act as intermediaries in translating messages from government level to communities in a way that is understandable and credible. For example, a meteorological agency might release the following message to communities: "the river is going to rise by one to two metres in the next 24 hours." But is it enough? What does it mean to the locals? Government agencies often release information that is not understood at local level (Cronin et al. 2004; Jaarsma et al. 2001; Messer 2003; ILO 2002; ISDR 2004). Cronin et al. (2004, p 663) in Ambae Island, Vanuatu, describe how depictions of volcanic hazard on a map could not be understood locally, because the community had a different perception of the landscape from that of the mapmakers. Hence, communication tools for disaster preparedness, such as official warning messages or hazard maps, need to incorporate local references.

The inclusion of local people in disaster management and preparedness activities is challenging. In practice, participation and decentralisation involve complex processes and the devolution of power to local levels does not always transfer into power being given to the most marginal groups, mainly because increased access to (political) resources does not always translate into increased benefits from those resources (see also Chapter 6, section on power relations). Chambers and Richards (1995, pxiii cited in Ellis and West 2000, pp 6-7) argue that development practitioners use jargon,

such as empowerment and participation, easily but have not changed their attitudes towards rural people and still undervalue their knowledge.

The renewed interest in local knowledge does not mean that outside economic interests in benefiting from local knowledge have disappeared, as demonstrated by controversies about intellectual property rights over medicinal plants and pharmaceutical commercialisation. These aspects illustrate how the use of local knowledge raises complex issues.



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