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Courting Catastrophe Project Report 03

Three Myths of Development, Disasters and Climate



**COURTING
CATASTROPHE?**

Humanitarian Policy and
Practice in a Changing Climate

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The Department of International Environment and Development Studies is part of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU). The Department's activities include research, education and assignments.

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Three Myths of Development, Disasters and Climate Change

One of the consequences of climate change and disaster preparedness is their effect on development either in the short or long term. Hazards including droughts, cyclones, and floods are events that may severely affect people's livelihoods. Communities, governments and humanitarian agencies respond differently to such catastrophes. It is therefore crucial to understand the overlap between development, climate change and disaster preparedness. The main purpose for organizing this seminar was to elaborate and discuss the connection between the above three aspects.

In the seminar, Terry Cannon presented key areas of work that overlap between development, climate change and disaster preparedness and discussed these in relation to three myths. The first myth is that people give priority to severe natural hazards, and that this is the same outlook as that of outsider disaster managers. Most people do not prioritize severe natural hazards because they have other daily priorities. The second is the myth of the community. Does it actually exist, or do we pretend that it is there in order to enable us to do our work? Terry explored the problems that arise when we use the notion of "community" in what we do, or what others do. This is linked to the assumption that people are rational in the way we assume, and that evidence is collected and acted on. However, we need to take account of different rationalities (rather than irrationality) and the significance of emotions and experiences in determining behavior in relation to evidence. The third myth relates to whether governments actually care about their people. When we do research to provide evidence for policy (policy uptake), we are making an assumption that there will be a rational and logical process that links our research to policy design and implementation. But, what if the responsible organizations (national governments and international organizations) do not actually care, or are constrained by factors that make evidence-based policy irrelevant? In all this, the missing element is any consideration of power relations as the major determinant of what does and does not happen.

Speakers:

- * **Terry Cannon**, IDS, University of Sussex, Research fellow (Main speaker). Email: t.cannon@ids.ac.uk or terrycannon@blueyonder.co.uk
- * **Kari Helene Partapuoli**, Development Fund, Leader (Discussant)

Disasters, Culture and Risk

Terry described during his presentation that beliefs lead to values and values bring about attitudes which eventually result into behavior.

- Beliefs are acquired through upbringing, family, education, and religious institutions.
- Values refer to what is given priority. The world view of the term value often includes and justifies power systems and this involves who is valued and what is cared about.
- Attitudes refer to how values translate into attitudes to risk.
- Behavior is what is or is not done in relation to risk, what is invested and how culture is operationalized.

The above aspects (beliefs, values, attitudes and behavior) are valid for institutions as well as people.

Disasters are framed by considering how people perceive risk, what role their culture plays, how organizations perceive risk and hazards, if they include people's culture, if people's views of disasters fit together with those of the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) organizations, and how DRR organizations frame risk. Furthermore, it is crucial to investigate why knowledge is not being used, and being ignored, why learning is not happening in DRR, what the barriers are to learning and why knowledge is played down.

Myth 1: People are interested in Disaster Risk Reduction

Many people do not give priority to risks of disasters, even when they face significant risks they have already experienced, or those that have been predicted. They take risks because they trade-off the risks they may face in order to benefit from livelihoods that are possible in dangerous places. Thus, people discount the future risk in favor of current benefits. Attitudes to risk and perceptions of risk, are not in the rational box that outsiders and experts like to use – a different rationality is in use that enables people to live with risk.

Picture showing flooding in Guwahati, Assam, North East India.



©TNT (The North East Today) Magazine

Cultural factors are crucial in many people's behavior in the face of risk because they are key to different rationalities. The empirical evidence for the gap between people's and outsider disaster managers regarding how to prioritize risk, is that all over the world, thousands of assessments of community-level risk (Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment - VCA etc.) have been done by Non-Government Organizations such as the Red Cross/Crescent. In hardly any of these, do the local people share the risk priority of the outside agency that is coming to help them to manage risk. In 2005, the Yemen Red Crescent did a vulnerability assessment in two areas after flash floods. After doing the participatory VCAs, they set up a road safety programme. That is what the people wanted as the risks related to road accidents were greater than those related to flash floods.

There are two key aspects to note; priorities and risk hierarchies, as well as culture and behaviors toward risk. Outsiders' ideas of disaster risk reduction are not the same as those of the people they are trying to help – they have different priorities. Additionally, significant aspects of culture lead to people having attitudes to risk that appear to be illogical or irrational, and which do not fit the logical approach of outside agencies.

People and institutions have different rationalities. This is well known, but ignored. For instance, there is hardly any psychology or behavioral studies used in development studies (or DRR). It has had some significance in climate change where it has been used regarding patterns of denial of climate change. This problem applies to all levels from grassroots to the top – including institutions and governments. There is little evidence

that good research provides governments with evidence that leads to the policies that are supported by that evidence. People respond much more to emotional needs than rationality.

Disaster Risk Reduction – divorced from reality?

There is a significant gap between what DRR aims at, and the willingness and ability of people to respond. People do not behave in the way that disaster managers expect them to behave, or want them to behave. Disaster managers do not behave rationally because they ignore the reality of people's behavior. "You can't be a rationalist in an irrational world. It ain't rational!"¹

Myth 2: "Community" is where it is at and where we should work

As in Community Based Adaptation (CBA) and Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRR), and many other problems where the prefix "Community Based-" is added: 'Saint Community can cure all problems...' Past research shows that the concept of community is basically useless when used to mean the local level. Criticism includes the concept community itself, concerns over the notion of participation, literature on elite capture (of projects, aid), research on land tenure systems and rural class including landlessness, landlords, debt bondage and class (and caste in India) are being ignored. This completely undermines the validity of using community as a concept for adaptation and resilience.

Community is used as a category that is convenient and confirming of our ethical stance that we work with poor people and are focused on the grassroots. "*We are bottom-up and avoid the problems of top-down,*" but we can never work in every community: what happens to all the other people? Is this unethical then? As researchers, we should not pretend that community works, but instead analyze the local internal differences, as there is no such thing as community in the sense of an inherently collaborative group of people. It is crucial to consider how the community is defined and what its internal divisions (for example gender, class, ethnicity, caste, religion, age group) are. When we use the concept of community, it is for our sake. We are the ones who find it convenient. We use it because it fits our idea of fairness and working at the grassroots. Community fits with what we want to do, and what funders think is good for delivering to the poorest or the most vulnerable, thus, community is where we are working.

¹ From the play "What the butler saw" by Joe Orton.

Myth 3: Governments care about their people and want to reduce disasters and implement policies that improve resilience

Achieving power (in elections or through other means) is to gain a prize that enables access to profit – for corporate and/or private benefit. The problem extends to international institutions that sovereign governments support – and which in turn are therefore unable to criticize government. Hence the introduction (by the World Bank) of the term governance as a way of dealing with corruption without naming it. Institutions also develop their own rationalities that serve their own interests rather than ordinary peoples.

The de-politicization of language

The way problems get framed reflects the needs of the institutions, not the people they are meant to serve. Those framings use language that neutralizes any content that relates to causation – e.g. causes of poverty. Current examples include resilience, hunger, sustainability, gender violence. Institutions or governments adopt ways of dealing with things that distance their function from what causes the problems they are supposed to address, thus power being ignored. Below is an example illustrating such a scenario;

“THE NEXT PERSON WHO CALLS ME RESILIENT I’M GONNA STAB IN THE NECK...” (Blog: *Catfish for breakfast*, 2012), accessed on 20th January 2016.

In the words of a New Orleans friend, “The next person who calls me resilient, I’m gonna stab in the neck so he can see for himself what it is to be resilient.”

My friend has (thus far) refrained from any stabbing, but her point is well taken – focusing on resilience can distract from the question of responsibility. When we celebrate resilience, we focus the spotlight on the people who got screwed over. The institutions that did the screwing over take the opportunity to slink off into the shadows.

<https://catfishforlunch.wordpress.com/2012/08/31/the-next-person-who-talks-about-resilience-ill-gonna-stab-in-the-neck/>

Examples of “framing”

Hunger – Food Security

❖ People are hungry

- ❖ People cannot get enough food
- ❖ More food needs to be produced
- ❖ There needs to be food security
- ❖ Food security is a priority for countries

The above example indicates how the language shifts away from the causes of why people cannot afford to buy or grow enough food. It shifts to the language in which an institutional and governmental approach emerges that assumes the problem is of food output. It de-politicizes the process of understanding the causes of hunger to make it a technical issue: food security is now about how to grow more (e.g. new green revolutions; genetically modified crops). Institutions prefer not to deal with the causes of hunger (there is already enough food to go round - and India exports food...).