

Local Knowledge and Disaster Risk Reduction

Keynote
Side Meeting on Indigenous Knowledge
Global Platform for Disaster Reduction
Geneva, 17 June 2009

REVISED 25 June 2009

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0. This brief overview tries to answer three questions:

- What is local knowledge (LK)?
- Why is it important for disaster risk reduction (DRR)?
- How does one engage with LK and mobilize it for DRR?

1. What is Local Knowledge

Local knowledge comprises the totality of perceptions, beliefs, understandings, and skills that one or more members of a community uses or potentially uses to communicate about and manipulate the world. “World” in this sense is made up of the physical and built environment and also the social, economic and political environment that affect production and consumption at the local scale.

That is a formal definition for the sake of clarity. In simpler terms, it is what people living in an urban or rural locality know that is useful to them in their lives.

Ten important features of local knowledge are critical to their use in DRR.

1. Local knowledge, like all knowledge, is social. Just as there can be no private language that only one person understands, there can be no knowledge that completely separate from what others know and have known in the past.
2. Local knowledge is not entirely “traditional” (passed on by generations). It is more.
3. Local knowledge may opportunistically incorporate versions of outside specialist knowledge. For instance, weather or climate forecasts listened to on the radio may be interpreted and modified according to local weather signs and past experience.
4. Given that mobility is important to human beings and that family members may migrate and send or bring knowledge home as well as money and goods, the tendency to mix or hybridize knowledges is increasing.
5. For all these reasons, the notion of “indigenous” or “traditional” knowledge is quite limited and only part of the picture. It is better to refer to the broader notion of “local” knowledge.
6. Within a community, local knowledge is not uniformly distributed. Not everyone has access to secret knowledge or knowledge associated with local skills such as building, finding water, or midwifery. Occupations and special skills come with sub-sets of local knowledge that may not be widely distributed in a locality.
7. Local knowledge is gendered and age graded, and moreover it varies according to the standpoints of people in different (and to some extent dynamic and changeable) life situations: for example, local knowledge of people living with disabilities,

knowledge of people with chronic health problems, knowledge of people who constitute an ethnic or caste minority in a community, etc.

8. Local knowledge may be a source of power and status. For example, in Sierra Leone, rice farmers have been known to compete with each other in breeding new varieties of rice, some simply for the beauty of plant. This is a source of praise and prestige.
9. Local knowledge may not appear to Western trained or oriented specialists to have any physical or biological basis or efficacy. This is because local knowledge often bridges physical and social functions and realities. Thus some women in Africaboil stones during a hunger period. “But stones have no nutritional value”, the outside observer would object. However, anthropologist, Paul Richards, was told that by executing this practice, the women signal a stage at which the community must consider the hunger serious and activate coping measures. The community is also reassured by the ritual which reminds them that they have survived in the past and that control and unity are still possible.
10. Local knowledge may not be explicitly spoken about by those who have it. It is sometimes tacit or implicit in their practices and acts – for instance, where on a slope with different soil characteristics to plant different plants. Western trained or oriented experts find the idea that knowledge is tacit hard to accept, yet it can be made explicit through patient discussion.

2. Why is Local Knowledge Important to DRR?

Playing the devil’s advocate, one might reject the question. Science and technology can deliver perfectly adequate hazard maps, resilient structures, crops and livestock that are

hardy and that have whatever characteristic is needed: drought resistance, salt tolerance, what have you. Science and technology from the outside can do all this and provide warnings as well. All that is needed is delivery!

Ah, that magical word: “delivery”.

Two global studies completed for the Global Platform¹ agree. Both the ISDR’s *Global Risk Assessment 2009 (GAR)*² and the GNDR’s *Views from the Front Line (VFL)*³ came up with the same quantitative and qualitative result: the *international and national scale knowledge and the practices based on that knowledge is not “trickling down”* and penetrating local communities at all fast enough to achieve Hyogo Framework of Action (HFA)⁴ goals.

This is not the place to discuss in detail why knowledge based diffusion of innovation is proceeding so slowly. There are many factors highlighted by GAR and VFL. Amongst these one might single out in the context of knowledge management the following:

- Top down diffusion of knowledge and practice require fine tuning to local conditions. Diffusion “by the book” seldom works.

¹ UN-ISDR Global Platform 2009 for Disaster Reduction; Geneva, June 2009; see <http://www.preventionweb.net/globalplatform/2009/> .

² *Global Risk Assessment 2009* <http://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/report/index.php?id=9413>

³ *Clouds but Little Rain* <http://www.preventionweb.net/english/professional/publications/v.php?id=9822> .

⁴ HFA refers to the Hyogo Framework of Action, the detailed work plan created at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction held in Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan in 2005 and signed by 168 governments. See <http://www.unisdr.org/eng/hfa/hfa.htm> .

- At the local scale people experience threats in a more holistic way that specialists who design practices focused on one hazard or another. Poverty, violence, climate change, and many different natural and other hazards confront people at the scale of 1:1 where they live, work, raise children, celebrate, and suffer. Local efforts to deal with one of these challenges generally involve dealing with the others. Fine tuning takes such experience into account.
- There is sometimes a lack of trust between communities and governments or outside/ non-local institutions. Trust and partnership must be built; it cannot be assumed. Without trust and mutual respect, the exchange of knowledges and production of a useful hybrid of outside and local knowledge is not possible.

So, rejecting the position of the devil's advocate, I think the answer is that local knowledge important for DRR because it is the lens through which people perceive and understand the world and work on the world. All innovation including risk reduction will have to be carried out at the end of the day by *people in places*. But apart from this sociological and geographical reality, there is even a more important reason why local knowledge is important.

People are constantly coping with threats. They share knowledge with neighbors, may draw knowledge in from far away, boil it down and work out ways to apply it locally. *Local communities are workshops of knowledge production, not just museums of tradition.* Thus for the outside specialist, the village, hamlet, town and city neighborhood are as much sources of new ideas to be tested, refined, and shared as is the outside

specialists skill a source for local people. There is a broad and deep partnership in knowledge production for DRR possible in the world that is very seldom actually achieved.

3. How Does One Engage with LK and Mobilize it for DRR?

My listeners may be thinking now that as usual another crazy academic is spouting off about utopias and the best of all possible worlds. Isn't that "broad and deep partnership" going to require millions of anthropologists to live for a year or more in millions of human settlements? Well, in a world wide economic crisis, why not include such ambitious and ethnographic adventure in economic stimulus plans?

Well, I am only kidding. That's not necessary. In many countries around the world the GAR and VFL have shown that civil society organizations are working with local governments and with communities in rapid, efficient, and effective ways. Participatory action research (PAR) is the overall term for a suite of tools and methods that are widely known today and can result in community generated hazard maps, vulnerability assessments, and action plans. For example, the ProVention Consortium among other institutions has available on its website a tool kit for community risk assessment⁵, as does the IFRC,⁶ and many others.

But all the tools in the world will not help if the relationship between communities and government is not based on trust and mutual respect. PAR can backfire and end up

⁵ www.proventionconsortium.org/?pageid=39.

⁶ <http://www.ifrc.org/what/disasters/preparing/preparedness-tools/vca.asp>.

demobilizing local people if there seem to be promises of action during the assessment and mapping, but there is no follow up. Also, PAR itself has to be done carefully so that the vital, complementary knowledges of women, youth, children, and men are collected. Inclusiveness of the process is important, and trust within communities is as important as trust between community and outsiders.

The potential is there, but having spent five years since developing institutions, laws, and policies in support of the HFA at the national level, now is the time to push ahead in a massive and global way from the other end: serious support has to be given to putting the known tools and methods to work at local level so that local knowledge and outside specialist knowledge come together in ways that bring safety to all.